

Between The Two Of Us

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In Richard Deacon's work, there have repeatedly been phases of high productivity that alternate with periods of apparent reticence. Until 1980, that is, during his ten years of training and in the years directly subsequent, he collected extensive experience in the use of material, bodies and space, expanded his interest to the most various realms beyond art, and began to formulate his intentions in language, in so doing creating foundations that still define his work in an ever-changing way even today.

This "preliminary" work bears fruit across the board in the 1980s, beginning almost explosively with the first open sculptures, made using laminated wooden strips. In rapid succession, works emerge in various materials and forms that in their energetic impulses, their craftsmanship, their oscillation between literalness and metaphor, as well as the dialogue they take up with their surroundings and the viewer, are immediately recognisable despite all surprises in individual works, evincing a quality a later critic would dub "Deaconian".¹ Numerous solo and group shows at international galleries and museums followed, and beginning in 1990 commissions for permanent sculptures in public space as well, alongside teaching, lectures, and texts. Beginning in 1993, a phase of revision and reflection began, of deceleration and experimentation, accompanied by large survey exhibitions in Hanover (1993) and Liverpool (1999) as well as the appearance of an extensive monograph.² Deacon's work became established in the eyes of the audience and critics alike as well as in its own inner development.

All the same, the security and fluency attained is also something that makes the artist sceptical. He not only sees the danger of exhausting himself in variations and refinements on the fixed ground of an oeuvre, but also of losing touch with what would have to be called his basic artistic position. Since his years of study, his work has been defined by a strong research impulse that goes far beyond what outwardly seem like obvious experiments with materials and methods of creation. In a text from the 1990s, he combines observations and anecdotes from very different realms in a way that is typical for him — from childhood memories to palaeontology, from art history to philosophy. He circles his artistic findings and intentions in a loose, associative way, rather than labelling them with authority. Surprisingly, he leads from the introduction of television to the experience of making art. "What television introduces [...] is a device for looking at the world that transcends or fragments the boundaries of sequence, time and space whilst also subverting the established social and political processes. In this [...] looking at television is very close to the experience of making art."³ Such a comparison reveals Deacon's effort to dislocate reflections on his own creation from common categories of rationality that steer an artwork along the channels of common sense or attempt to subject it to binding, plausible explanations. It is no accident that his example from the world of television is a quite banal DIY show. On the one hand pedantically pragmatic and at the same time absurd

in its abbreviation of working steps, such a programme can be read as a metaphor for the incoherence and ambivalence of everyday life, which makes a mockery of theory's claims to order and domination. Directly linked in this text are the loosening of general attitudes and causalities, and the destabilisation of social and political relations. This could be seen as a concise plea for a poetic anarchism, if the term did not instead refer to the 1960s and early 70s. For the moment, it is enough if a field of tension emerges that was and is definitive for Deacon's work: how can one create within a postmodern context of hybridity and ambivalence in art a basic element of social connectivity?

In the early 1980s, Deacon already referred in interviews to the significance of a series of large-format drawings he made during a one-year stay in the US in 1978/79⁴ [pp. 18, 98, 99 and 174]. Several years later, he returned again in a now almost canonical text to speak of them in detail, describing the concrete occasion of their creation, and the questions and concepts implied in them as decisive preconditions for his breakthrough as a sculptor.⁵ The subjects and arguments formulated here have often been taken up by those interpreting Deacon's work, and there is no reason to doubt the stringent course of artistic development depicted. As of 1980, the sculptures already exhibit a direct link to the drawings in mere formal terms, even if this is not the only link, and not the most important one. In his text, Deacon quotes extensively from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, which served as the starting point for his drawings and for a mini-theory on the link between language and fine art. The reference to Rilke might be unusual in a British context, but it came to the artist through texts on Auguste Rodin. More surprising still is the reference to poetry itself. That language serves as a point of crystallisation in his development at all is not least a reflection of the impact of the linguistic turn in the humanities and the social sciences on the art of the 1960s, and especially so-called Conceptual Art. For many artists who studied in the 1970s, this, along with Minimal Art, was a key bone of contention — massive visual and conceptual blocks upon which one was forced to take

a position to avoid operating in a vacuum or in the niche of unquestioningly accepted traditions. Tellingly, however, Deacon refers not to theoretical concepts about language, but to the aesthetic execution of a poet's language. When he says that language "not only describes the world but brings it into being" and that "we are of and in language",⁶ he is summing up key findings of the linguistic turn. But when he lets Rilke have his say, verse after verse, he unleashes a stream of images that revolve around speaking and listening, yet unclearly and with poetic exaggeration. There is in these poems a term for language or singing, but it is a proper noun, a mythological figure. And this figure in turn has no fixed location: "Once and for all / it's Orpheus when there's singing. He comes and goes." Or: "For it is Orpheus. His metamorphosis / into that and that."⁷ As much as Deacon tries to give his work as a fine artist a contemporary theoretical framework here and elsewhere — and with it a social connection — by using the model of language, it also becomes evident that it is not about a functional integration of his art, but about opening it up to the greatest possible extent. Parallel to this, he also sets himself apart from the material and constructive literalness of Minimal Art. The in part ostentatious emphasis on the material and its craftsmanship in his own works he sees as a further development of theorems proposed by some representatives of Minimal Art. To make this link clear — while at the same time setting himself apart — he uses the example of Donald Judd: "The notion of the matter of fact which seems to be within Judd's work, returns to discourse, and becomes metaphorical, through them becoming public."⁸ Here too, aspects of the work are brought into the realm of language, as it were, to drive the clarity out of them and make them available for new contexts of meaning. As with other artists of his generation, the significance of language defines a necessary phase of self-affirmation for Deacon in the 1980s that results from the dominance of the linguistic turn in the prior decade.⁹ Here, however, thinking in linguistic categories and forms deliberately does not seek to analyse art in a definitive way and thus to demythologise it, to give it a rational basis, but is instead used as a means of making things more fluid,

of dissolving certainties and bringing out complexity and ambivalence. This takes place not to promote renewed myth-making, as was the case in the Neo-Expressionism from the same period, but rather to do justice — in a poetic manner — to the actual ambiguity of the world and society.

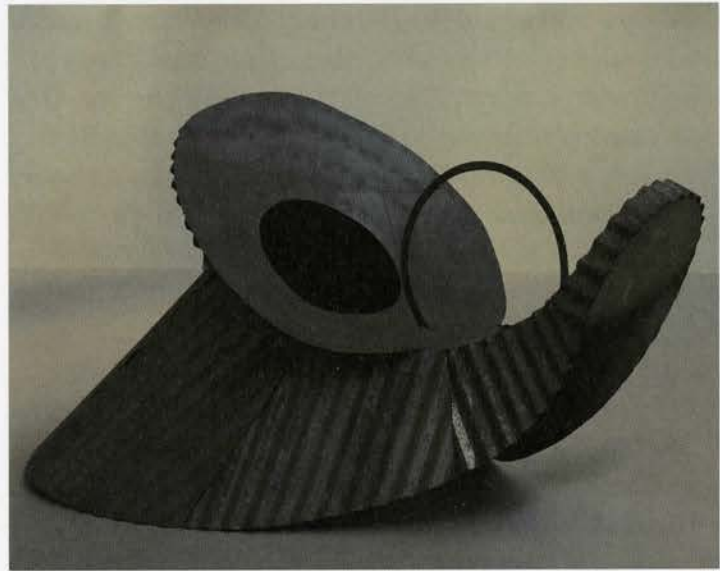
To return to the Orpheus drawings: they are anything but freehand, intuitive adaptations of Rilke's thoughts and motifs. Rather, they owe their execution to a construction method that approaches a handicap. With pencil, cord and nail, different arches are drawn, erased, adjusted and altered, until they form a more or less continuous shape. The intention to react to things recognised in the poetry is thus sent through a searching process in craftsmanship, without much of a goal in mind. The indirect method not only serves to avoid illustration, but seeks to harvest results in the course of an open process, as it were. The possibilities and the limitations of the chosen technique are here already key catalysts of formal invention, a method that Deacon still treasures today when he turns to new materials and technologies, and a habitus that can be followed into his drawings, reduced to a single line as visual accompaniment to artistic reflection. It is surely possible, following the ancient myth, to associate some of the drawings with the head of Orpheus, severed by the Maenads but still singing. Likewise, the curved and intersecting lines could in a certain sense be considered a kind of free musical score for the senses linked to this, limning the melodies and rhythms of singing and speaking. But even more, a circling around what are initially formal oppositions stands out that still today continues to serve as a matrix in Deacon's work: interior and exterior, outline and internal form, surface and opening. Even though they repeatedly become explicit in the works, they are not so much formal constants in the sense of a formulated subject or an intended representation, as they are something like problem constants, comparable to a limited set of personal tools with which new access to the metier of sculpture can be found again and again. The stubbornness with which these elements surface in the work can also suggest the suspicion of an obsession, and it is not surprising that Deacon has often been

posed questions about the sexual connotations of the openings in particular. But the psychological pattern of interpretation lurking here makes things too simple. It is not that sexual metaphors play no role at all, but that they play a role alongside many other elements. Tracing back an individual "artistic will" to a "primal scene" lapses into a kind of modernist myth-making that is inappropriate for such an open and pragmatic oeuvre.

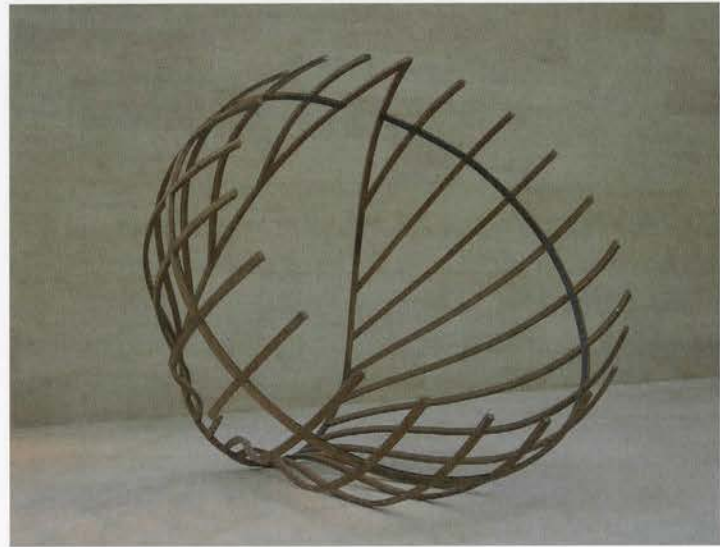
Looking at the first sculptures made after the Orpheus drawings, the formal similarities are quite evident. The emphasis on the process of craftsmanship is also comparable in the two media. *Untitled* (1980) shows a decidedly new step going beyond the sculptural works of the 1970s [pp. 100-101]: while the older sculptures were additive and designed planimetrically, the newer ones develop as continuous, quasi-organic forms. The conical body of sheet steel in *Untitled* is assembled from several panels and strips, as if there were no sufficiently large piece of metal available to work with. It does not present itself (as is the case with Minimal Art) as an industrial end product, as a perfect new object, but instead openly reveals the pragmatism of a craftsmanship that adapts to the circumstances. Already in this early sculpture, the idea of labour resonates in Deacon's work, and not only in the physical sense as effort and expenditure of life forces, or in the social sense as a collective process. Labour can also be read here as a step-by-step procedure, as trial and error, as a deliberate exploratory bricolage on the surface of the object — in principle just as in the Orpheus drawings. What's new about the basic form of *Untitled* is the dynamic interplay of the two openings. The narrower opening seems like a clean, technical cut through a hollow body with walls of considerable thickness. But this is only simulated by way of an inserted concrete ring covered in metal. The unexpected combination of sheet metal and concrete, which one would sooner expect to find in house construction, has a life of its own; this initially makes its purpose in the sculptural construction puzzling, until we realise that the weight was necessary to keep the work in its horizontal position. Beyond such a matter-of-fact explanation, this opening only unfolds its meaning in

conjunction with the larger one. The lip of the larger opening is flanged with metal strips bent both outward and inward in a way that is at first difficult to decipher. The motif of a wall thickness that is only suggested is picked up here, but at the same time transformed into a free play of interior and exterior. Both openings belong unmistakably to a single body; their shape and their position in the geometry of the sculpture are similar; and furthermore they articulate oppositions like hard/soft, heavy/light, technical/organic, straightforward/playful, and so on. In the comparably simple constellation of this early work, a field of ambiguities opens up that liberates both formal and associative as well as symbolic dimensions.

If The Shoe Fits (1981) shifts such a web of relations towards the quasi-pictorial. While the earlier sculpture is reminiscent of the abstractness of a technical detail, the latter is created using industrially prefabricated material, but is perceived directly as a figure and/or narrative. The apron, bent into a kind of tongue or horn, bends towards a hole with a wide collar, and in so doing becomes a freestanding ring that looks like the graphic depiction of a movement. There is an ambivalent relationship between the sweeping movement and the opening: they suggest a shared act that never becomes explicit and which oscillates between sexuality and toy, to mention only two possibilities. While the earlier work primarily explores formal ambiguities using a simple model, *If The Shoe Fits* intentionally narrows the spectrum in the direction of a visual narrative. In a sense, one could almost speak of a three-dimensional comic with a speech bubble in the form of a title. For the first time in Deacon's work, a sculpture steps out of anonymity and retains a "speaking name". Unlike in a comic, though, there is no direct, explanatory relationship here between image and text. This and other turns of phrase or individual words that Deacon now uses frequently expand the field of ambiguities still further. On a linguistic level, they do link what is seen into the common world of everyday social exchange and its tradition, and in so doing form a parallel to the conventional materials and working techniques he uses in the sculptures. However, the titles do not define the visual states of affairs, but



If The Shoe Fits, 1981



Untitled, 1980

rather accompany them like a metaphor, even if they are quite rarely actual linguistic metaphors. In the most fortuitous cases, the titles are like names that in some inexplicable way seem "fitting" for a certain person, appearing to pick up the overall appearance of the work, its formal and thematic rhythm, so to speak, and like an echo to additionally lead it into the realm of language.

Alongside these sculptures of sheet metal that possess a largely closed outer skin, Deacon simultaneously discovered an entirely new technique that would become of decisive importance for his further

work and indeed something of a trademark for some time. He began making sculptures of laminated wood strips that are bent in almost arbitrary curves, skeleton-like shapes with a great deal of dynamism that seem like drawings that have materialised in space. This technique is used for example in boat and aeroplane construction, because the wooden strips glued together possess great strength yet can be shaped easily. Over the years, Deacon not only explored the technical possibilities of laminated wood in order to create ever new formal processes and sculptures of sometimes considerable dimensions; he also attained his own material aesthetic using this technique. The excess glue that drips out from the edges while pressing together the wood layers is left in place and sometimes dyed. This raises the impression of an intermediate product, a preliminary state in a larger process. What we see standing before us seems to have the potential to also appear in a different form. No matter how coherent and closed the form might be, the feeling evoked by the material indicates its open-endedness. In the subjunctive mood, as it were, the sculpture points beyond its current state. Despite their solid physical appearance, these works still seem to contain a touch of the transitoriness of the performance, a mode with which Deacon worked intensely in the 1970s. On the surface of the sculpture, however, the forces that shaped the work remain visible, the physical efforts as well as the innate forces of the material. The tension of the bent beams and of the curving lines in space is not only communicated in a formal sense, as a purely visual phenomenon; a physical dimension is added to this that is not derived solely from the here and now of the viewer's experience, but which also points to the physical engagement of others in the sculpture's making. Like the title, this emphasis on crafted-ness, on collective effort and the tradition of labour, represents Deacon's attempt to establish an element of social communication and integration in his sculptures.

One of the first works using this technique (*Untitled*, 1980) takes recourse to the Orpheus drawings, like the steel sculpture with the two openings. However, its hemispherical shape also refers to a container, and recalls Deacon's practical and theoretical en-

gagement with ceramic forms from the period around 1980, which only much later, at the end of the 1990s, led to a new field of endeavour. Despite the latent aggression exuded by the free ends of the wood beams, the basic form of the work can be described as an eyeball into which a shape is inscribed that looks like a tear, eye, mouth or vulva. The skin and openings of the object are here conceived less as oppositions than as a continuum, as a fluid unity conveyed by the material that looks different depending on the standpoint of the viewer, flowing once in the one direction, then in the other. The freedom that this mode of creation allows soon leads to ever more complex constructions that leave all dichotomies behind. From the doubling of two formal actions, a dialogue-like structure emerges that suggests not so much the opposition of speech and response as the continuous linkage of two speakers (*Untitled*, 1981 [pp. 102-103]). *For Those Who Have Ears # 2* (1983) has four ear-shaped arches emerging from two shared starting points, but by way of their differing sweeps and the torsion of the upper connection avoids all schematicism and gains a mobility that evokes the impression of a constantly changing elasticity, especially if the sculpture is placed in the landscape.

Conducive to the latent mobility of Deacon's sculptures as of 1980 is their new relationship to the ground. Constructivism, particularly in 1920s Eastern Europe, tried to liberate sculpture from the tectonics of the figural and to let it expand freely in space by reducing mass and volume. From here far into the latter half of the century — think of Alexander Calder or sculptures from the realm of *Informel* or Abstract Expressionism — efforts to counteract gravity usually remained bound to clearly defined starting and/or resting points. No matter how minimal the contact with the ground as bearing foundation might be, the *raison d'être* of all sculptures, as it were, is that they have a place, their place. Some works may unfurl into space in a free and daring way, yet they seem to grow from a fixed point in the ground. They define a place where they belong, that belongs to them. Deacon develops a different relationship between sculpture and its site, one that is less bound and yet does not abandon genuinely sculptural qualities. With few

exceptions, the works of the 1980s and 90s take a precarious position in their respective surroundings. Their curved contours only touch the ground in a few places. Even more decisive is the strange balance that sometimes in fact seems about to collapse.¹⁰

Many of the works give the impression that they do not necessarily have to stand or lie as they do, but could also take on other positions. Their presence in the space thus takes on a kind of calculated randomness, as if they were only placed here like objects that have been set aside, and not expressly presented. They show a fundamental independence from the surrounding space, indeed possess a certain foreignness in relation to it. Paradoxically, the independence that they thus assert emerges from their random quality. This kind of attitude can also be found in the art directly preceding Deacon, in Arte Povera or Joseph Beuys, for example, and naturally in performance art as well.

In Deacon's works of the 1980s and 90s, the goal of allowing sculpture to emerge from an intense process of action, and of maintaining it in the potential alterability of variously aggregate states (see *Stuff Box Object*, 1971/72 [pp. 59-66]), is relocated from the performative environment to the figure of the sculpture itself: see for example *These Are The Facts* or *More Light* (both from 1987/88). These object-like works, with technoid structures that almost seem like something from science fiction, seem to have found but a provisional standing in space, like oversized individual or replacement parts that an unknown hand set down in this location. The attractiveness of their materials and their precise craftsmanship, their unavoidable presence and fascination as things in Rilke's sense,¹¹ stands in stark contrast to the precarious balance with which they hold themselves on the ground and offer precisely this view and this formal constellation. Even if their points of rest are *de facto* created in such a way that they remain in the desired position, their potential mobility points to their status as objects, as things that could change their position and their location depending on their use. Not all works from the 1980s and 90s operate with the element of insecure balance. Large wooden works like *Blind, Deaf And Dumb A* (1985), *Listening To*



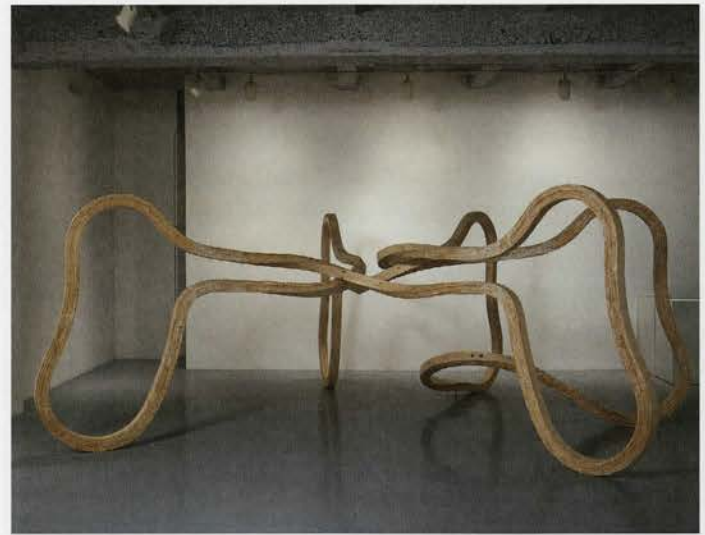
These Are The Facts, 1988



More Light, 1988

Reason (1986) and *Double Talk* (1987), with their four or more resting points, are constructed in such a way that their stability is without doubt, even if long spans and parts that jut out seem to challenge the limits of structural engineering. The broad swing of the sculptures, the torsions of the laminated beams and the construction of the links, however, lead a life of their own, reminiscent of the ephemeral gestures of a freely drawing hand or a conductor. The lightness of these lines and the liveness with which they respond to the moment have here found an almost improbable reflection in bulky material, in the weight and size of sculpture as a medium. The abstractness of gestures in drawing or music, or that of a thought or an experience, encounters the concrete reality of a sculptural structure. This association should not imply that Deacon's works illustrate these movements of thought or emotion in any way. Rather, they serve as a model for the freedom and autonomy of sculptural forms, which creates an independence from their respective site in a similar way to the object-hood in others.

The relationship of the sculpture to its location and thus to the viewer reaches a climax when the sculpture is located outdoors, in so-called public space. Among the first works of this kind is a sculpture that was created in 1986 for an exhibition in Arnhem (the inner part was renewed in 1999 using a different material). *When The Landmasses First Appeared* consists first of all of a basket-like structure of steel rods that marks out a spot in the broad expanse of a park. Although transparent, this enclosure creates a kind of protective zone within which the arabesque of a linear sculpture made of plastic can unfold. The quiet dichotomy between the comparatively strict fencing and the mercurial curves and vaulting gestures of the "figure" increase the dynamism and can be seen as an allusion to the tradition of garden sculpture as an element between nature and architecture, between (staged) freedom and architectural integration. At the same time, the container of the "basket", which functions like an up-ended plinth, makes the abstract lineament stand out from its surroundings. It is as if a thought or a fleeting movement were temporarily showcased. Many of



Listening To Reason, 1986



When the Landmasses First Appeared, 1999

Deacon's works develop this kind of dialectic of embedding and distinction, of reference and autonomy, especially when placed outdoors. The closed, ellipsoid body of *Never Mind* (1993), for example, seems to have landed like an unidentified object on the grass; firmly and hermetically it resists the inspecting eye. At the same time, the work almost exaggerates the convention of sculptures arranged on plinths in a modern sculptural park, like the one in Antwerp for which this work was made. The work could be considered an ironic commentary on so-called "drop sculpture", more or less unmotivated pieces placed in the public space that are not bound to the spatial, historical or social context — if its rigor did not block such an appropriation. The same is true

of *Moor* (1990), an almost 25-metre-long sculpture set atop the columns of a former railway viaduct in Plymouth. The flat pressed ring of double T-supports seems on the one hand like a conscious reminiscence of the industrial age that so marked the harbour city. At the same time, the sheer absurdity of the equally lost and exposed “work piece” of unknown function discharges the sculpture from any obvious integration in the urban, historical or social context.

With *Building From The Inside* (1992), a sculpture installed on a quite non-descript, traffic-dominated square in Krefeld, Deacon pursues more deeply the link between autonomy and integration. He notes that this piece represented an express attempt “to make a work which defines the context rather than opposing or embellishing it”.¹² The sculpture should neither be a “sign”, a “logo” nor a “monument”, but was instead meant to create “an opening in space” that “act[s] as a generator for the space that surrounds it”.¹³ In general, Deacon finds that the limit of a work’s autonomy “might not be architecture, but ... public-ness”,¹⁴ and he mentions the narrow line that a successful sculpture needs to negotiate. “If the work implies that it might belong to the social context then that’s OK; if it belongs to the social context then it becomes something else. [...] What’s interesting is the edge between the two, the extent from which you borrow from one in order to enrich or enlarge the experience of the other.”¹⁵ Even if “the way in which the work of art resists appropriation by the spectator or the place” seems to the artist to be “a highly desirable feature”, and he is not so sure about “the harmonious relationship of the work to the place”,¹⁶ he tries to link the one with the other. “It seems to me an intriguing thing and an extraordinary possibility that under the umbrella of making autonomous objects there are aspects of one’s experience that are sometimes separated and sometimes coherent, and it is possible to make objects that characterise those two modalities.”¹⁷ This directly parallels his considerations on the role of language, and it becomes evident that he understands his work at its core to represent an instance of communication between the inner and outer world, between the personal and the collective. Indeed, Deacon goes a step further and formulates



Moor, 1990

a psychological perspective when he speaks of his (culturally conditioned) ambivalent relationship to beauty, which he in part feels to be a (nonsensical) opposition to the good and correct. The goal is to fuse the two, even if he admits, “It may be impossible because you are trying to put dependence and independence into the same thing.”¹⁸ However these contradictions might be suspended or dissolved in the individual sculptures, for the work in a general sense this means that their location is the “intersection of memory and experience, subjective, objective, actual and possible. [...] The real cannot be shown within it, but as a genre is palpable in the site of the work which is also the site of our uncertainty, the site of a perception and a re-structuring of presences to which we have direct access.”¹⁹ Even though these sentences were not formulated with Deacon’s work in mind, they do embrace it in the broader context of 1980s sculptural art. As a legacy of the discussions of the 20th century and in particular of Minimalism and Conceptualism, sculptors at that time attempted to plumb the “site of the work” beyond and between dependence and independence (from aesthetic, historical, social and economic factors). The latent mobility, the dynamism exhibited by the wood sculptures from the 1980s, their rhythmic, almost vitalistic expansion into space, their oscillation between pure and metaphorical form and their partnership with

the viewer become a more closed unity in the 1990s. There had always been rather object-like works from time to time, such as for example *Out Of His Own Mouth* (1987/88), *Struck Dumb* (1988) or *Kiss and Tell* (1989) [pp. 124-127]; but despite all their corporeality they were shaped by the opposition of various elements and materials. *Turning A Blind Eye Again* (1988) is a strange hybrid of open and closed form. The laminated wood strips have in comparison to the relatively modest dimension of the sculpture achieved such a thickness, they are brought so close to one another and arranged in what is almost a mirroring symmetry, that the impression of a cut-open body results. The numerous, rhythmically placed linking elements made of metal serve as emergency anchors that keep its mass from falling apart. The colour increases still further the somewhat brutal character of the work, which sets it apart from similar studies of the relationship between inside and outside in open, ribbon-like shapes such as *Heart And Mind* (1986) or *There And Here, Here And There* (1987).

Within the framework of this move towards a greater closure of the outer form, special importance can be attributed to a series of relief works that were created in rapid succession in 1986 and 1987 and bear the title *The Back Of My Hand* [pp. 123, 205]. The retreat to the wall and the surface seems like a gesture of opposition against the simultaneous sculptures in space. Even though the contours of these reliefs, which are placed on the floor, and a certain instability of the forms are reminiscent of the swing and rhythm of the wooden sculptures, their lack of transparency and their frontality rebuff the viewer. They are slightly exotic-looking pictorial objects that can hardly be classified in any specific category and that oscillate between microcosm, cartography, fetish, and work or model presentation. The title could then be read in the sense of experiences where something fully familiar, such as the back of our hand, suddenly becomes strange and appears like an alien object from the outside world. Such an unexpected split, confounding self and other, could on a psychological level represent a counterpart to the perception of a relief, dominated as it is by an insoluble conflict between actual surface and suggested depth. The



Turning a Blind Eye Again, 1988

illusionism of a relief always collides with the facticity of the material and the limits of its space. In *The Back Of My Hand* we are confronted with a closed contour and a surface from which only here and there sculptural elements jut out. The sculptural elements as well as the multiple surface materials, such as metal, linoleum, PVC, leather, rubber, canvas or foam, structure the surface in such a way that we can barely distinguish between composition and technical accidents or limitations. We get the impression that elements from very different processes and contexts have found their way into these reliefs and form here a hybrid fabric. This is especially true when considering the relationship between external form and inner composition. *The Back Of My Hand* brings a disturbance to Deacon's work, because a kind of dichotomy comes to the surface that is triggered not only by the seemingly formal question of interior and exterior. He had been concerned with this issue ever since the Orpheus drawings, but he had usually kept the contradiction transparent, including the viewer in an inviting, quasi-organic way. "[...] the spectator was in the position of feeling occasionally outside and occasionally inside the sculpture. The feeling of being engulfed by the object you are looking at does change the subject-object relationships. One has the sense of becoming, on occasion, the object for the sculpture as much as the sculpture is object for you.

[...] In the more recent works [...] the object maintains its distance and therefore always remains an object for the perceiving subject. At the same time the result of that autonomy is that the nature of the object or the nature of the subject remains for the spectator a matter of guesswork. It's like when I talk to you, then the contents of your subjectivity remain unknown to me."²⁰

Five years after these reliefs, Deacon returned to the subject in a radical gesture. In an exhibition at two museums housed in two adjacent houses in Krefeld, Germany, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the Lenge House and Ester House, he plays through two different models of exhibition, i.e., two variations on the relationships between artwork, architecture and viewer. The most surprising works were the semi-transparent plastic panels with irregular forms painted on them that he positioned in the large windows looking onto the garden. They "put the viewer in the wrong place",²¹ not only because they disturb the relationship intended by the architecture between interior and outer space, but also because they were settled in an intermediate zone of either/or or neither/nor. The viewer perceived them in one instant as part of the exterior, and then again as part of the interior, but could not combine the two in a unified viewpoint. The placement of the works in this special situation increased their ambivalence in relation to earlier reliefs, yet the basic question remained the same. In an almost diagrammatic form, this is all about the relationship between contour and inner detail, to use the proper art historical terms. The title of this series of panels, which was later also shown in different contexts, makes this aim almost blatantly explicit: *The Interior Is Always More Difficult*. Not only in drawings and prints, but also in numerous other reliefs (for example, *What Could Make Me Feel This Way (B)*, 1993, or *Infinity*, beginning in 1999 [pp. 222-223, 248 and 251]), Deacon returns to the motif of an organic frame with a minutely composed interior. As simple as this scheme might look, it seems to formulate a certain obsession of the artist that he himself links to a childhood memory. In a letter from the year 1986, later published, he tells of a fantasy of escape that he had as a child, in which a self-drawn



Exhibition views, Villa Esters in Krefeld

map of the unknown country where he wanted to go during a catastrophe played a role. "The map [...] had a shape — as if it were the map of an island — with a few notional geographical features."²² And he continues: "Shape is the outside edge, boundary, extremity, limit. It is other. [...] Somehow therefore, in order for my map to represent another place in the intended sense there was a necessity for it to have a shape or boundary. The contour of the interior, however, is always more difficult."²³ The motif, that is, goes far beyond an aesthetic level and borders on psychological, communicative and social dimensions.

This tendency, which becomes visible in works such as those since the late 1980s and even more so in the 1990s, is by no means limited to more or less graphic formulations of the surface. The increasing closure, the definition of the sculpture by way of its skin, which provides no or only limited views into the interior, is also in evidence in works using wood, a material that previously helped to create the greatest possible openness and transparency. In the

course of this development, a perhaps symptomatic shift from laminated to cut wood takes place. In the bentwood technique, wood is bent under steam and pressed into a certain form until dry. In contrast to laminated woods, which possess a technological, industrial air, this moulded, solid wood gives an effect more like craftsmanship in the traditional sense. It communicates a different kind of solidity and a different kind of tension that are more reminiscent of the organic forces of wood than its mechanical domination. This becomes especially clear when timbers of impressive diameter are twisted and configured into narrow radii (for example in *Out Of Order*, 2003, or *Quick*, 2009 [pp. 20-23, 238-239]). Unlike with laminated wood, we can almost “see” the natural restorative forces at work. The lively dynamism of some of the curves in the earlier sculptures gives way to a heavier kind of unruliness. That these new works in wood also spread out markedly below eye-level seems fitting here (for example *UW84DC*, 2001, or *Restless*). But to return to the use of this material in the sense of a skin, let us take a look at a sculpture that seems like a translation of another. The work *Untitled* (1991), made of embossed copper, has an organically modulated, broad ring shape that allows us to see into or through it, but conceals the interior of its swelling walls. A year later, a work of comparable form was made using bent beechwood (*Keeping The Faith*, 1992). Here, the bars are bound together with ample amounts of glue into three layers, resulting in a broken skin with an extremely haptic appeal. From a normal viewing angle, our glimpses into the only knee-high sculpture get lost in the shadow play of the pierced walls. Even if it resembles a semi-finished product in the way it was made, the organic associations are just as powerful. The sculpture’s physicality presents itself in a kind of model state: little is lacking here for us to be able to imagine a closed form, perhaps a living body, but at the same time, the form insists on the significance of the underlying structure, its blueprint. Kept at a similar abeyance between body and model, or between facticity and theory, if you will, are the large wood works of the 1990s, such as *What Could Make Me Feel This Way (A)* (1993) [pp. 132-137], *Laocoon* (1996) [pp. 138-139] and *After* (1998). Their

basic element is a tube of rings, ribs and ribbons, a continuous flexible form bent in upon itself. The first and most complex work operates like a gigantic shape game. Six weir-like elements are pushed through three consecutive asymmetrical loops, resulting in a structure of great density but also potential fragility. Despite all their interweaving, it seems as if the individual parts could be assembled differently, or that the figure could be expanded at will. The highly powerful dynamic of the work, which has something muscular, almost boastful, about it, is balanced out by the schematicism of the combinability of only two different modules. The robust liveliness that the material, its treatment and the overall form communicate encounters an element of potential alterability, familiar from the grids used for three-dimensional drafting on the computer before the body images constructed there take on their surface. Sculpture in a quite classical sense (*Laocoon!*) combines with the virtuality of a model.

There is a counterpart to this sculpture with the same title (*What Could Make Me Feel This Way (B)*, 1993). Both made their first, somewhat emotional, appearance, in the same broad, historical space. More so than eight years beforehand, when another two large works sharing an identical title developed an interplay between the interior and exterior of an exhibition building,²⁴ here the apparently complete opposition is surprising. Where the one sculpture asserts itself unmistakably with its impressive energy, the other rests as a cloudy mirror flat on the floor. The warmth and organicism of wood contrasts with the coldness and technical quality of stainless steel. Although both works are of similar length, the one expands into the space whereas the other retreats to its clearly marked borders: self-conscious physicality as against an almost immaterial appearance. The steel sculpture naturally has a physical presence as well, and as such one that is somewhat puzzling. The outer form is developed from the *Back Of My Hand* reliefs, and the internal structure has its graphic predecessor in the Krefeld window drawings. The surface with its ornamental structure composed of individual elements that are divided at right angles is similar to a quilted piece of fabric, whereby the

production process borrowed from the making of radiators lends the soft bulges a strange suppleness. Despite their contrariness, a comparison of these two sculptures illustrates what began to change in Deacon's work in the 1990s — and what remained. On first glance, a certain solidification is apparent. The linearity as well as the hybrid-object quality of many earlier sculptures has given way to a unified corporeality with fixed contours. Often, a continuous external skin, conceived in many diverse ways, closes the work. In a certain sense, the work thus retreats, as an object gains distance from the viewer, but does not withdraw. The interplay of contour and surface, material and structure, sends out attractors that encourage more precise inspection, even if this inspection cannot decipher the riddle of objects that are animated from within in such a reserved fashion. The latent mobility that saturates the entire oeuvre comes to bear in a subtle way in these more or less closed works. The modulated surfaces with their varied textures, swellings and transparencies suggest the restrained movements that can be seen rippling across the skin of an organism, be it in the microscopic or macroscopic realm. To stay with this image, we could mention breathing, muscle or tendon contractions, or natural phenomena like wind and waves. Where there were once echoes of symbolic forms like ears, mouths or eyes, now there are indicators of vitality that are less readily identifiable. While the older works repeatedly offered anchors to the linguistically structured world of consciousness, many of the newer ones remain more in the zone of the vegetative. To dare a perhaps overstated comparison that turns on the differences in the relationship of work and viewer: a lively communication, a dance, has been enriched by incorporating a thoroughly erotic exchange, beyond the world of language.

Particularly in the realm of smaller and mid-sized sculptures, there is a broad spectrum of forms, types and materials during the second half of the 1990s. For example, the continuing series *Art For Other People* was always a field for experiments beyond its communicative intentions, a possibility for escaping all-too-clear definitions in associative and/or semantic terms and for dissolving the “nexus of meanings”.²⁵



Keeping The Faith, 1992

As sculptures with the dimensions of everyday objects, these works are “handy” in a double sense: their tactile and sculptural allure indirectly demand that they be picked up and studied, and at the same time they appear available in a certain sense. But both qualities are, so to speak, only a rhetorical gesture. Increasingly, the works abide in an attractive, yet fundamental, otherness. A joint 1995 work with Thomas Schütte entitled *Them And Us* explores this quality in an open, narrative way. At Schütte's prompting, Deacon then turned to ceramics in 1999, a technique that not only interested him in the 1970s and early 80s, but with which he also worked in 1979, such a decisive phase in his oeuvre. While at that time pots with their dialectic of body and opening were so important to him, his approach is now a different one. In the first works he made in a professional ceramics workshop in Cologne, the foreignness almost takes the form of a certain withdrawal, with the large, glazed forms standing independently in space, removed from time (for example *Tomorrow, And Tomorrow, And Tomorrow (B)*, 1999). Yet each of these sculptures seems like a familiar shape, as if they had already been seen somewhere before or one had sketched them. It is possible to follow how working with the material brings a movement, once begun, to its logical end, or adds individual elements to a striking form. What makes these works seem vaguely familiar is not so much a verifiable relation

to actually existing objects; rather, it is as if the shapes explored themselves in the process of their emergence, and in so doing summoned other forms to mind. Underhandedly, as it were, an exchange takes place that we can read as reminiscence of other, possibly older, cultures. These are not concrete borrowings, but highly synthetic memories, precipitates of the remembered, the felt and the thought, even though Indian elements might shine through here, Chinese or perhaps Pre-Columbian there.

The closure in these ceramics reached a new climax on the threshold to the new decade, which made them seem far distant from the expansive gestures of the sculptures twenty years before. An engagement with the space and the viewer seems to be replaced by astonishment over a self-created, and yet foreign, object. It might be useful at this point to turn away from the sculptures and their fundamental claim to publicness, and to take a look at the more intimate form of the drawing and especially the drawn-over photographs with which Deacon has increasingly been working since the end of the 1990s. The painting-sized photographs, in which relatively small “final drawings”²⁶ are placed, express something “through visual comparison” and are made “on the basis of similarities as well as contrasts”. In series such as *Ants* (1998), *London* (1998) and *Caithness* (1999), the drawn forms centre on homogenous images like a swarm of ants or the sky. In the screen-print portfolio *Show & Tell* (1997), the drawings, which are placed in small white rectangles, have in various places left a “blind spot [...] in the reality of the large format photographs”. The image of a wooden house closed up in the winter on an island near Helsinki, for example, is superimposed in one spot with a drawing where an indication of a continuing “story” could be imagined. The bright rectangularity of this mark evokes in a way an analogy to the time-tested stability of the simple building with its pragmatically placed doors and windows, yet the interior detail hardly allows itself to be placed in relation to this, at best in the sense of a complementary mood, a different story, which indirectly responds to that of the photograph. Between the two, a “matching” emerges that comes quite close to the “dialogue form



What Could Make Me Feel This Way, 1993

of playing out image, conversations in reality”. The drawing leaves its mark “with all its insider aspects” on the “large format photographs”. The closure of the one visual world and the openness of the other are opposed to one another not only in the sense of individual and collective, private and public, psychological and sociological — here just as in the sculptures — but have to be seen as a dialogue, one that the artist carries out in and with his entire work and the viewer: *Between The Two of Us*.²⁷

Notes

1. Peter Schjeldahl, "Deacon's Faith", in: Jon Thompson/Pier Luigi Tazzi/Peter Schjeldahl, *Richard Deacon*, London 2000, p. 93.
2. See Penelope Curtis, "The Interior is Always More Difficult", in: Thompson/Tazzi/Schjeldahl, *Richard Deacon* 2000, pp. 170-190.
3. Richard Deacon, *In Praise of Television: Television and Representation / Éloge de la télévision: Télévision et représentation*, Association des Amis du Musée Départemental de Rochechouart, 1998, n.p.
4. Richard Deacon, "Talking with Caryn Faure Walker", in: *Aspects*, no. 17, London 1982, n.p.
5. Richard Deacon, "Silence, Exile, Cunning", in: *Richard Deacon*, exh. cat., Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh 1988, pp. 9-16.
6. Ibid., p. 15.
7. Rainer Maria Rilke, "Die Sonette an Orpheus, V" (1922), in: Rainer Maria Rilke, *Ausgewählte Werke, Erster Band, Gedichte*, Leipzig 1942, p. 271.
8. Richard Francis, "Richard Deacon Talking about Those Who Have Eyes No 2 and Other Works", in: *Richard Deacon – Five Recent Sculptures*, Tate Gallery, London 1985, p. 14.
9. See Julian Heynen, "Ein Ort zwischen den Grenzen. Skulptur und Sprache bei Richard Deacon, Harald Klingelhöller, Franz West", in: Hans-Caspar Graf von Bothmer/Klaus Güthlein/Rudolf Kuhn (eds.), *Festschrift Lorenz Dittmann*, Frankfurt am Main/Berlin/Bern/New York/Paris/Vienna 1994, pp. 199-215.
10. For example *Heart And Mind* (1986), *Untitled* (1987), *There And Here, Here And There*, (1987), *The Breed* (1989).
11. "Dinge. Indem ich das ausspreche (hören Sie?) entsteht eine Stille; die Stille, die um die Dinge ist." (Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rodin: Zweiter Teil [1907]. Ein Vortrag*, Frankfurt am Main 1984, p. 72).
12. "Interview. Pier Luigi Tazzi in conversation with Richard Deacon", in: Thompson/Tazzi/Schjeldahl 2000, op. cit. p. 22.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., p. 32.
17. Ibid., p. 29.
18. Ibid., p. 32.
19. This and the next quoted passage from: Alain Cueff, *Der Ort des Werkes. Bustamante. Gober. Klingelhöller. Mucha. Schütte. Vercrusse*, Bern 1992, pp. 113f.
20. "Zwischenzonen / In Between", in: *Richard Deacon*, exh. cat. Museum Haus Lange and Museum Haus Esters, Krefeld 1991, vol. 1, n.p.
21. Interview Tazzi/Deacon 2000, op. cit., p. 25.
22. Richard Deacon, "Moulins Cherie, France, 17. 6. 1986", in: *Richard Deacon – ATLAS: Gondwanaland and Laurasia*, exh. cat. Kunsternes Hus, Oslo 1990, n.p.
23. Ibid.
24. *Blind, Deaf And Dumb (A)* and *Blind, Deaf And Dumb (B)*, 1985.
25. Francis 1985, op. cit.
26. This and the following quoted passage from: Gerhard Storck, "Wenn eins zum anderen kommt", in: *Artist's Proof – Künstlerisch erprobt. Grafische/fotografische Arbeiten aus den letzten dreißig Jahren*, exh. cat. Kaiser Wilhelm Museum, Krefeld, Cologne 1998, p. XIV.
27. This is the title of a sculpture by Richard Deacon from 1984.