

Splendid isolation

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This Spring at the fair in Basle 1 saw a piece by Richard Deacon standing amidst the hustle and bustle of a commercial area. It was erected on the edge of the Lisson Gallery stand in an area that divided the exhibition space and a walkway. On this spot its singularity was complete and absolute. It manifested a respect for the passers by which was reciprocated. And between passerby and the piece another factor came into play — the effect of height, that mild domination which Richard Deacon's works can exert over humans. And yet there is never that overwhelming sense of authority such that respect can be exchanged for seduction: there is never a plethora or a paucity of forms such that the space is burdened or naked — nor is there an overabundance or a deficit of materials such that the desire is born and then nipped in the bud.

This leads one to hypothesize that the sculpture of Richard Deacon lends itself to a cautious intercourse both with the individual as such and with people en masse and that in so doing it doesn't in any way relinquish the art of its statuary. Even if it does unburden itself of its pedestal which is perhaps not the essence. No base then but instead, and enhanced moreover, there is an aura, a line, an emanation. In Richard Deacon's works there is something that is often missing in the pleasant productions of modern art namely, poetry and a moral. What Deacon is creating is imbued with a culture which is haunted by Rilke and Heidegger — he is creating a genuine piece, a priceless edifice of labour.

In Basle the singularity of Deacon's piece was even further accentuated. Here at this fair it played the role of the intruder in the surging mass of proposals and configurations all involved primarily with the need to fill the giant spaces which are the results of a trend in modern museums. And it wasn't without a certain amusement that I recalled a recent feat wrought by the sculptor who in December 1986 succeeded in housing six of his pieces in the alarming lack of space of the Arlogos Gallery in Nantes. On that occasion I noted the artist's ability to play with space and different areas as if the work itself were the eternally correct centre and open to the diverse effects of gravitation. Later on I would like to touch upon the internal struggle which these six pieces by Deacon engaged in during their sojourn in the philosophical boudoir of the Arlogos Gallery. What an abundance of delights in that tiny cell!

But first of all I would like to dwell on a peculiarity of the solitary voyage of that sculpture which evoked such astonishment in Switzerland. That day in the visual bubble-bubble of a contemporary art fair Deacon's work had the appearance first and foremost of a 'colour'. It is quite a strange sensation to stand in front of a sculpture which manifests so many pictorial qualities. A sensation made doubly peculiar since it surfaced in the midst of a tide of paint where only the colour of the sculpture stood out. An astonishing paradox particularly since Deacon's work and what can be termed as his 'quest' is aimed at atonal materials which contain a virile achromatism in their mass. Splendid isolation which was suddenly unveiled to me when my attention lingered on a detail of the work, the overflowing of the glue, — the sweat, the secretion the strength and binding force of the work itself. There it stood — a splash of sculpture silent as an unseen bead of sweat and yet simultaneously restrained and betrayed, — a salivation, mood, body, organ, a garden of delights. How was it possible to see anything else at this fair but this tiny secret, this discreet exactitude, this organic manifestation of strength and abundance?

Therefore, with the exception of a representational artform which is very dear to me and accompanied me to this fair — all I could focus on, at this circular fair where the centre is but a void, was a satellite turning, this enigma launched into a stream of polished stars where it

absorbed all the secretions of those opalescent drops imbibing all the energy of that seminal milky way.

So the question is how can a piece be so powerful that it can stand out so strongly in its isolation ? How does it manage to be that detail which springs out immediately from a group photograph, to be the 'punctum ' of a contemporary situation? What is the secret of this sculpture which was destined on that occasion to be but the companion of the ' pictures' and yet manages to invade the mind and the senses and instills the hope that something can still be triggered in the realm of meaning ?

Some of these questions can be answered by the exhibition which Deacon held in the Arlogos Gallery in Nantes in December 1986. And yet this place started out with every handicap imaginable. There was no natural light, the surface was unpretentious and the access to the space almost mazelike — all factors not disposed to gladden the hearts of sculptors with expansionist aspirations. Apart from the excellent relationship between the sculptor and the manager of the Gallery it was undoubtedly the terrible restraints of the space and location that captivated that paradoxical sculptor Deacon.

For those who do enter the lay-out of this exhibition is remarkably precise. On the floor there is a composite piece of wood, glue, linoleum, galvanized iron entitled ' Other Men's Eyes '. On the walls there are five other pieces which should be designs and are of galvanized iron, riveting, leather or sensitive plates and entitled in a series of The Back of My Hand I, II, III, IV, V. These bas relief pieces attached to the walls lead to the ground with a touch of a curve and yet remain sculptures preserving a weight.

Each one of these pieces is a victim of the confines of the location, yet they do not suffer from it or of it. On the contrary there is a perfection in the arrangement, a special resonance. Everyone is ama-zed. Entering the gallery one penetrates Order itself. A kind of order question of perception but also a question addressed to sculpture itself.

which leads us to question order itself, the same way we would question an object we can hold in our hand, a new object and yet even though we don't know exactly how it will serve us we already know that it is going to be of use to us. How is it possible to be in this space with these cumbersome objects and not

have the feeling that they are depriving us of our space? Very quickly we understand that each of Deacon's sculptures is a door, an orifice, one of those splendid openings which Lewis Carroll's Alice found one day and which unfurls into the intimacy of unfathomable depths. The purpose of Other Men's Eyes' is to see but also to be seen. The title is always important in Deacon's works and here it is like a sign, a clue. Of course in Deacon's work there is no figurative proposal but neither is there abstraction. The very form itself of ' Other Men's Eyes' contains a question — a This sculpture is composed of two hollow forms — a line of wood glued together, surrounded by linoleum that traces in space the sketch of a form that is open. The other form is a mass of galvanized iron studded with rivets and having the same structure as a sound box of a musical instrument which gives the appearance of being hermetically closed but open to the void, to the echo which has to enter and then escape in order to be an echo. The way we look at Other Men's Eyes' is like that. It needs a certain form to be seen without presenting the form necessary to retain our fascination. In this way the structure of Deacon's pieces can be said to be musical in that they generate perceptions. The musical metaphor which often accompanies Deacon's work is in face an attempt to translate the function of the body or the organ which Deacon wants to talk about. In this case attention is riveted on the eye and leads to perceptions. We get the feeling then, that the sculptor is sliding towards an unexpected ambition which is a phenomenological exploration of perception, a way of expressing in sculpture the thousand and one struggles and conflicts which bodies engage in by means of the organs of perception. This is where the generic term of Deacon's work ' Art for Other People' stems from. This is where the myriad allusions in his work to Seeing and Understanding and Blindness and Muteness evolve

from. Perception is subject to the same laws as the body — and the body can only appear as an object when it is threatened by joy or infirmity.

Having said all of this and maybe even having accepted all of this we go back to the philosophical boudoir in Arlogos.' Other Men's Eyes' is in a blind area, surrounded by five pieces — tympani, drum surfaces of hard sheet metal stretched by the jaws of rivets, held and holding softer material of leather or X-ray sensitive plates or even the linoleum of desperate backrooms. Is this anything else but a chamber of echoes where the lips of metal hiss and hoot? Is this not the crutch which modernity is crying out for — to be able to listen to words of desire and the mute death rattle of pleasures where rivets and glue are executed to perfection?

The five pieces which surround the first one are called 'The Back of My Hand' — a term which need no further clarification. This expression connotes a blind knowledge, an intuition which doesn't have to be seen and particularly by others. What happens in the very profundity of Deacon's sculpture, in that place, where with blindfolded eyes one knows in advance what one can expect from the sculpture, in other words the absence of illusion, absolute doubt and the cold eye on the mythology of the artist.

The materials which Deacon has chosen to express his maturity are composites and not one of them has the effect of mass which would also permit a classical work of sculpture. All these materials have been industrially transformed and are to be regarded as surfaces and even if they are called upon to simulate volume they are never asked to fill it. In the same way without any true density they will have to seek the assistance of glue and rivets to be erected. There are two consequences to that and two objectives are attained.

First of all in the logic of a new English sculpture. Deacon has a theory of sculpture connected to labour, its lyricism and this comes to the fore in the design. The instant of creation is one of production which holds at bay other estimable theories of sculptors who would try to maintain the battle with volume and the challenge of materials. Deacon's tools fit in with the curious banality of his materials, that universal tool of a contemporary man trying to efface his sorrow. And of course there is that infinite patience and the repetition of motion. There can be no doubt that here there is evidence of a desire that cannot be very far removed from what J.-F. Lyotard described as a logical paradox of a proletarian libido. If Deacon creates a difference in contemporary sculpture it is undoubtedly due to the fact that in his sculpture he does not make any differentiation between working as a sculpture and as a skilled worker. It goes without saying that the object of this creation is the fruit of another longing, and that it descends from another sphere. That the object then ends up in places where the elite of art exhibit their work is due to a combination of both factors. It is true that the fascination that Deacon's work produces is due to what he shows without mystery. The idea that an imaginary doesn't need to resort to occult or hidden devices is naturally going to surprise a world which only tolerates the word 'work' by sublimating it in creative charm. If Deacon's theory and execution is visible in his work it is because he is driven by an ethic which consists of trying to reflect with the greatest amount of tact and elegance a problematic world where the very idea of work no longer has any inherent value. At a point in time where the economy drains the motion of work of its inferred dignity. Deacon the British artist creates sculpture as object and leaves to others the prestige of sculpture. This 'Art for Other People' produces objects sheathed and endowed with the repetition of work and are as such a homage to work and labour.

I don't find it all surprising that a contemporary work betrays an idea which could be too hastily assessed as reactive. The violence which marks the world of labour today is also in evidence in the world of artists. Modern economy develops its genius in the distribution and commercialisation of products while disdaining the products themselves. For a long time works of art gave rise to heightened emotions and some violence within their own realm. Today this is no longer possible because even before they see the light of day they are destined for the largest possible amount of distribution. By this I mean that they will end up in those gigantic machines

which will bring about their metamorphosis into cultural products. The only choice left to artists is the one to be made between truth and falsehood.

Deacon's truth is to endow labour with significance and to make it visible even to the point of becoming a nuisance. This truth is also expressed in the passion for phenomenology where even during the work of creation the artist discourses on the mechanisms of imaginary. All of Deacon's pieces state that imagination is a recombination and that to imagine is to add to the form, the material, the references. Deacon's truth is still anchored in words in his titles which lead to the birth of meaning.

It is behind the words that he chooses for his titles to the sculptures that we can rediscover Deacon's writing — and by this I mean his ' designs '. A recent and very beautiful piece written by Olivier Kaepelin waxes lyrically on the forms in Deacon's sculptures and the splendour of Giovanni Bellini's painting — ' The Agony in the Garden '. What a perceptive eye Olivier Kaepelin has to observe the looseness of the lines in that painting and the uncertainties of volume induced by the paint. A good eye and better judgement to juxtapose Deacon's work and this painting with such a formidably strong title. Deacon's words are to be found in his lines, in his curves which fill his notebooks in his quest for spirals, for moebian effects and which very much to our surprise translate into sketches of corporeal and even anatomical diagrams.

Because in Deacon's sculpture it is a matter of Listening-Seeing, of Seeing-Enjoying, Listening-Enjoying and of being the Object-Orifice and it is to this end that that word intervenes in the sculpture so that the poetry and a very avalanche of words can be triggered. I believe in Deacon's writing, in that great body of work by the sculptor where each piece is more than a sign, a letter of the alphabet but rather the articulation of a message. And even if sculpture remains ' Deaf and mute ' it is because it wishes to remain the sole object of desire by the will of the artist and by bringing into play absolute impoverishment.

How is Deacon's treatise progressing? It is advancing because from one piece to the next he deliberately chooses ungrateful even base materials. Observe the compositions of the sculptor and you will see from one piece to the next the return of atonal materials. Each one of them is a rough or chilly surface without any depth — almost glaucous. Sometimes the linoleum betrays a derision for the decorative but the way in which it is disciplined, contained and crimped in the form it produces an added silence on the doubt it has aroused. It would be more accurate to say that the modelling of Deacon's sculptures subjects itself to implacable impoverishment. By this I mean that its very visibility and the definite impression it leaves on the mind and memory is a result of the disappointment it evokes rather than the wealth one expects from sculpture.

Deacon's work is organized entirely around this disappointment, namely on the radical position which is one of querying sculpture on the matter of waste and residue. In his work Deacon wonders what leads to the death of the mythological figure of the sculptor, the disappearance of mass, the obliteration of illusion and pretence and the magic of knowing, the derogation of materials. His work goes on to pose the question of what brings about the proof of labour, the evenness of surfaces, the quality of the object, the coarseness of the material?

And what if, leaving aside all problematic and in response to the work we were to state that the sculpture by Deacon was first and foremost a colour ? We would be joining forces with the best of his connoisseurs who when pondering his work often revert to painting. And by so doing we come to the paradoxical conclusion that because of the atonal plasticity of his materials Deacon with his work is relentlessly constructing a hole, an emptiness in the landscape of art, a space where painting will have difficulty reaching because it tries so hard to seduce. We would even add that its existence results from the deficiencies it exhibits; from its desire to see without looking, to hear without hearing, to seduce without using charm. And to go so far as to say that nothing enhances or emphasizes a forest more than a clearing in the forest and that nothing can be more effective than this emptiness.

The promises of Deacon's work are equal to his own rigour. Everything leads to the belief that the motor of this work will never be jammed by archaic criticism. And there is more than reason

to believe that Deacon's eye on the world is one of a perfect and acid lucidity. The barriers are numerous in the work of an artist and they are vital with regard to what the artist refuses to accept or what he has in mind. The works are there, imbued with an ethic and a poetry which protect them from a total surrender to the world of art. How is it not possible to understand then, that these prosthesis where the meaning of significance and the pleasure of secret bodies are sheltered, preferred in December 1986 the obscurity of a dungeon more suited to delights than the foolish brightness of another light ? In this manner it preserved its splendid isolation.