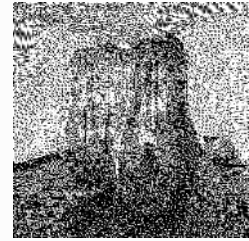


full'n'empty – subjectobject – uhhh, Richard Deacon, Haus Lange and Haus Esters, Krefeld 1991

Article by **Julian Heynen**



The exhibition of new sculptures by Richard Deacon that was presented at Haus Lange and Haus Esters in Krefeld in 1991 was not the first occasion on which the artist's work had been shown there, but it nevertheless took its place as one of a significant sequence of exhibitions presented at this unique site. The architect of the two villas, constructed in adjacent grounds between 1927 and 1930, was Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and they have been used as exhibition spaces for contemporary art since the 1950s and the 1980s respectively. The open vistas provided by these villas, the intense interplay between the inner and outer spaces together with the intrinsically sculptural nature of their design, perhaps contributed to the particular focus on sculpture and installations in the programme of exhibitions held there. At Haus Lange, outstanding examples in the period after 1955 were the exhibitions of work by Henri Laurens, Julio González, Alexander Calder, Jean Tinguely, Yves Klein, Arman, and Marcel Duchamp; and, in the period after 1969, the presentations by Sol LeWitt, Christo, Joseph Beuys, Carl Andre, and Isa Genzken. Following the opening of Haus Esters in 1981, there were exhibitions of work by Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Bruce Nauman, Jannis Kounellis, Maria Nordman, Richard Serra, and Claes Oldenburg.¹ At the same time a younger generation of artists was coming into play, leading to exhibitions of work by Reinhard Mucha, Thomas Schütte, Zvi Goldstein, Katharina Fritsch, Harald Klingelhöller, Franz West, Juan Muñoz, and others, some of whom had their first institutional exhibitions in these villas.² After this came the era of Richard Deacon and the “new” form of sculpture that was making an impact in Europe and North America, having initially evolved in the shadow of the “new” expressive painting that seemed to dominate artistic activity at that time. The precursor to Deacon's solo show in Krefeld in 1991 was the group exhibition *Anderer Leute Kunst* in 1987, in which the artist not only participated, but for which his work was also the inspiration for the exhibition's title, a paraphrase of the title of his series, *Art for Other People*.³ All the artists represented in this exhibition were specifically interested in creating sculptural interconnections between autonomous forms, objecthood, and language.

Deacon's solo exhibition in 1991 was one of his most extensive to date and consisted almost entirely of new sculptures (and “drawings”) made for the occasion. Responding to the architecture of Van der Rohe's similar, yet strikingly distinct, villas, Deacon aimed for a sense of emptiness in one (Haus Lange) and abundance in the other (Haus Esters)—to the extent that *Mammoth* (1989) appeared to put a visible strain on the capacity of the living room. The vitalist dynamics of the sculpture almost seemed to burst open the crystalline structure of the space. In other rooms, open and closed forms interacted in a variety of ways with the vast windows of Haus Esters and with the dialectics of inside/outside that are so characteristic of this architecture. The notion of emptiness in Haus Lange was addressed in two different ways, albeit again in

relation to the internal/external theme of the architecture . On the upper floor the main focus was shifted to the terraces outside. Spectators viewed the sculptures from the empty bedrooms or from the garden below (fig. 1). On the ground floor only the living room was occupied, and contained two airy, semi-translucent sculptures, one of which was linked to its “twin” in Haus Esters (fig. 2) . Beyond that, everything played out on the literal membrane dividing the inside from the outside, that is, the large windows that define these spaces. Deacon created “drawings” on multi-layered, synthetic light-weight panels that fitted exactly into the window frames (fig. 3). But in Deacon’s thinking, emptiness and fullness also corresponded here to autonomy and dependence within the given space. The relatively conventional placement of the sculptures in Haus Esters gave them an air of independence. Their relationship to the architecture was pragmatic and formal. Deacon himself explained that, by contrast, pushing works to the very skin of Haus Lange and to places beyond the interior of the building, had “to do with the notion of evacuating the interior of the house to its outside, and putting the spectator in the position of being always in the wrong place”.⁴ In his consideration of the exhibition’s focus on the zone between inside and outside, between sculpture and the spectator, language also came into play. As he put it, he “tried from time to time to make the connection between the work and the world resemble the way in which speech exists between individuals”. His use of the conditions in Haus Lange was

an expansion of that “border” between the subject and an autonomous universe. The in-between is something that’s shared. It’s not private or personal and it’s also not public. So therefore it’s common but able to become part of the spectator’s subjectivity.



Figure 1

Installation view, Richard Deacon, *Pipe*, 1991, on the terrace of Haus Lange, Krefeld, Germany. Digital image courtesy of Richard Deacon / Kunstmuseen Krefeld.



Figure 2

Installation view, Richard Deacon, *Pack*, 1990 (left), *Border*, 1991 (right) in the hall of Haus Lange, Krefeld, Germany. Digital image courtesy of Richard Deacon / Kunstmuseen Krefeld.



Figure 3

Installation view, Richard Deacon, *The Interior Is Always More Difficult ©, (E), and (F)*, 1991, Haus Lange, Krefeld, Germany. Digital image courtesy of Richard Deacon / Kunstmuseen Krefeld.

The special qualities and characteristics of the architecture of these exhibition spaces in Krefeld prompted Deacon to develop new ideas, forms, and procedures. At the end of a decade in which he had achieved his major breakthrough and received international recognition, he managed to create a subtle through-choreographed exhibition concept, which included a notable, but subtle, dialogue between the Van der Rohe’s two villas. But Deacon’s work had also reached a plateau of sorts, and the exhibition seems to have allowed him not only to reflect on what he had achieved so far, but to engage with new themes and methods. On a phenomenological level, these included sculptures with closed surfaces. While Deacon had previously made a number of

works of this kind, it was only in the sculptures he made for the Krefeld exhibition that he explored this theme in more detail. Sculptures of this type subsequently took root in Deacon's work, particularly in 1999, when he started to fabricate ceramic pieces. In the aforementioned conversation with the author, which took place during the exhibition and was also filmed, Deacon explained that

*in much of the other works the spectator was in the position of feeling occasionally outside and occasionally inside of the sculpture. The feeling of being engulfed by the object you are looking at does change the subject/object relationship. One has the sense of becoming, on occasion, the object for the sculpture as much as the sculpture is object for you. . . . In the more recent works . . . the subject and object relationship is more consistent. The object maintains its distance and therefore always remains an object for the perceiving subject. At the same time the result of that autonomy is that the nature of the object or the nature of the subject remains for the spectator a matter of guess work. It's like when I talk to you, then the contents of your subjectivity remain unknown to me.*⁵

Another innovation in Deacon's repertoire of materials that came to light as a result of the Krefeld exhibition was his use of PVC and synthetic materials. He had found that joining together several pieces, sometimes a great many sections of the same or different materials, had begun to "frustrate" him. So he went in search of a new material that he "could use like a skin", and found that transparent synthetics opened up new possibilities for his art.⁶

The fact that Deacon was born and trained in the United Kingdom and was amongst those promoted as exponents of "New British Sculpture" did not influence the decision to show his work at Krefeld.⁷ His work self-evidently connected with international developments of the 1960s and 1970s—above all it connected with the diverse attempts in the 1980s to rehabilitate sculpture as an independent medium, without succumbing to traditionalism. This is exemplified in the changed relationship between language and sculpture that is seen if one draws a line from Lawrence Weiner to Franz West, Harald Klingelhöller, or to Richard Deacon himself. One could also point to the use of metaphor, for instance in Thomas Schütte's architectural models, or Hubert Kiecol's house sculptures, and Andrew Lord's ceramics, or possibly even Katharina Fritsch's early, non-figurative works, and Richard Deacon's sculptures. And the precise, extreme manual skills evident in Deacon's work also connect with the very different-looking work of Reinhard Mucha.⁸

Aside from any generational issues, it is worth considering how Deacon's work was seen at this period by artists in Continental Europe, and what influences may have resulted from their encounters with him, and vice versa. It is hard to come up with definitive answers to these questions, or even to cite concrete examples. The main focus for these and other artists was the revision and expansion of what sculpture could be in the postmodern world, in the wake of the neo-avant-gardes shaped by Minimalism and conceptualism. These artists saw themselves as mutually empathetic experimenters, albeit with no interest in creating a new movement, let alone a new doctrine. Above all, they had a strong sense of being part of a community of post-ideological, isolated individuals.



Figure 4

Installation view, Richard Deacon, *The Interior Is Always More Difficult* ©, (E), and (F), 1991, Haus Lange, Krefeld, Germany. Digital footage courtesy of Martin Kreyssig / Richard Deacon.

In terms of actual points of contact, however, mention should be made of Richard Deacon and Thomas Schütte's collaborative work, *Them and Us* (1995). It was not by chance that this installation took the form of a sprawling ensemble with 120 individual parts (later divided into twelve groups). The input of each artist was clearly identifiable: Schütte contributed some of his *Kleine Geister* figures (Small Ghosts/Spirits), while Deacon devised the geometric constructions and organic-looking felt objects. What they shared, however, was a multi-part open narration, which had something of an improvisatory air. Spatial contexts are hinted at, and dialogues combining familiarity with alienness unfold between the figures and the felt shapes. The title highlights the fact that the two worlds in this narrative are both connected and separate. The contributions of the two artists do not coincide either materially or stylistically; each artist basically remained true to his own repertoire. There was also no mutual adjustment in the narrower iconographic sense. If anything, the combination activated the specific narrative and metaphorical potential that is essential to the work of both artists. In a figurative sense, this might even be described as a metonymic relationship between the two. The third entity that followed from this encounter cannot be defined clearly, but is rather a proposition of sorts—as fragile as it is stimulating. In a sense, *Them and Us* can be seen as an illustration of the nature of the exchanges that took place between these and other sculptors in the 1980s and early 1990s. It seems that Deacon's fabrication-based, pragmatic experimentation made probing contact with Schütte's forays into a non-conservative revival of figuration—despite the barely definable differences in the mentalities of these two artists.



Figure 5

Martin Kreyssig, *The Interior Is Always More Difficult—Schwieriger ist sowieso der Raum im Innern*, DVD, from 08:44 till 11:00, directed by Martin Kreyssig, produced by Richard Deacon, 1991. Digital footage courtesy of Martin Kreyssig / Richard Deacon.



Figure 6

Martin Kreyssig, *The Interior Is Always More Difficult—Schwieriger ist sowieso der Raum im Innern*, DVD, from 22:00 till 25:04, directed by Martin Kreyssig, produced by Richard Deacon, 1991. Digital footage courtesy of Martin Kreyssig / Richard Deacon.



Figure 7

Richard Deacon, Martin Kreyssig, *UHMM*, CD, Dia Art Foundation, New York, 2006 (back of CD case). Digital image courtesy of Richard Deacon / Martin Kreyssig.

A long time after the Krefeld exhibition, a CD was released with the title *UHMM*, which goes back to that event.⁹ It contains a “speech” by Richard Deacon, slowly unfolding in a carefully constructed rhythm over the course of nine tracks. It consists almost entirely of the fillers that are used by speakers as they gradually formulate their thoughts. Every now and then a word or concept briefly shoots out from this sea of stops and starts. The whole thing is of course a fine joke. However, one could also take this multitude of near-nothingnesses, this collection of linguistic raw material as a metaphor. From this wealth of repetitive, disordered acoustic material—which seems to have a life of its own in the artist’s mouth and which serves the course of his thoughts like a kind of humus—all of a sudden a word, a form, a meaning flashes into view. As Deacon speaks, the murmuring material yields meaning. On the basis of this way of producing language, one might wonder whether it is exactly the opposite case in the

conception and production of one of Deacon’s sculptures. Is there not in the beginning a concept—or an idea of a form, which at this point is more or less the same thing—that then has to be taken through a similar sea of materials, tested and put into concrete form? Are the realization of thoughts and sculptures in fact reciprocal processes? Even if reducing the processes to a single formula seems a little too mechanical, don’t the notions of contrary-motion or intersecting activities tie thinking, talking, and doing to each other in a way that seems fitting and that the artist may well be aware of? On the back cover of the CD of the audio sculpture *UHMM* there is a direct reference to the concept of working with one’s hands, to the actions of the sculptor (fig. 7). As a humorous yet also deeply meaningful echo of the Krefeld exhibition, this image raises unanswered and unanswerable core questions concerning Deacon’s art. Namely, the matter of the relationship between the work of the mind to the work done by the hands, and hence the relationship of language to the visual form, and, ultimately, that of the subject to the object and of the individual to society. And vice versa, of course.

Translated from the German by Fiona Elliott

About the author

****Dr. Julian Heynen **** is a curator and writer specializing in contemporary art and currently artistic director at large of Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf, Germany. Since the 1980s he has worked with and written about artists such as Bruce Nauman, Thomas Schütte, Katharina Fritsch, Lawrence Weiner, Franz West, Richard Deacon, Thomas Struth, Mirosław Balka, Luc Tuymans, Gregor Schneider, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Gerhard Richter, Thomas Ruff, Rodney Graham, Tino Sehgal, Wilhelm Sasnal, Roman Ondák, and many others. In 2003 and

2005 Heynen was the commissioner of the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale. In 2008 he was one of the curators of the Shanghai Biennale.

Footnotes

1. *Dreißig Jahre durch die Kunst*, exh. cat., 2 vols. (Krefeld: Museum Haus Lange and Museum Haus Esters, 1985).
2. *c/o Haus Lange Haus Esters 1984/1999* (Krefelder Kunstmuseen, 1999).
3. *Anderer Leute Kunst—Ernst Caramelle, Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Katharina Fritsch, Andrew Lord, Franz West*, exh. cat. (Krefeld: Museum Haus Lange, 1987).
4. This and the following quotes are taken from “Zwischenzonen”, in *Richard Deacon*, exh. cat., 2 vols. (Krefeld: Museum Haus Lange and Museum Haus Esters, 1991), 1: np.
5. Martin Kreyssig, *The Interior Is Always More Difficult—Schwieriger ist sowieso der Raum im Innern*, DVD, directed by Martin Kreyssig, produced by Richard Deacon, 1991. See “Zwischenzonen”.
6. “Zwischenzonen”.
7. In addition to the group and solo exhibitions mentioned here, in 1993 Deacon also realized the sculpture *Building From The Inside* in a public space in the town of Krefeld.
8. The artists mentioned here also had solo exhibitions in the villas in Krefeld between 1984 and 1991, or participated in group exhibitions.
9. Richard Deacon and Martin Kreyssig, *UHMM*, CD, Dia Art Foundation (Dia 006), New York, 2006. The words spoken by Richard Deacon were extracted from an interview that was recorded during his exhibition at Haus Lange and Haus Esters in 1991 and forms part of the film by Martin Kreyssig, *The Interior Is Always More Difficult* (figs. 4, 5 and 6).

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