

What car?

Lynne Cooke - Richard Deacon

Richard Deacon 20 February 1992.

A car stands in front of a glazed, bland but convoluted building. A pared down, corporate, late modernist exterior. Surrounding buildings are amongst the welter of reflections and self-reflections in the glass. The glazing pattern of the building is in turn reflected in the car windscreen. The plaza is stepped, the paving detailed with stripes. A fragment, an inverted "V" shape, is visible to one side behind the car. This is possibly a sculptural, possibly a structural element. Behind this a piece of movable security fencing has been placed across a (side?) doorway. Another doorway is visible to the rear of the image, again closed and visually obstructed by the stepped detailing of the plaza. These are the only visible entrances to the building, both closed. Within the car's interior it is possible to make out the four seat headrests and to know that there is no-one inside. The driver's door is presented to the spectator, the prominent side mirror at the very centre of the image. Reflections in the windscreen marry car and building; to be inside the one is to be inside the other; to be outside is to be outside them both. The car seems to occupy a place in a corporate plaza that, most frequently in North America, Japan or Germany, would be taken by an artwork. The copy says "The Chairman's statement", a nice conjunction of the form of address within a shareholders meeting with, given the clues from the rest of the image, the idea of artistic utterance. The corporate high flyer is joined to the personalized and individualistic values associated with the artist and artwork. The raising of a vehicle to iconic or symbolic status should come as no surprise yet the device by which that is accomplished in this particular case is worth marking. The plaza, even a corporate one, is a public place. Sculpture has been used to both adorn that space and to celebrate its publicness. Although as Richard Serra has discovered there are limits, freedom of expression belongs in the public domain. There is also a sense in which the implicit act of patronage is celebrated. There are no people in the picture and half of the population are non participants.

Lynne Cooke 14 March 1992.

This pristine, newly-minted car astride the corporate plaza usurps, as you say, Richard, the place that would, if occupied, normally be taken by an art-object. What makes the substitution so provocative is, it seems to me, the way that the vehicle usurps the place but not necessarily the role of the artwork; indeed it seems actively to embrace that very role. To the degree that it succeeds it becomes an interlocutor not an impostor.

Much twentieth century sculpture in the public domain, which increasingly means the corporate as much as state or municipal environs, simply adorns its environment. Seeking to ameliorate the visual cacophony of street signs and "furniture" that make up the urban space, to embellish or otherwise provide a respite from this clamour, only rarely does the sculpture escape being commandeered as a logo, a sign naming the site in shorthand. Seldom does it manage to offer a counter-statement or even an explicit commentary on the values enshrined in that locale, as Richard Serra's Tilted Arc so effectively, if provocatively, did.

Irrespective of whether it takes on the role conventionally assigned sculpture appropriately or not, the automobile here unquestionably embellishes the site and reinforces the values it enshrines. For, as you note, Richard, the harmony between building and car is more than a matter of stylistics, the interchange acted out in the play of reflection is deeply coded and hence operates on a symbolic level.

The functions assumed by the car are thus virtually equivalent, albeit pervertedly so, to those traditionally accorded the monument: to educate, elevate and decorate (in that order). The monument is usually realised in the form of a statue of a heroic figure who is commemorated,

even celebrated, for the exemplary character of his (or her) actions, and therefore as a source of moral authority and as a model for civic virtue (or valour). Ironically, and this is something that has not escaped the attention of the advertisers, in contemporary urban society the chairman of the corporation has assumed, even at times seized, such a role. That the values that he (not she, as the image makes only too apparent) embodies revolve around money, power, exclusivity, surface style, mobility and transience, that they are essentially private, and that their sphere and manner of operation is being celebrated here is the message disseminated by the image. That responsibility for this in part lies, as Richard Sennett has persuasively argued, in the fall of public man, that is, in the withering away of the civic roles formerly adopted by the citizen, is a conclusion hard to escape. Similarly, the deduction that public space is merely a fiction, that it has long been occupied by private interests, is one that is hard to deny. P.S.: Reading further, and contextualising the image proves telling. That the location of this billboard is, as the street sign attests, "Bush Road" (notwithstanding the fact that it is in London), must seem only too apt for any reader from the United States. The proliferation over the 1980s and into the 1990s of such pristine zones as the one pictured here has only become possible because they are reinforced by exclusionary techniques and by surveillance systems. Outside, as witnessed here in the actual spaces below the image, traces of urban decay - of garbage, graffiti and other forms of visual pollution - abound. That this arena, and not the one pictured above it, is peopled only reinforces the point. transience, that they are essentially private, and that their sphere and manner of operation is being celebrated here is the message disseminated by the image. That responsibility for this in part lies, as Richard Sennett has persuasively argued, in the fall of public man, that is, in the withering away of the civic roles formerly adopted by the citizen, is a conclusion hard to escape. Similarly, the deduction that public space is merely a fiction, that it has long been occupied by private interests, is one that is hard to deny. P.S.: Reading further, and contextualising the image proves telling. That the location of this billboard is, as the street sign attests, "Bush Road" (notwithstanding the fact that it is in London), must seem only too apt for any reader from the United States. The proliferation over the 1980s and into the 1990s of such pristine zones as the one pictured here has only become possible because they are reinforced by exclusionary techniques and by surveillance systems. Outside, as witnessed here in the actual spaces below the image, traces of urban decay - of garbage, graffiti and other forms of visual pollution - abound. That this arena, and not the one pictured above it, is peopled only reinforces the point.

Richard Deacon 17 March 1992.

You're right, the car is not parked it is there deliberately; the driver has not strode inside for a meeting. It is important that we (those of us whose gender allows this little fantasy) realise this, that availability (ownership?) is a possibility, though vicarious. However it is also true that this is an artifice, the public space exists in this case through a piece of image making. You are also right to expand your frame of reference to take in the whole photograph. I hadn't remarked the poignancy of "Bush Road" over the rubbish bags but I had noticed the piles of garbage, the graffiti, the brutality of the rendered gable end and that this was an occupied place. Did you ever read a book that came out sometime around 1986, a study of territory in housing estates, particularly the blocks from the sixties with their public walkways, communal areas, etc? I'll have to try and find the title. The argument was that lack of definition of those communal areas was a strong contributing factor to social breakdown in the blocks. Paradoxically, the best of intentions, by confusing public and private, had engendered alienation and social confusion, the very symptoms that the architects and the local authorities were trying to alleviate. Against these blocks were contrasted suburban developments of the interwar years, rows of individual houses where the distinction between public and private is absolutely clear. And where, furthermore, bay windows at the front gave an occupier a means of surveillance. The zones of responsibility for maintenance etc. being clearly established, anti-social behaviour is suppressed. The book was

quite successful, its recommendations becoming quite influential. The redefinition of occupied space by removal of walkways, addition of gates, abolition of communal areas is being actively pursued by many local authorities. While hopefully this ameliorates the quality of life for residents, it does so by eliminating one sort of public space - the networks of alleys, walkways, stairs and open spaces to which all had access and none had charge. There is an intriguing paradox in the photograph we are considering in that the billboard proposes (suggests) a public space, recognizable as such - the message relies on that recognition - at the same time the photograph itself shows the absence of conditions in which such publicness could endure.

Lynne Cooke 21 March 1992.

Exactly. What it presents seems more akin to a stage set than to an actual place, though the model on which the "set designer" has based his (her) work is quite a familiar one. This is clearly not modern(ist) architecture, it is contemporary corporate architecture and hence an architecture which in recent years has relied heavily on the atrium as its preferred vehicle for meeting the legal requirements set by the state or federal government of providing public space within any given building project. Typically, it does this in ways that are very carefully devised so that the public spaces actually remain exclusionist: generally guards and/or other surveillance mechanisms are used to keep out certain groups of people, notably the indigent, confining them to the narrow pedestrian corridors outside, to the pavements. Simultaneously, nature is sequestered indoors. Moreover the plants chosen tend to be exotic species, and even when not are nevertheless rendered artificial, preserved as they are in carefully controlled climatic conditions. The global proliferation throughout the 1980s of these atria permits this particular image of corporate architecture and social space to be read as "universal" and ubiquitous, which is to say, as anonymous, displaced and, arguably, place-less (because it is devoid of any clear identity). Such venues become places people populate rather than inhabit. Inadvertently no doubt, recognition of the character of this site makes visible the mechanisms of alienation to which both producers and consumers are continually and systematically subjected in public urban spaces. This recognition is re-enacted metaphorically here in the complicity with which the role of the viewer (especially when he or she is not the white male viewer who interpolates himself as surrogate for the chairman) is limited to that of voyeuristic inspection. As you point out, Richard, what is being offered here as in all advertising is fantasy (for those who might partake) or dreams (for those who are necessarily excluded).

So, fortuitously perhaps but nonetheless tellingly, your photograph counterpoints an image of an uninhabited pristine public space containing a brand new luxury car with actuality, with, that is, a populated mundane street corner at which is parked a utility vehicle, an ordinary commercial van. Both of these are clearly urban sites; the former (supposedly) recently constructed, the latter an unplanned aggregate that has accumulated over time. If one is therefore the paradigmatic architecturally designed location, the other might be characterized as an adventitiously formed fragment of the built environment: where one is seamless, ordered and cohesive the other betrays the ruptures, oppositions and asynchronicity, the margins and transitions that in fact make up the totality of most urban environments.

In certain respects these antithetical sites could be read as two models for the kinds of public spaces currently made available for public sculpture. In neither instance is it easy to recognize that social spaces like these are indeed collectively constructed. Nor can it be easy for the contemporary sculptor to acknowledge, define, and perhaps manifest in his or her work, the complexity of the social experience inherent in, or integral to, any such space.

Richard Deacon 26 March 1992.

"Look at this," Joe said. In the living room, he sat on the bed, his small suitcase beside him; he had opened it and brought out a ragged, bent book which showed signs of much handling. He grinned at Juliana. "Come here. You know what somebody says? 'This man.'" He indicated the

book. "This is very funny. Sit down." He took hold of her arm, drew her down beside him. "I want to read to you. Suppose they had won. What would it be like? We don't have to worry; this man has done all the thinking for us."

Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle*.

The first chapter of Rosalind Krauss's book *Passages in Modern Sculpture* begins with a description of a scene from Eisenstein's film *October*. It is the opening scene and starts with the camera exploring in detail a statue of Czar Nicholas II, ending with a crowd bursting into the square that the statue occupies, fixing ropes around the statue and dragging it to the ground. This act of iconoclasm through which Eisenstein celebrates the coming of a new age and which Krauss uses as a way of arriving at a view of Rodin, has become once again familiar this last year. But what would it be like if it were the other way round, if we had witnessed the triumph of soviet communism. Crowds on the streets of Hamburg, Cologne and Bonn. Queues of people desperate to enter East Germany, Austrians flocking into Poland and Hungary. A wild night in Berlin when the wall came down. Disintegration of the European Community and NATO. The United States swiftly reduced to independent republics -Utah, Alaska, Texas, California, Hawaii, The Confederacy, Navajo, Crow, Dakota. The Union itself a small group of North Eastern states and Maryland. Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales secede from the United Kingdom. After brief hostilities Scotland pursues an independent course but bloody and protracted civil war breaks out in Wales and Northern Ireland. The Soviet Union recognizes the breakaway republics of Wales and Scotland. The United Nations plans to send a peacekeeping force. The rump of the former United States applies to join the Warsaw Pact. France, Scotland, England, Portugal, Spain, Netherlands and Belgium apply to join the Soviet Union. Germany becomes a full member of the Union followed shortly by Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Albania., Yugoslavia and Romania. Cuba offers the Independent American Republics help in dismantling their crumbling nuclear arsenals. Bickering breaks out amongst these republics over control of the former United States military assets. The republics of California and Texas in particular prove reluctant to share their navies. Canada and Mexico close their borders to American citizens. The republic of Vietnam imposes strict border controls to counteract the problem of migration from Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia, Australia and Japan. The crowds have burst into the square, the symbols of an outmoded authority are being thrown to the ground. What are they? Does the Washington monument totter? Is the Lincoln memorial destroyed? The Statue of Liberty blown up? Perhaps it would only be a matter of overturning a few police cars. Or maybe the works of Oldenburg, Serra, Moore, Picasso, Miro?

Lynne Cooke 30 March 1992.

What would it mean for the works of Oldenburg, Serra, Moore, Picasso and Miro to survive desecration and destruction unlike, say, the statues of Lenin, Stalin and others? Would it indicate that their meanings are porous, that they are malleable and hence capable of a rereading or manipulation, that, in short, they are politically correctable in the way that the national flags flying in Bucharest in December 1990 were filleted, their central symbols cut out leaving only the country's colours surrounding gaping holes? Would it mean that they could remain present as monuments if they were, as signs, rendered (or considered) mute? In a celebrated dictum now perhaps hackneyed but nonetheless pertinent, Robert Musil contended that a monument is immune to public attention and thus invisible. A monument in his definition is not, therefore, a sign.

Put the other way round, one might contend that the statues of Lenin and his counterparts were removed not because they were monuments, but because they were signs. (Many other "invisible" monuments of Pushkin, Gorky, etc., doubtless remain, ignored because innocuous.) New signs are already appearing, but how many new monuments? The principal squares in Moscow currently sport billboards extolling the virtues of Coca-Cola, McDonalds and other western staples on signs that are larger and more imposing than any other forms of public

display found in the metropolis. During the Cold War the United States Government used Abstract Expressionist painting as a cultural weapon to further spread its political ideology. Today, multinational corporations do a far more effective job utilizing advertising signage. Perhaps it is inconceivable that when the crowds burst into the squares - Piccadilly Circus, or Times Square, say - that their first targets will prove to be the spectacular boards devoted to Coke, Sony, and Marlboro... But, almost certainly, Alfred Gilbert's Eros, like the statue of Father Francis P. Duffy on 42nd Street in New York City will be bypassed in the excitement, ignored, unremarked...

Richard Deacon 2 April 1992.

"Now, Kitty, let's consider who it was that dreamed it all. This is a serious question, my dear, and you should not go on licking your paw like that - as if Dinah hadn't washed you this morning! You see, Kitty, it must have been either me or the Red King. He was part of my dream, of course - but then I was part of his dream, too!" Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*. It's interesting to suppose that the reasons for the United States government supporting Abstract Expressionist painting are the very same reasons that our crowds might ignore the works of Picasso, Serra, Moore, Oldenburg, Miro etc. That is, the individuality, privacy, hermeticism, idiosyncrasy, even apparent meaninglessness of those works. It's contradictory isn't it? On the one hand a patronage, based in ideology, that understands freedom or liberty - high order values -, as being expressed by the, if you like, extreme pursuit of individuality, of privacy. On the other hand something like ineffability, porosity in your word. Thus at the time of the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie in 1988, one appalled commentator, desperately seeking ways of describing the scene of mindless destruction which confronted him, said of the twisted fragments of metal scattered across the ground that they were "like modern sculpture." Equally, when the supermarket chain Sainsbury's began introducing a much broader variety of familiar fruits and vegetables (particularly many different types of lettuces and potatoes) into their stores they advertised this with the rather anthropomorphic image of a potato. Underneath this image they had as copy "No, not Henry Moore." It should also be said that the Sainsbury family are themselves very significant patrons of the arts in Britain.

These are certainly questions about meaning, but they are also about "public." Thus we started by my description of the car, an interlocutor, in your phrase, in the corporate plaza, occupying a place that might be taken by an art work. The one precedes the other and, in general, it is publicness of space which is thought of as the container for works of art in public. But what if this were not the case, what if it were the other way round - that it was "publicness" in the art work which enabled a space to be public?

Lynne Cooke 6 April 1992

The question of whether the publicness is brought into being in and through the object, or whether it preexists it and pertains to the space itself brings up the issue of the relationship between the modernist sculpture, the monument and the memorial. It's my hunch that the monument and the memorial being recognizable and identifiable typologies in themselves are integrally public in address whereas the proper home of the autonomous modernist sculpture is the museum, for there self-referentiality is most securely in place. When it is placed outdoors the modernist sculpture seems to require that the site be read as an extension of the museum, as, in effect, a surrogate museum space of the kind exemplified in a sculpture park. In such venues the forms of address are implicitly in place before the work is encountered. By contrast when the character of the space is not sharply designated or where it has a hybrid identity, as in a corporate atrium, the work often runs the danger of being commandeered, and forced into embellishing the site and/or the patron. Many of the most effective recent strategies adopted to counter this seem, as in say the case of the outdoor work of Richard Serra, to involve creating a work that is site specific in ways that entail an engagement over and above that with the physical

qualities of the site. One alternative, and a telling one, appears to lie in confronting or otherwise invoking the supposedly moribund identity of the monument/memorial. This was done very effectively from within a modernist aesthetic by Barnett Newman with his Broken Obelisk. More recently it has functioned in both active and passive ways, that is, firstly in ways that attempt to counter the loss of meaning, and secondly in ways that seek to profit from it. The gradually disappearing column, Harburg Monument Against Fascism, which Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz constructed in Hamburg and that will ultimately become invisible is an instance of the former. The converse is found in a recent work by Juan Muñoz. This is a seemingly anonymous cenotaph, a memorial devoid of inscription, erected on the banks of the Thames in London. Modelled along the lines of the well known example of this monument found nearby, Muñoz's work was designed to meld directly into its milieu in such a way as to become virtually unnoticeable from the moment of its inception. Reading your notes to *Between Fiction and Fact*, Richard, I was struck by the fact that, compared with those that accompany the already existing sculptures also documented in this book, you offered in place of an analysis of the work partially based in hindsight, an account of how you approached the site, its particular characteristics, not least the fact that the layout of the museum building seems unconnected to the topography of the land, tailored your responses. While I recognize that you must necessarily speak differently about a work still in progress, yet in the same text you reveal another impulse behind your acceptance of this commission. You allude to a chauvinist speech made in 1990 by Margaret Thatcher, then the British Prime Minister, contending that the significant social and political ideals embodied in the French Revolution had been already realized in Britain during the previous century. This claim not only jarred your sensibility and contradicted your beliefs but it galvanized you into responding to the invitation extended the year before by the museum at Villeneuve d'Ascq to make a work in connection with the Bicentenary celebrations. What kind of interface exists between these two modes of responding? They seem on the face of it to embrace differing senses of how publicness might be constituted and overlaid.

Richard Deacon 17 April 1992.

Baudelaire's assumption, expressed negatively in his Salon criticism of 1846 ("tiresome") and positively in his Salon criticism of 1859 ("divine role") was that sculpture was necessarily primitive and close to nature: that is to say, incapable of becoming civilized, as painting is, without losing necessity and virtue. A central plank of Rilke's interest in and writing about Rodin was puzzlement bordering on awe that something made as art could dispense with its maker and exist in the world of things. Judd in his text *Specific Objects* suggests the possibility of an art which borders on the ordinary and the matter of fact. This "like 1, 2, 3" is a way of seeing the world. For all three of these writers, despite vast differences, the object is situated in the world where the subjectivity of the spectator is engaged. This is a limit for Baudelaire, a source of existential questioning for Rilke and a means of de-mystification for Judd. It is without question for any of them that both the site of engagement is in the world and that what is engaged is the product of a human agent. There is no question of privacy. Whatever it is that all these three writers are considering, whether or not we want to call it sculpture, is in public, out there in the world. Like language it is neither yours nor mine and also like language, it is un-contained. What "it" is and what constitutes "the world" may not always be quite so clear.

I don't subscribe to Henry Moore's suggestion that the proper place for sculpture is outside. No more do I believe that the "proper home of the autonomous modernist sculpture is the museum." That seems to put the cart before the horse to me and carries with it a whiff of the prescriptive that I cannot let pass. This may be a matter of dogma to me, I don't know, since I recognize the truth, Lynne, in your comments about the sculpture park and the corporate atrium. You ask what interface exists between Margaret Thatcher's speech and the garden of the Musée d'art moderne at Villeneuve-d'Ascq. I have always assumed that "public," in the sense that is used for example in "public place," had a basic meaning of "belonging to all" - in the

commonality. In this sense a public park is very different from open ground and a speech by a British Prime Minister to the French Parliament is very different from a private conversation. However the two obvious answers to your question are either "none" or "one" - the one being my letter to Joelle Pijaudier. I've often begun discussions about my work by telling the following joke, it helps to break the ice. Q. What do you get if you cross a centipede with a parrot? A. A walkie-talkie.

I don't know how it is in French, but in English I find the compression wonderful. The question brings together two unlike organisms whose commonality is revealed by the answer. The two first organisms, one an insect (a creepy crawly) and the other a bird, are functionally anthropomorphized (anything with a "hundred" feet can do nothing but walk, we repeat what we have learnt "parrot fashion" as if talking could be divorced from understanding). The two single actions are very specific and the conjunction of walking and talking is somehow special. Their focus in the popular name of an artefact brings it, Pygmalion like, to life - "she's a walking, talking, living doll" (Adam Faith - Living Doll). The combination of nature and culture thus achieved is very particularly human and language is the medium and the mechanism by which this conjunction is wrought. There is an external frame, a public net, provided by language yet it is within our own consciousnesses that understanding and ap-preciation takes place. We may laugh together but the cause of the laughter is deep within our own psyches. Thus it seems to me, the joke is an example of criss-crossing of not only categories of things but also of the barrier between the self and the world, where world is meant in the sense that it is a place occupied by human speakers. Since both centipedes and parrots are members of the animal kingdom (although of different phyla) and therefore reproduce, we can, despite the genetic unlikelihood, allow of their cross breeding. A quick trawl through mythology will reveal a great many less likely couplings. The existence of this possible biological abomination, however tenuous, allows the progress from question to answer. The answer in turn makes the question meaningful. Without wanting to stretch an analogy too far, the Musee d'art moderne at Villeneuve-d'Ascq and Margaret Thatcher's speech to the French Parliament seem to have as much in common as parrots and centipedes.

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