RICHARD DEACON

WHAT THE SCULPTURE KNOWS

On authorship, ambiguity and what happens when the object begins to know something its maker does not.



Richard Deacon, Just Looking, Installation view at Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin, 2026
Photo by GRAYSC, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin

For Richard Deacon, sculpture begins somewhere between knowing and not knowing. For more than five decades, he has bent, joined, folded and fabricated materials into forms that appear at once precise and strangely alive—objects whose seams remain visible, whose interiors matter as much as their surfaces, and whose meanings refuse to settle. Wood, steel, ceramic, language, space and even absence become materials in a practice driven less by certainty than by curiosity. In conversation with The Art Talk Magazine, Deacon reflects on the intelligence of materials, the ambiguity of authorship, the body hidden inside abstraction, and why, after a lifetime of making, the most fertile place for an artist may still be the moment before he knows what comes next.

Art Talk Magazine: You have described yourself not as a carver or modeller, but as a fabricator—a word that means both someone who constructs something and someone who invents something. After more than fifty years of making, which meaning feels closer to what an artist actually does: to make something, or to make something up?
Richard Deacon: Both remain true. An artist makes things and he or she makes things up. You're constantly telling stories to yourself whilst you are working (and even when you are not).

ATM: You once wrote of the making process: "I am never sure whether I finish the thing I am making or whether it finishes me." That suggests a moment when authorship becomes uncertain. At what point does the material stop obeying you and begin telling you what the sculpture wants to become?
RD: I think I said 'finishes with me.' I don't always intend to make what I do make and there are often surprises along the way. Of course, these days I am often telling people what to do, but yes, at some point, the input from the material or from what you are making does start pulling you along.

ATM: You have said that changing materials allows you to "begin again each time." You have moved between laminated wood, steel, aluminium, polycarbonate, marble, ceramics, vinyl, foam and leather. After decades of experience, how do you preserve the possibility of not knowing?
RD: I am always curious and finding a material that you don't understand, seeing something in an unlikely location or meeting someone that can do something that you hadn't expected is a perennial pleasure. I don't think of myself as particularly skilled but I do have the freedom to wonder what happens if you do something 'wrong'.

ATM: Your sculptures reveal their own construction—the screws, rivets, seams, laminations and sometimes even the glue remain visible. We live in a culture increasingly obsessed with seamlessness: seamless technology, seamless images, seamless experiences. What interests you about allowing us to see how something has been made? And is imperfection sometimes more truthful than perfection?
RD: This is a good question. It does seem to be the case that the world has somehow been hidden from us by the seamlessness of technology, of images, of experiences etc. and that this is both profoundly alienating and socially divisive. The world remains obdurate and the glitches that happen are occasions when, even if they are frustrating, the world as a physical realm reasserts itself. There are always flies in paradise.

ATM: Your work is abstract, yet it often feels strangely bodily. There are openings, skins, cavities, curves, folds and forms that seem almost anatomical without ever becoming figurative. Is the human body somehow present in your sculpture even when you have deliberately removed the figure?
RD: Eyes, ears, mouths, bodily orifices have been present in the work and in the titles I use. There is, to my mind, a connection between the way we perceive the world and the way we describe it that impinges on our construction of reality. Metaphor has been a fundamental interest for the way that some quality is carried over between things ('tight as a drum' for example) as has the relationship between representation, resemblance and likeness.

ATM: Many of your sculptures seem equally concerned with what is not there. The opening inside a form, the air contained by it, the space through which we look can become as important as the material itself. Can absence be a material?
RD: Yes. What is not there is equally as important as what is there. I tend to think of the empty space as the contents and hope that it signifies in the same way as the physical material and its construction or manipulation. I would also say that I find depth or distance, although necessary to the way we navigate the world, hard to explain.

ATM: You once became fascinated by the holes in Swiss cheese—by the relationship between the hole and the cheese surrounding it, even wondering what would happen if the holes became so large that there were no cheese left. It is a wonderfully ordinary starting point for a profound sculptural question. Do the most important ideas sometimes arrive precisely when we are not looking for art?
RD: I think that ideas arrive precisely when we are not looking for art. The problem with making things about big ideas is that they get smaller whereas small ideas get bigger. I used the Swiss cheese story in a lecture titled 'Where Do Ideas Come From?' to which the, slightly tongue in cheek answer was 'you get them in the supermarket'. It is curiosity that drives things forward as much as anything else.

ATM: Language has accompanied your sculpture throughout your career. Titles such as Fall-



Richard Deacon, Family, Installation view at Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin
Photo by Stefan Haehnel, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin



Richard Deacon, Cut & Fold #3, 2023, Stainless steel, 128 x 180 x 126 cm
Photo by Mathias Schormann, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin

ing on Deaf Ears, Water Under the Bridge, Let's Not Be Stupid and Shiver My Timbers take familiar expressions and make them unfamiliar again. Can a title change the physical object we believe we are looking at? And, in that sense, can language itself become a sculptural material?
RD: Language and speech are inherent in our being human. At art school the long thesis I submitted for my graduation was titled 'Language in Perception'. I wrote about the ways in which what we perceive is circumscribed by our ability to speak about it. This was connected to a particularly intense personal experience. My mother was very ill at the time with motor neurone disease and had both lost the ability to speak and most of her voluntary motor control. She did, however, retain the ability to turn her head to one side. Thanks to very advanced help she was given a device, connected to an electric typewriter, that enabled her to move a cursor across a grid of letters, select one and double click to type it. If you have seen the film 'The Bell Jar and the Butterfly' you will know the kind of device I mean. Although I saw her frequently, I was at art school in London, a two and a half hour train ride away. One amazing day, early on in my second year, out of the blue I received a letter from her. Only three lines long and painstakingly typed letter by letter, the phrasing was, nonetheless, exactly hers. I knew instantly that, despite the painful wreck her body had become, she was still there, intact. It was a miraculous revelation and, despite my answer to your earlier question about seamlessness, it was technological advancement that enabled it. So, in answer to the second part of your question, yes, I do think of language as a material. We can build with it and it also builds us.

ATM: You have said that a successful sculpture holds together the material, the form, the structure, its associations and the possibility of meaning. But you have also resisted the idea that there is one answer to what a work means. When does ambiguity become more powerful than explanation?
RD: Here I think you answer your own question. Ambiguity is essential to the rich experience of the work of art. Explanation is, it seems to me, reductive of that experience.

ATM: Your sculptures have an extraordinary relationship with the viewer's body. We walk around them, look through them, measure ourselves against them; occasionally they feel closer to architecture than objects. Do you think sculpture begins with the object—or with the space and the person surrounding it?
RD: One day, walking down the street near my studio, I overheard a poor, distressed woman shouting "He never said that to my face". It was raw and desperate and stuck in my mind. To My Face became a slogan for and the title of several subsequent sculptures. I think sculpture can begin anywhere, with the object, with the material, with chance encounters, with the space and with the person.

ATM: You emerged within an extraordinary generation of British sculptors, alongside artists including Tony Cragg, Bill Woodrow, Antony Gormley, Anish Kapoor and Alison Wilding. Looking back, the period has acquired the neat art-historical label of "New British Sculpture." Did it ever feel like a movement from inside it, or is a generation something that only becomes visible afterwards?
RD: To me, it didn't feel like a movement at the time but, given the radicalism of British art education in the 1960's, arising with the Basic Design course that fed into Fine Art and, particularly, Sculpture departments, it is not so surprising that a generation emerged. The late 1970's also saw the emergence of a great deal of focus on painting (exemplified by the exhibition A New Spirit in Painting curated by Norman Rosenthal and Nicholas Serota). The UK was a bit outside of that.

ATM: Your collaboration with Bill Woodrow created something particularly unusual: Woodrow-Deacon, almost a third artistic identity independent of either artist. Artists are generally taught to protect authorship very carefully. What happens to the ego when two artists make a work that belongs completely to neither of them?
RD: Bill and I have been friends for a long time – he was in the year above me at St. Martin's School of Art and we continually crossed paths. The collaboration started with requests sent to both of us for work to put into an Art Against Aids auction. We both wanted to contribute but neither had any available work so making something together seemed like a good idea. To begin with, we were nervous about being in each other's space so each of us made a half which we joined together. Jonathan Watkins, then at the Chisenhale Gallery in London, was interested in what we had done and asked if we would like to make a show of combined works. It sort of snowballed from there. The works have all been made in response to invitation, but you are right, it is a considerable body of work now and Woodrow-Deacon does feel like a separate artist independent of either of us. I like this.