

THE RELATIONSHIP TO ACTION

An interview with **RICHARD DEACON**

RAJESH PUNJ

There could be a long discussion about drawing and the relationship between drawing and the work, drawing and hollowing out, and the ways in which the vocabulary of stock materials is used, and finally of a relationship to volume.



In conversation British sculptor Richard Deacon employs language and lexicon as though the buildings blocks for one of his works. Deliberating over the construct of the conversation as though it could well become a physical object pinned together by ideas, and applied to space. From the Middelheim Museum, Antwerp, where Deacon's *Some Time* exhibition has just opened, he explains everything as part of a process, that resulted in the placement of existing pieces and new versions of older works, in a celebration park of sculpture. As he sees materials and language as the elemental skin and bones of his sculptural works, that in-situ make contact with the rest of the world. And whilst enjoying the potential abandon of Middelheim's vast landscape, Deacon also recognised of such circumstances the potential failure of placing works outside to do with the intensity of so many natural elements at play.

Recalling how previously "when things went outside the relationship of the skin of the work to the inside was lost, and they became lumps outside. Whereas inside a room you were between one sort of skin and another sort of skin; so that there was something about the fragility or the existence of the skin of the work that became more apparent." Which as a precursory concern to his Middelheim opening demonstrates the real risk and resulting reward involved in negotiating with the enormous intimacy of nature. And of his relationship to the outside Deacon says, "site-specificity can go several ways. Richard Serra has a very hardline approach to it, and he maybe right, he maybe wrong. There are some works of Richard's that are clearly site-specific, to do with the levels of the ground. But sometimes I am not sure that they are as specific as he claims. And

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Richard Deacon recording his vinyl record, 'Something for Everybody', photo by Ian Coomans, Image Courtesy: Richard Deacon: SOME TIME is at Middelheim Museum in Antwerp until 24 September 2017, www.middelheimmuseum.be

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Richard Deacon, 2002, Bronze Skin, Cast bronze, 109 x 128 x 128 cm, Image Courtesy: Richard Deacon: SOME TIME is at Middelheim Museum in Antwerp until 24 September 2017, www.middelheimmuseum.be



with his Guggenheim works in Bilbao, there is something between the architect and the sculptor that is more antagonist than complimentary.” Which interestingly has us consider that a work, as Deacon’s contemporary sculptor Tony Cragg might also suggest, deserves our undivided attention; without the wonder of the rest of the world.

Part of a generation of long-standing artists from the 1980’s and 1990’s, there is an incredible honesty about how Deacon explains himself that shows itself in his works; as though his choice of materials could be likened to body organs carried by a metal frame. The endeavour to shelf his ideas as objects that hold space, is so utterly engaging for their logic.

And it is by virtue of his evolving explanations of everything that one begins to understand his art as an extension of his own attitude to life as an adventure of the mind.

“The casting process is normally associated with bronze, of which bronze skinned down is the only exemplar of working in that way, both in the show and anything I have ever done; and I have never made any other large-scale bronze cast. But in that case the original cardboard was burnt away in the casting process so one thing was replaced by another. Then there could be a long discussion about drawing and the relationship between drawing and the work, drawing and hollowing out, and the ways in which the vocabulary

of stock materials is used, and of a relationship to volume.”

The Mexico City born New York based artist Bosco Sodi talks as eloquently, when explaining of process as fundamental to the visual outcome of something. Seeing art as an extension of philosophy, in interview Sodi said “there is a very nice book *Zen in the Art of Archery* which is a very beautiful book that artist (Amedeo) Modigliani gave to (Wassily) Kandinsky’s wife, and then Kandinsky’s wife gave to (Antoni) Tàpies. A book about German philosopher Eugen Herrigel, who lives in Japan in the 1920’s, and wants to learn one of the disciplines of Zen. The whole book is about how the orient is much more focused on the process, and of the journey over the outcome. Here we are much more looking for the outcome, and we want results very quick.” And in the company of Richard Deacon it is something of Sodi’s appetite for process together with Deacon’s

own interest in the object’s physical appearance that has the British sculptor engage in a kind of biology of objects as art, in which the materials and the mess deliver these inside out sculptures.

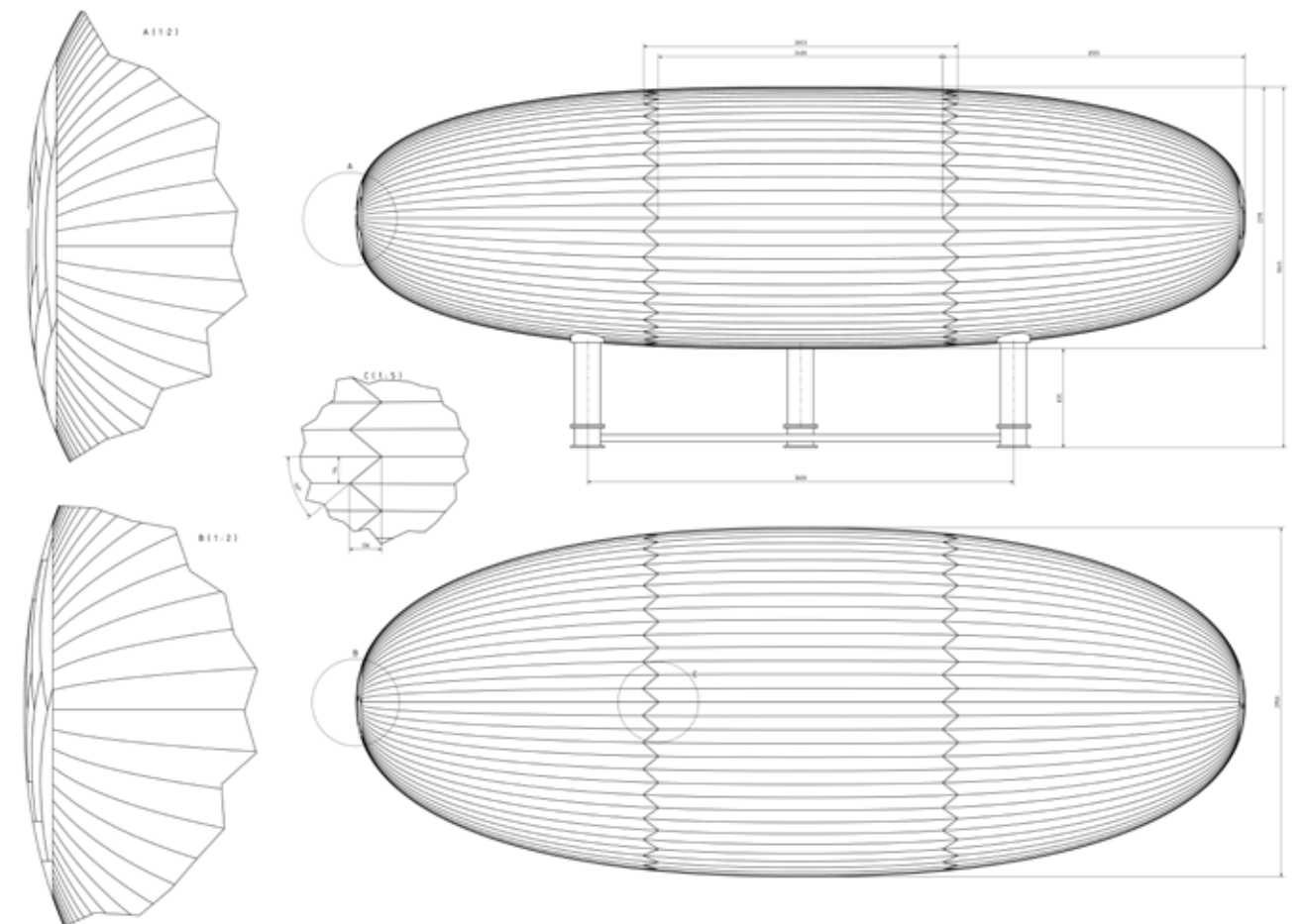
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Rajesh Punj: Can you begin by exploring and your explaining the significance of your work being outside?

Richard Deacon: Most of the time I have obviously made work outdoors. I have done commissions, and I have made work for group shows etc. But when I thought about it I realised actually I had never made or tried to make a show in a park or landscape style situation. Peter Murray at Yorkshire Sculpture Park did talk to me at some point, but I was never particularly interested at the time, or I never thought I could do it. The motivation for doing the (show) here is catapulted by the determination

to reintroduce the work *Never Mind* back into the Middelheim collection, and with the means and an idea of how to do it, of how to reprocess the work. And then from Sara (Weyns) saying that if they (Middelheim) were going to put that amount of resources into doing this then actually it should have some context by them having a larger show. And of then constructing the exhibition around the basis of ‘A’ what there was there already, and ‘B’ if there was any relationship to the work *Never Mind*. Or of that process of remaking, and of reconsidering a work once it has been made.

In the pavilion *Bikini* was made a year or some months before *Never Mind*, and I only ever made two works like that. So having *Bikini* at one end and *Never Mind* at the other end are about spatial separations of works which are closely connected. Also in the pavilion is a work called *Body Of Thought* which was in my show in Antwerp in 1987-88 (the



^ *Richard Deacon, 1993 - 2017, Never Mind, Wood, stainless steel, epoxy, 310 x 765 x 300cm, Image Courtesy: Richard Deacon: SOME TIME is at Middelheim Museum in Antwerp until 24 September 2017, www.middelheimmuseum.be*

> *Technical drawings of Richard Deacon's Never Mind, Image Courtesy: Richard Deacon: SOME TIME is at Middelheim Museum in Antwerp until 24 September 2017, www.middelheimmuseum.be*



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 Richard Deacon, 2006, *Infinity #29*,
 Stainless Steel with mild steel base,
 160 x 212 x 131 cm, Image Courtesy:
 Richard Deacon: *SOME TIME* is at
 Middelheim Museum in Antwerp until 24
 September 2017,
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Richard Deacon, 2007, *Some More For
 The Road*, Pigmented acrylic resin, various
 dimensions, Image Courtesy: Richard
 Deacon: *SOME TIME* is at Middelheim
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two node and three node together I would have five, etc.; that I had by chance modules that numbered from two to eleven - or two to ten I should say. And by welding the individual nodes together it solved the problem of twisting. Then it was a question of if you can get to ten then can you go on? The fabricator (at the time) that I worked with said that actually he could solve the problem of the twisting by putting a hole in the middle of the nose. So with that and all subsequent works we have used holes rather than nodes as a way of counting.

The next group (of module works) I made for PS1 in New York, of which three are in this show, I thought of those as more like satellite dishes that were numbered in relationship to their holes. So again there are two, three and four node works. It is the holes that count. And it is strange that I saw those in New York in September 2001, as they obviously have a certain poignancy for me. It was a very strange time to be installing a show just after the planes crashed into the world

trade centre, but on the other hand it felt like a very positive thing to be doing. To try and build something new, and although there are also inclined to pick up light from the sky, or receive messages or whatever, they have quite a complex history. So I carried on, some on the wall, some are free standing in the next substantial group, as the numbering gets bigger and the modules get more complicated. And there are three of those in the exhibition, so your question about mistakes was that fixing the wobble enabled the work to take off in an unexpected direction. Another example I guess would be the base under the work called Big Time Painted.

Sara Weyns (Director of Middelheim Museum): I have talked about that.

RD: You spoke about that already. I don't know how long a deviation you want me to have? The construction of *Never Mind* came at a period when I just stopped making things one way and was trying to find different ways of working with wood. And one of

only other single show I have done in Antwerp), which is the earliest work of this show that acts as a connection between that occasion and this. So the collection of MOCA (The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles) has a significance, and then the narrative gets a bit complicated.

There is a group of small works up on the wall called *Some More For The Road*, which were actually originally chocolates. They were made for a show at the Ludwig museum in Cologne, entitled *Art and Chocolate*; and obviously chocolate is not a sculptural material. Well chocolate does stand up, it is subject to insects, and it also tends to go white when it gets older. With the silicon molds we made three different versions, one in a neutral material and two in colours. The chocolates were originally coloured, using quite virulent food dyes. Not quite as strong as the

yellow up there but still quite harsh colours never the less. The casting process is normally associated with bronze, of which *Bronze Skins* the only exemplar of working in that way, both in the show and anything I have ever done; and I have never made any other large-scale bronze cast. But in that case the original cardboard was burnt away in the casting process so one thing was replaced by another. Then there could be a long discussion about drawing and the relationship between drawing and the work, drawing and hollowing out, and the ways in which the vocabulary of stock materials is used, and finally of a relationship to volume.

RP: I wanted to ask about something that Sara Weyns (Director of the Middelheim Museum) mentioned in her talk, about mistakes and of their significance to your work. I find it interesting that you acknowledge it as a phenomenon that is integral to

your practice; is that because you see them not as a negative, but as a necessary element of invention?

RD: Yes, I wouldn't want to fetishise making mistakes, mistakes are made, and I do think you learn from them. Okay so the infinity works which are on those funny cradles, that group of sculptures started from trying to make a work for a show at the Tate, Liverpool. I had the idea that I could make a floor based work that was recomposable, that you could put together like a jigsaw puzzle. So I made a number of modules, with two, three, and four nodes, thinking that they could be composed on the floor. But actually they twisted whilst making them and looked a bit shabby so I never did it, and then shortly afterwards I realised if I looked at those I could treat them as a kind of counting mechanism. So that the two node was the beginning, and then there was a three node, and then a four node, and if I put the





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Richard Deacon, 2015, *It's Like A Rock*,
Stainless steel, 155 x 245 x 180 cm, Image
Courtesy: Richard Deacon: *SOME TIME is*
at Middelheim Museum in Antwerp until 24
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Richard Deacon, 2005, *Masters Of The
Universe #1*, Stainless Steel,
163 x 194 x 126 cm,
Image Courtesy: Richard Deacon: *SOME
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the ways I thought was of using the wood in the same way you might build a barrel, so by planking or as a boat, or even a cabin.

I guess that I thought that Never Mind could work outside in the same way that wooden boats are on the sea, or Norwegian churches exist outside on the tundra. But I was mistaken in that thought, either because of inexperience or bad selection of timber, or that I hadn't really thought about how sunlight affects wood; which is the problem - it is not water it is the sunlight. The expansion of the wood caused cracks to open, and wood and water penetrated the hollow interior, which led to it becoming like a cooking pot inside. I restored it two or three times before we stopped, and then it was obvious there was a construction mistake, and it stopped me making things like that. So then I started making wooden things that were more solid, and that also proved

unsuccessful. At the same time I began thinking about furniture, and of using steamed and twisted wood as a means of generating the forms I wanted to create. So failures can project you along different exploratory paths, which the success (of an idea) doesn't necessarily do. And there have been other kinds of failure in my work, structural failures and things that have broken. And there are various reasons for that, one is incompetence, the other is that because structure is really quite closely related to how I think about making sculpture, I have quite strong ideas about structure in relationship to the object. Then there will be times when the structure pushes the limits.

A good analogy of that would be the wobbly bridge at Tate (Modern), that despite all that engineering expertise that Arup put towards it, to make this suspension bridge with these very low elements on it, and them accounting for wobbly in one

direction, they hadn't accounted for the force in the other direction; and the way that a resonance would build up very quickly in that (same) direction. So the bridge wasn't a failure, just that while everyone was saying 'well whose fault is it that the bridge wobbles?' Actually the data wasn't there to tell them that when your foot presses on the ground that you are also exerting a sideways force, and nobody had twigged that. And it wasn't until a structure that was responsive to that sideways force was built that it was exposed (as a fault or phenomena).

RP: Mistakes come as a consequence of ideas, and ideas are born of drawings. Can you expand on those initial processes of production that you employ in your studio?

RD: So if we go into the Braem pavilion the ceramic work that is on the floor there - the big ceramic work that appears like a cage, what I would describe was how I was

developing a way of using models to make things in clay, partly to do with the way I was working with those models, but also as a consequence of a trip to India in fact, to Ellora to see the temples there, particularly the Kailash Temple, which is a buildings made up of carvings. And this morning I said that the origin of architecture was in relationship to making holes, rather than building walls. What was really astonishing about the Kailash Temple is that it is a full-blown piece of architecture that is carved out of a solid lump, and the Jain temples are the same. And when you go there you can see the evolution of a cave, with a feature in it as to how you might then create a piece of architecture. But I could see to make this building you started with a lump and hollowed out the spaces, which was a pretty extraordinary way of going about doing it. And also in relationship to making sculpture, it means you didn't have to think about how to make something, you started with a solid and ended up with a structure. If I am building something I work from the ground up, but if you start with a lump

you don't have to do that. So the structural form that you end up with doesn't necessarily have any kind of relationship to how you build it, it is just what's left.

So that's how the model making for that developed, and then I thought about leveling it and I produced a set of drawings that are conceptual flattening's of that. If you looked at that large ceramic and just imagine squashing it flat you end up with a geometry of some sort, which was translated back into the drawings with the alphabet works on the wall, which number twenty-six in total, and why they are called Alphabet. Then there is a purple steel work on the floor, which thinks the other way, about stretching it out again, so those drawings get pulled; which is part of the process of doing that. Colour comes into things at some point, which relates to making ceramics. I am giving you too many details here or too complicated a story, but in the house these are some of the first large scale ceramics I have made, and they are coloured because that's what ceramists do, they put glazes on stuff and colour





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Richard Deacon, 2015, Small Time, Powder-coated mild steel, 73 x 55 x 80 cm, Image Courtesy: Richard Deacon: SOME TIME is at Middelheim Museum in Antwerp until 24 September 2017, www.middelheimmuseum.be

Richard Deacon, 2016, Higher Custom, Stainless steel, 307 x 154 x 75 cm, Image Courtesy: Richard Deacon: SOME TIME is at Middelheim Museum in Antwerp until 24 September 2017, www.middelheimmuseum.be

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them. So to begin with those works were monochrome, but then there is a point when I think that there is no real reason why they have to be monochrome, and there is a funny thing with glazing that the colour doesn't look anything like the finish, so it is extremely liberating with what you get.

One of the problems with painting for me anyway is that as soon as I try to put a paint mark on something it reminded me of things that other people have done, and it is too quick. Whereas with glazing you could paint in relation to what you think they are going to look like, rather than what they actually look like. Even the relationship to action is quite interesting, because I became aware after a while that what was happening was that the colour would come into the work in a way that I could use. So I then started using colour on steel, and a little on wood, but not quite so much. I had

added colours to glue, and at the same time I had added materials to the adhesives that I was using. But I also think - and I realised something when I was giving a talk this year for a show in San Diego - that in the 1980's I made a lot of works from laminated wood, and I let the glue ooze out, drip down; and gradually I let more and more glue come out. And it is an obsession with making two bits that are connected together, and in another sense it is a childish thing with actually liking that sort of runny surface. I also thought there was a distinction between the sides where the glue squeezes out, and the top and the bottom which are completely clean.

We all have pleasure squeezing sand or anything else, and having it push out between our fingers, or squeezing out toothpaste tubes, or dough or whatever; or shit even if you are a baby, but we won't get into that. And I realise why I was

actually persisting in using the glaze, because it was satisfying that idea of a runny fluid surface; and it was obviously scratching or touching upon something that I am interested in. So there is a relationship between runny glue, the module stainless steel surface, and the glaze surface, which has to do with fluidity. And there is another relationship between structure, geometry, and means of attachment, screws, nuts, bolts, all of that, which is on the other side. The two tendencies play off of each other, and it is also a little about being alive and being dead. I think fluidity and fixedness are two sides of a rather interesting divide.

RP: *And in terms of the placement of the works, how have you decided upon that in Antwerp?*

SD: Well I remember that we spoke earlier about the fact that you were reluctant to show your works in nature. Which might be a question

related to yours, because of course we all need that dialogue between nature and the sculptures, and vice-versa.

RD: Yes which is one of the nice opportunities here, that it is a constructed situation. With green things it has rabbits and ducks running around, but (Middelheim) also has sculptures and a road underneath the park. The question about placement, the logical thing would have been to put Never Mind back in its original place, but that's wasn't possible because the site is occupied by the Singer. And Sara's invitation was along the lines 'that if we are going to do this reconstruction (which does require resources, energy, expertise and enthusiasm), then we should consider doing a bigger show, to give it some sort of context; which is correct I think. So then it was a question of what we could do.

I mentioned at the beginning that I have not often made works for a

'show show' in an outdoor space, with what was available, what was possible, what connected (work for work). Bikini was a fairly obvious first choice, because it was made at the same time, and correct me if I am wrong Sara but the bracketing of Bikini at one end, and Never Mind at the other end was intentional. Accompanied by the Customworks that I had shown last year at Thomas Schulte's Skulpturhalle. They were always intended to go outside, so they were an obvious choice. For different reasons I also knew that the bronze work could go outside, and I had also wanted it to go outside, but I needed to find a good occasion to put it outside. Just putting it outside on its own didn't really do it for me. And I wanted it to go outside because I wanted it to go green, which it is doing and it has changed quite a lot in four weeks. There must be a fair amount of acid in the rain here.

So I am very happy to have (that there), and then the Infinity pieces



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work very well with the other works in the collection. They are the right size to go with the other sculptures, and they don't infringe upon them. It is particularly nice the relationship between the Max Bill and the Infinity pieces. The Max Bill is quite a small work, but because of its shininess it takes up a lot of space. Then for the layout of works at the hortiflora, it's noticeable that we didn't put anything in the middle; which means that there is nothing that is at the centre point. There is a cross between Master of the Universes, When The Land Masses First Appeared, the Custom pieces and Never Mind down here; but in the middle there is an area that is not occupied which could have been occupied, but it would have made everything else subject to it. And I guess you would do the same thing if you were installing inside. I noticed there were some people drawing today, they were looking down and drawing Never Mind, it is actually quite an easy thing to draw, its not particularly complicated, but there are some perspectival things which could be interesting.

RP: In terms of the title of your works, is there a correlation between Some Time and Never Mind?

RD: Yes, Some Time actually reflects the amount of time it takes to make things. When you make sculpture it encapsulates time because it takes time to make and it also lasts for a period of time, and resolving the problems of Never Mind did take some time - that is the simplest connection. The bracket between Body Of Thought and the most recent work in the show Big Time, which is thirty years, is some time. And if I wanted to get philosophical then I would say the opposite of Never Mind is Body, and Body occupies a place in the world for some time. So that is another connection.

RP: Do you think your sculptures appear better in a gallery space setting or outside, exposed to the elements? And with that in mind, have you done a site-specific piece?

RD: In 1982 I put a piece of sculpture, which is now in the Tate collection, called If the Shoe Fits outdoors for a show in Cheltenham, and I thought it looked awful, when actually I knew it was a good piece of sculpture. I thought I had just thrown it away, and I was really depressed. I tried to work out why (a work couldn't work outside) and I decided it was because that when things went outside the relationship of the skin of the work to the inside was lost, and they became lumps outside. Whereas inside a room you were between one sort of skin and another sort of skin, so that there was something about the fragility, or the existence of the skin of the work that became more apparent. So then I thought I am not going to do that again, if ever I make a piece of work for outdoors again I will make something specifically intended to go outside. I kind of kept to that idea, and most of the time I needed to know the specifics of a situation before I made the work. But sometimes they were only for temporary situations, that a work would get moved to another location. Even though I might have been prompted by the specifics of a particular place, and sometimes they look better when they are moved to another location.

I didn't have a hardline thing about site-specificity. I made a piece of work for Glasgow Garden festival in 1989, which was on a crane base, on the side of the Clyde. It was a very big work that had a nose that hung down and a big steel thing on top of it. Going back to your question, yes it was specific to the site, in that in order for it to stand it needed a six metre by six metre, by twelve metre side cube, or half cube to stand on, and we had to take it down afterwards. And then it went into long-term storage, and it was made with public money, with youth training scheme assistants.

RP: And the work was made of?

RD: Steel, very heavy steel. It was made in a shipyard and so it went into store, and I tired various places to reinstall it, at Leicester University

for example where I suggested you could have a seminar room in the supporting block, which you could have done. But then it was sited to go to South Shields where one of the local politicians got into a protest about it, saying it wasn't site-specific; which is true. It had been stored in South Shields for a long time, and it was there, and all they had to do was make this base, which could function as a room. A big room, six metres by six metres high by twelve, actually twelve metres by twelve metres by six, that is a big interior space. And so that went nowhere and in the end I destroyed the work, because I had been storing it for such a long time. And this politician was only using a site-specific argument in a political sense.

RP: That is incredibly sad, possibly now you could sell it to Qatar to somewhere in the Middle East?

RD: Yes I could. If I had kept it for another ten years I could have probably got rid of it, and done something positive with it.

RP: Is there documentation of the work?

RD: Yes, it was called Nose to Nose. So site-specificity can go several ways. Richard Serra has a very hardline approach to it, and he may be right, he may be wrong. There are some works of Richard's that are clearly site-specific, to do with the levels of the ground. But sometimes I am not sure that they are as specific as he claims. And with his Guggenheim works in Bilbao, there is something between the architect and the sculptor that is more antagonist than complimentary. If you look at Serra's Columbus Circle I don't quite see how that work is site-specific. Richard would be annoyed if he were to hear me say that. I did make a work that flowed on the river, and that was fairly specific to its site, unfortunately it got washed away so its not there anymore. The site itself became specific, and it ended up in the North Sea somewhere.

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Richard Deacon, 2016, Big Tinem Painted and lacquered stainless steel, 117 x 189 x 65 cm, Image Courtesy: Richard Deacon: SOME TIME is at Middelheim Museum in Antwerp until 24 September 2017, www.middelheimmuseum.be

