

The Tone of Labor

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Richard Deacon's sculptures give signs of a work ethic, drawing rapt attention to the toil, both manual and mental, that went # into producing them. They look labor-intensive in a small-industrial, skilled-shop way, full of the old goodness of the engineer-artisan, the urban yeoman. Because they are art, conspicuously nonfunctional, their hard-work, hand-work qualities feel excessive. Sheets of metal are joined with far more screws than are necessary to hold them together. Laminated strips of wood ooze profligate amounts of glue. Heterodox materials, such as linoleum, seem chosen purely for efficiency in doing a job infinitely more demanding, physically, than a sculpture's job of sitting still for inspection. The work looks overqualified to be sculpture. Its brand of care feels attuned to a "real world" of "serious" purposes unconcerned with the (merely) aesthetic. Such, precisely, is Deacon's aesthetic hook. The sensuous and ethical beauty of purposeful labor is his basic compact with the viewer, something to agree on that stimulates an appetite for further agreements. The artistic adventure thus initiated makes Deacon, to my mind, the most considerable sculptor of today.

Deacon is thirty-eight. He was born in Wales but is English, the son of a career RAF pilot who flew bombers in World War II and of a doctor who served for a time in the Indian army. He says he grew up surrounded by his mother's medical textbooks and his father's textbooks on aviation, which may help to account for the peculiar, charged clarity of technical procedures in his art. ("In medicine and flying," he says, with understatement typical of him, "procedure is all-important.") In 1969-72 he attended the St. Martin's School of Art, then a center of post-Anthony Caro formalism where his teachers included the sculptor and theorist William Tucker. Hostile to the reigning orthodoxy of welded steel, he was excited by the art and writings of Donald Judd, with his doctrine of the "specific object" not reliant on compositional conventions. Deacon's social thinking was influenced first by involvement in a Trotskyite group and then by a reading of information theory, with its emphasis on the technological basis of power. In the mid-seventies at the Royal College of Art, where Tony Cragg was a fellow student, he made blocky process sculptures of plaster and wood, sometimes in a performance context (displaying "sequences of operations"). He liked, in performance, "the way things matter—everything mattering all the time and all at once, not in bits or parts." That holistic preference remains constant in his works, no matter how many elements are joined in them.

By 1978, when he began his second visit to the United States (after an earlier stint at the Art Institute of Chicago), Deacon felt at a dead end with sculpture, as did

much of an international art world newly intoxicated with painting. Married to a ceramicist, he made pots himself, and drew. He draws far less than most sculptors, as a rule, but in New York he produced a unified body of drawings, titled *It's Orpheus When There's Singing*, that were germinal to his mature work. The title and inspiration came from Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, of which this is the first (in J.E. Leishman's eloquent translation):

A tree ascending there. O pure transcension! O Orpheus sings! O tall tree in the ear!
All noise suspended, yet in that suspension what new beginning, beckoning, change,
appear!

Creatures of silence pressing through the clear disintricated wood from lair and nest;
and neither cunning, it grew manifest, had made them breathe so quietly, nor fear,
but only hearing. Roar, cry, bell they found within their hearts too small. And where
before less than a hut had harboured what came thronging,
a refuge tunneled out of dimmest longing, with lowly entrance through a quivering
door, you built them temples in their sense of sound.

In a remarkable 1985 interview, Deacon told Richard Francis that what he found useful in the Orpheus sonnets was a vivid "myth or story concerned with the origins and functions of language." Exploring this "myth or story" graphically, Deacon evolved versions of "a hollow enclosure with an opening and that seemed to be able to stand for either the head of Orpheus singing or listening—the aperture could be either a mouth or an ear—or for his musical instrument... Or for other very domestic objects, particularly pots and pans, shoes, hats." The Orpheus drawings' curvilinear shapes directly anticipate Deacon's subsequent sculptures of laminated wood lath, and their gaping orifices foreshadow several of his sheet-metal works.

The main thing Deacon got from Rilke, incidentally a great critic of sculpture as well as a preternatural poet, was a peculiarly abstract, schematic type of metaphor that stands in for whole conditions of being. Such a condition is speech, considered as a third term, Deacon explained to Francis, "in between our private selves and the world" (where art, too, occurs). In sonnets like the one above, which narrates Orpheus's seduction of wild nature, Rilke speaks speech and sings singing, conflating utterance and reception: the sound of listening may be the song. Visualizing the metaphor in a drawn form that is an ear, a mouth, an instrument, or just a property of common things— or all, or none—Deacon hatched an idea of sculpture based on "figures of speech," rhetorical word-pictures demonstrating language's society-creating protocol "in between" inner self and outside world. In the early eighties he nudged his intuition into three dimensions with increasing boldness, as in a huge "eyeball" of riveted stainless-steel strips titled *For Those Who Have Eyes* (Fig. 1), where, perhaps, the look of looking is the sight. Though rarely quite so explicitly as that, nearly all Deacon's motifs since 1981 have been keyed to figure-of-speech titles. "There isn't any such thing [as the Essential], on one level; but there is, because we can talk about it," Deacon told Francis. "So that it's a rhetorical concept, even a

rhetorical experience." Deacon's concretized rhetorical figures have ramifications as, for, and about sculpture, all of which he anchors in the tone of pleasurable, virtuous labor. Like any true artist, he conceives ideas not as an end of his work but only in order to keep working. Nevertheless, he hit on something widely important. His notion of the "in between" comes straight down the middle of value conflicts central to all culture today: private/ public, individual/mass, feeling/ideology fetish/monument. In this hot zone of fundamental, perhaps irremediable tensions, his work conducts itself with improbably cool playfulness, and it seems worth inquiring how and why. The root answer, I believe, is the tone of labor, which branches in one way into a reflection on the social, impersonal nature of all productive activity and in another way into sheerly personal gratification, attaining a grand philosophical poise grounded in physical, common-sense facts. It is very English somehow, Deacon's methodical confidence in realms of uncertainty, like Lewis Carroll's Alice, level-headed in the face of no matter what.

2

With something like Alice's prideful modesty, Deacon calls himself, simply, a "fabricator," emphasizing his work's trope of # humble task-performance while downplaying its actual, dizzying complexity. The fact is that Deacon fabricates—constructs, devises—more than meets the eye, or at least things that oblige the eye to scan repeatedly for different sorts of information that never entirely cohere. Take, for example, the Tate Gallery's *For Those Who Have Ears #2* (Fig. 2), a wood-laminate piece that stands on four open "lobes" that appear to droop or slur away from one end of a sinuous horizontal and to be plucked up smartly at the other end: lovely material, insistent technique, lyrical form, and illustrative metaphor make mutually

conflicting claims on one's attention. Trying to grasp the "fabrication" as a whole is wonderfully frustrating. All Deacon's work similarly frustrates and may conduce to wonderment, because it communicates at once the peremptory attraction and the ultimate inadequacy of all forms of communication. Such doubleness pops up in every aspect of his art, including his extraordinarily perplexing titles.

"Art for Other People," a notion worthy of Lewis Carroll, is the generic title of, so far, twenty-six small sculptures made since 1981 (see Figs. 3, 4, Colorplate 3). The phrase has fascinated all commentators on Deacon. It is like a Zen koan, full of the sound of one hand clapping, cast in an idiom of civic benevolence. The gremlin in the phrase is that word "other," a bottomless whirlpool or ulcer at the core of the Western, subject-centered mind. Consider Rimbaud's "I is another," a thought that poisons the self, and also Marcel Duchamp's deft gravestone epitaph, "After all, it's always the others who die," which raises a reasonable doubt in the graveyard visitor's mind about who, precisely, is dead. The assurance that one is looking at an art

"for other people"—not the artist, not oneself—similarly haunts and piques. But the most interesting overtone of Deacon's title is social/ political, strumming the nerve of art's anxiety in democratic culture. The title recalls that of a British exhibition program of the early 1940s, *Art for the People*, which Kenneth Clark called "one of the first faltering steps toward public support of the arts," meaning the bureaucratic culture that is such a distinctive form of the postwar era, especially in Europe. Deacon's paraphrase exposes the undecidability of who "the People" are (and who gets to say), let alone of what "art" is, let alone of what being "for" might entail in their relation.

The "Art for Other People" sculptures tend to be intensely but very elusively satiric presences, sharing an oddity of feeling distinctly underscaled. They generate some furiously strong formal and meta-phorical dynamics, typically by combining analogous, vaguely organic shapes that create wildly different effects—with material combinations that have included stone and leather, galvanized steel and linoleum, brass and suede, linoleum and marble—but on a scale too reduced, too capturable at a glance, to be physically engrossing. As closely as you approach them, to the point of bumping your nose, you may feel too far away. They do not have the paradoxically monumental, wrong-end-of-the-telescope smallness of tiny sculptures by, say, Joel Shapiro or Ken Price, but rather an air of efficient shrinkage: something deflated or folded up to be portable. Plunked on the floor, they feel underfoot even from across the room. Deacon has said he thinks of them as letters sent into the world, produced in one intimate circumstance for reception in another that is unforeseeable. For the viewer—apart from that Other whose existence cannot be proved or disproved—the effect is of a letter still in transit or delivered to the wrong address.

Deacon's dry, functional irony, though nearly antic in the "Art for Other People" series, is not to be confused with humor. It is a kind of half-joke, a descent into unexpected incongruity without the subsequently expected ascent, the release, of recognition and laughter. Deacon has an instinct for fundamental absurdities, intrinsic to language, that stop the mind dead in its tracks. He uses them to force a suspension of thinking in favor of simply beholding, creating a silence in which another language, that of sculpture, can take over. "Art," in his implicit sense, becomes a term almost of despair, definable only as what's left when other possibilities have been eliminated. He likes to tell of a conversation between two young men he overheard while assembling a work outside London's Serpentine Gallery in 1985: "Look at that! What's that then, is it ducting?" asked the one. "Naa, it's art. Look at the way it's put together," answered the other. The second young man understood Deacon perfectly, of course, giving the short answer to a conundrum—What is art?—whose long answer, of which I am giving a version here, ends in the same place.

3

Deacon's sculptures have a unitary, all-at-once impact that occurs at first glance ("What's that then, is it ducting?"), no matter # how complex they are. Contemplation of the work's eccentricities ("Look at the way it's put together") does not alter the first impression but may render it uncanny, as if one had known clairvoyantly what one would find. The phenomenon owes to a principle of construction that Deacon associates with airplanes. A plane, he has remarked, is "built all over" rather than, like a car, "from the ground up." A plane's skin is no mere shell but a functional element that expresses the whole at each point. (Analogues in the natural world are seeds and fish.) The surfaces of Deacon's works have a similar air of functional integration that is proof against the craziest configurations—in a recent piece, *Other Mens Eyes* #/ (Fig. 6), a steel-sided, wood-laminate "ear" contour stuck onto a steel unit that extrudes the silhouette of an "eye." The suggestion is that if these things are unembarrassed to be seen together, their conjunction—ordained by some unknowable purpose—should pose no problem for the viewer.

The more incongruous the shapes and stuffs in a Deacon, the mightier is the effect of technique, especially joinery: screws, brackets, glue, stitches, and so on that, with their insistence that *this goes with that*, overwhelm the mind's economical reluctance to approve the illogical. However, the effect of technique, absorbing the viewer in the sweet tone of excellent labor, is actually secondary to the work's conceptual coherence, a quality sensed without being grasped. One's eye is convinced by the work's details and strives to reconcile them with the whole, in vain—as if, repeatedly, one performed an equation and reached an "impossible" solution, then started again. You can't make the parts of a Deacon add up, because they are derived from an idea that precedes their appearance: the rhetorical motif, the figure of speech, which is immaterial and not so much expressed as replaced by the physical object. You can only look and look, onto pleasant exhaustion.

The vaguely mechanistic structural principles of Deacon's work, redolent of Tatlin and Russian constructivism, do several things: they defeat the pictorialism of most assembled sculpture, discipline the work's figurative references, reinforce a tone of social engagement, and are extremely charming. Deacon's charm, no less potent for being impersonal, is a function of things performed in order to be noticed for their own sake. Absolutely no feature of a Deacon sculpture feels incidental to one's experience. Even inaccessible in-sides and bottom sides tantalize. This is a phenomenon far rarer in art than might be supposed. Most sculpture tends to enforce a priority of elements, by which certain things—materials, color, configuration—are felt to matter more than others. One feels that there is a proper, or anyway a more sophisticated, way to look at it, which calls for an educated editing of one's perceptions. By contrast, it is hard to imagine an improper way of dealing with a Deacon, short of vandalism. His work condones, and indeed demands, the most

childlike, naive contemplation of which one is capable. That's the charm, which can give rise to a kind of democratic glee.

4

I think of Deacon as a modernist (post-postmodern), even a kind of neoformalist, of a socially conscious type adumbrated # by constructivism: democratic modernism, which conceives of the artist as a task-oriented professional who advances the language of constructive form for public use. By the lights of this ethos, art gets to be special, but the artist does not—even when, as now, no "will of the people" sets the artist's tasks, obliging him or her to make them up from scratch. The social site for a true popular demand is empty, a fiction, but that is no problem for imagination, as Deacon shows. In the fancied zone of an "art for other people," he works *as if* "commissioned, with a practical consideration immediately palpable in his repertoire of scales.

Small, medium, and large are not, for him, just different conditions for the same thing, but distinct genres corresponding to distinct orders of rhetorical engagement. If his small pieces are letters, his roughly body-scaled sculptures are essays, and his large, enveloping works are speeches. Each scale has, for its content, the appropriateness of its address to the viewer: the small are like offerings, the body-scaled like confidences, and the large like group occasions. By necessity, because no differentiated constituency of viewers can be assumed, what is offered, confided, or broadcast is kept rudimentary and primordial: the fact of being alive in a sensate body.

Starting with his mouth/ear Orpheus imagery, Deacon's iconography has been consistently organic, referring to standard human body parts: usually organs of sense and sex, with the odd heart or kidney, but never bone or tendon. All hard structures in Deacon's art are strictly literal: wood, metal, or stone worked in mechanistic ways. His big, cold, hard images of things small, warm, and soft are determinedly not surreal or otherwise "expressive," and they are all the more gripping for that. Again, the eros of Deacon's work resides in its tone of labor, the evidence of his (absent) hand on inorganic materials with which (unlike fleshy stuffs like paint or clay) it can have no identity—materials that neutralize the emotion of the eyes, ears, genitalia, and so on that they are shaped to evoke. The condition of having a body is thus made a cerebral matter, something one "knows intellectually," while one is transfixed by the other, mineral kind of body that sculpture is. The effect is gratifying, even elating, because it creates a communal monument to private experience. It celebrates in the most impersonal way imaginable—social, discursive, daylight—the shadowy reality of the personal.

The delicate wavelength of the interplay between Deacon's work and the viewer, so dependent on sensations of scale, is extremely vulnerable to circumstance of installation—except for the little "Art for Other People" pieces, with their definitive

tone of being out of whack anywhere. The scale relation of the big wood laminates, especially, to the spaces in which they are shown must be just about perfect to strike the right balance between thingness and enclosure. I realized this, with surprise, when Deacon told me a piece of his I had seen installed and quite enjoyed was too large for its room. On reflection, I discovered that my memory of the work was comprised more of bodily sensation than of sight: I couldn't say what it looked like. Given too much space, alternately, the large pieces tend to lose energy. They also can't abide much ambient visual static. Viewing *For Those Who Have Ears* #2 (Fig. 2) in the Tate, I observed that the patterned marble floor on which the work's "lobes" rested swamped their subtle curves. As if by a sort of hydraulic compensation, however, the dynamic of the sculpture's horizontal overhead element, with its drooping and plucked-up ends, seemed to intensify. So my experience of the piece in that flawed setting enhanced my appreciation of its liveliness, while obtruding a queasy sense of violation.

Such hypersensitivity to site, in an art that shuns the institutional games of "site specificity," is no weakness of Deacon's, though it is a chronic, grinding problem for him, as it must be for any sculptor conscious of art's equivocal worldly role today. The weakness inheres in the entire cultural ground between public and private upon which art must stand or fall, a sometimes seemingly nonexistent area between architecture and commodity. To make sculpture strictly of and for that area, as Deacon persists in doing, is to raise edifices in an earthquake zone. *For Those Who Have Eyes, Listening to Reason, In Two Minds* (Figs. 1, 5, 7)—Deacon's titles laconically designate the terrain. It is proper (it could hardly be any other way) that the eponymous work is as variable in its impressions as English weather or an adolescent's mood. Shiftiness and irritability are authentic human responses in any situation fraught with obstacles, preserving the self at whatever cost of seeming awkward.

Observing someone stumble, we sense a loss of balance; for the stumbler, on the contrary, the movement is precisely a means of gaining balance. Deacon suggests that stumbling may be a way of dancing.

5

"Speak in French when you can't think of the English for a thing," the Red Queen enjoined Alice, "turn out your toes as • you walk—and remember who you are!" (Alice had had a bad moment of suspecting that because she was uncharacteristically confused she might no longer be herself but, instead, her stupid friend Mabel.)

Besides an Alice-like, dancery presence of mind, there is sometimes about Deacon's work a bit of the Red Queen's dance-masterish importunity. When his best work is superbly installed—I'm thinking especially of his 1986 show at the Marian Goodman Gallery, where the vast, snaking, enterable contours of *Listening to Reason* (Fig. 5) churned the room's space to a froth and where "Art for Other People" pieces

fulminated here and there like surly lapdogs—the viewer may feel subjected to a lesson in manners. Looking at the work, one is conscious of engaging in visible behavior: looking-behavior, objective enactment of subjective process. It is a dazing sensation of being, in effect, beside oneself, regarding oneself regarding the art, but highly agreeable because coaxed through pleasure, with none of the glum righteousness of minimalist-type confrontation. The exploratory action that feels best, in terms of heightening awareness, plainly is the best, the proper behavior. The consequent feeling, for me, is some combination of decorous and giddy.

Deacon seems to want more from viewers than many are accus-tomed to giving: not just an eye willing to be convinced but something like active trust, a willingness to be taken in hand and guided. He returns a lot, notably what I have called "the sensuous and ethical beauty of purposeful labor" (a value we thirst for), but the bargain he proposes seems intentionally difficult. To quote the general title of a recent series of wall reliefs (see Fig. 8), he offers "The Back of My Hand"—to be inspected, perhaps, and either or alternately to be slapped by or to be kissed. The heavy, amoeba-shaped plaques of galvanized steel thus titled give a strong dose of the tone of labor: hundreds of screws join the steel elements and surround inset swaths of linoleum and plasticized or rubberized fabric. These are things *made* with a vengeance, and they loom at the viewer with something of the same emotion. At the same time, they are wide-open, vulnerable, splayed—as if freestanding sculptures had been steamrolled and mounted like skins. Addressing the viewer frontally they impatiently await response, demanding to be accounted for or identified, somehow, like animals in the Garden of Eden crowding around Adam to be given their names. The "Back of My Hand" pieces resemble advice from the Red Queen in being at once straightforward and weird—if observed con-scientiously ("remember who you are!"), guaranteeing disorientation. The effect is classically high comic, which is not to say unserious. The function of high comedy is not to deny life's gravity but only to make it bearable. Speaking psychologically, the often unbearable seriousness of life that Deacon's work can be seen to apostrophize is the problem of knowing the limits, the contours, of the self. People's selves in present society tend to be as indeterminate as the clumsy shapes he graces with the exactitude of industrial templates: awkwardness rendered with an engineer's deliberation, anxiety with a clinician's detachment. We suffer, most of us, from a disjunction between the general and the particular, an amorphous sense of being-in-the-world painfully at odds with lucid thoughts and feelings that come and go. Deacon instinctively mimics the structure of such disjunction in a material image that proves—mysteriously, amazingly—to be not disjunct at all.

Such affirming fantasy—abstracted from life to a maximum de-gree, but in touch with life nonetheless—is an old modernist ideal (secretly linking Brancusi and Mondrian, say, or even the likes of a Paul

Klee and a young Henry Moore) little respected in recent decades. It is so rare in first-rate contemporary work that one might be insensible to its possibility. My own growing excitement about Deacon's art has entailed a scarcely believing reflection on my response to it, discovering a richness of implication that I associate with great art long past. Deacon proposes matter-of-factly that an art of civilized communion, abolishing the rift between private knowledge and public observance, is still, or again, very possible indeed, at once as welcome to sensibility and as acceptable to intelligence as the value of useful work that is well done. Though ironically bracketed as it must be—by being set in the parallel universe of those wonderful "other people"—Deacon's gesture maps a spiritual space in the here and now: a sudden republic **of citizen**-aesthetes, an idea of **Utopia** minus the idea of the future. It's enough to make one eager, against one's conditioned cynicism, for some corresponding betterness in the world at large.

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