

Boundaries and Meaning Making

Vikki Bell

By posing the question - what do you make of this (this form that I have made)? - sculpture summons an awareness of the modes and processes by which we make meaning. The sculptor is in the privileged position of placing objects in the world that, in their extraordinariness, (re)quest such a journey. Through their standing out, they turn us toward our own. We are frequently offered a relationship to the interior as well as the exterior of Deacon's sculptures. Many are of a design and scale such that one can pass through them. Often their lines take the viewer on a visual journey in which inside and outside are, as with the Mobius strip, indistinguishable. Sometimes transparent or opaque materials give the opportunity to 'pass through' the first border between 'us' and 'it'. Deacon evokes the experience of being drawn into a relationship with an object. In the larger ones, the object threatens to engulf, to take you inside, like so many stories of large beasts, science fiction or horror movies. More pleasurably told, they recall comforting experiences - the child in the womb, or the freedom of swimming underwater; more mundanely, they recall everyday experiences in our relation to objects like driving a car, within which we routinely enclose ourselves, with our perception of our dimensions expanding accordingly. The point is not that 'going in' results in a deeper or better knowledge, but that moving between the interior and the exterior changes our sense and experience - our sensation - of the sculpture by moving us along and - almost - across the boundary. This is less the scientist with a microscope and more the swimmer who, moving through the water, experiences the boundary between water and air, and travels along it, existing in both. Just as philosophers have argued that language fixes meaning on the fluidity of the world, so Deacon plays with fluidity in our perception of spatiality. We have an amazing capacity to make sense out of optical confusion, to accept illusion, and to surrender the correspondence between substance and appearance. Looking, like language, can be said to constitute the world. But Deacon's sculptures refuse to be merely objects to be looked at. One isn't just to look, and to meditate on the constitutive powers of looking, but one is to see, to receive from these objects. Experiencing the interiority of an object is not equivalent to becoming that object: there is something that is not available to the spectator. The specificity of objects, like each of our unique 'inferiorities', is not available to be shared. The boundary is crucial. The membranes, skin, the impenetrable or unseeable; all these challenge any simple continuity between object and spectator. We must recognise the fluidity and plasticity of the material world, but to see ourselves as constituting it entirely is to give up not only on the 'stuff of the world, as Deacon calls it, but on mystery.

As the sixties became the seventies, Richard Deacon and his classmates at Saint Martin's School of Art in London seemed headed towards glorious futures. In studios, galleries and magazines, a notion prevailed: 'Work with the cube, the idea, or the weld and you will achieve success.' Instead, young artists in England, the United States and elsewhere stumbled into all sorts of detours and dead ends. Shunning the easy solution, then as well as now, Deacon has created a body of work which remains fresh, singular, inventive. His pieces would not look out of place in an exhibition surveying the history of Western sculpture, though initially they might seem misshapen, awkward, and cumbersome among figures of marble and bronze. Nor are they out of context in contemporary surveys, though his 'stuff often seems more graceful and elegant than the ungainly and rambunctious things generally installed nearby. Deacon's art holds its own for a number of reasons. There is the uniqueness of his aesthetic, a meld of the formal with the singularity of the way his studio practices express his ethics. To be sure, it is almost impossible to name a typical Deacon. Each piece represents a new adventure, the possibility of moving off in a direction not previously taken. Consider the nature of the full volumes the artist makes from scratch. Some have curved, covered surfaces against which a flat plane or some quirky element may nestle. Others are formed by strips of metal alternating with openings so that their cores are visible; these structures may rise high off the ground and even be sited outdoors. But for every work by Deacon which has a bloated or dense centre, there are those which are as flat as pancakes and flush with the floor or the wall behind them. His works also vary in size from the miniature to the monumental without losing any of their power and expressiveness. Additionally, materials such as wood, metal and polycarbonates with their differing densities as well as their inherent colours, or applied tones and hues, add to the infinite combinations that the artist manipulates. Richard Deacon treats his studio as if it were a fabrication shop. In this he departs even more from the Minimalists who made a point of having their work sent out for manufacture. While an artist like Donald Judd ceded control of how details such as edges and planes were treated, Deacon stays with his forms and elements from start to finish. The difference in attitude and approach shows. Because his sculptures tend to be self-contained pieces, Deacon's work conveys meaning whether seen alone or surrounded by others he has made. In front of something intimate and small-scale or towering and public, we can respond to

the similarities and differences or just ponder the intellectual and sensual pleasure close at hand.