

Make Your Own Trail

A Conversation with

Richard Wilson

BY RAJESH PUNJ





Slipstream, one of Richard Wilson’s most innovative projects to date, translates the motion of a car rolling over into the aeronautical maneuver of a small propeller plane turning through the air at high altitude. The suspended, aluminum-clad sculpture twists through the central space of Heathrow Airport’s new Terminal 2 building like an elongated spacecraft settling for earth. The “wow” factor of *Slipstream* characterizes all of Wilson’s work. His architectural interventions—including his best-known work, *Turning the Place Over*, commissioned for the 2008 Liverpool Biennial—employ a creative synthesis of sculpture and engineering to create daring and sometimes disconcerting breaks in the fabric of everyday life.

Water Table, 1994. Billiard table, concrete pipe, ground water, and electrics, 3.7 x 2.1 x 4 meters.

Rajesh Punj: *Could you explain the significance of scale in Slipstream?*

Richard Wilson: The scale question is interesting. The first thing that people ask is why it’s so ginormous. You have to understand that I’ve spent a good part of my professional career as a sculptor dabbling with architecture, playing with it and undoing it, and therefore I have to take on that scale. If you have an idea about spinning a façade, you don’t do it as a six-foot piece. A façade is looking at the extremities and thinking about what the budget will allow. So, architecture is an obvious determinant for scale, and the other thing is the canvas that I was given at Terminal 2—the empty void of the covered court area, which is supported in the middle by 11 columns. The brief that I was given stipulated that the sculpture could only be supported off of the columns. I have only used four of them, just over a third of the supports for the ceiling.

In that respect, it’s not a very big sculpture; but it is big when you see it, which has to do with human

scale, non-human scale, and architectural scale. I worked with the scale of the room, and I worked with the scale of the interior architecture. It only occupies one-third of the building, which includes the car-park arrivals area from London, the covered court area, and the terminal. So, I have the middle piece, and I’ve taken four of the 11 columns of that piece, therefore it’s not a sprawling work; it occupies only one part of the architecture. I think that it is right for where it is, and the size is right for where it is located.

In terms of the visual, people like to see exciting things, dramatic things—things that are going to arouse them, dazzle them in some way, and startle their imaginations—and I think I work on that level. It’s a little rude in the sculpture world, but I use it; I suppose because I work a lot of the time in an environment where the audience isn’t well versed in art grammar. Twenty million people a year come through this terminal, and they are not all going to be *au fait* with the visual arts; they haven’t had the training, so I have to use something that gets the “wow” factor going.

RP: *You appear to consider the external factors of a work—the volume of the space and your wish for the work not to overwhelm that setting in any way—as much as the work itself. Am I correct in thinking that?*

RW: I think that’s true. One learns to be very sensitive, and that comes about for various reasons. It is something that I’ve really had to think about and

work with over the years. You can make constructions and build, which is what *Slipstream* is, or you can unravel, undo, and look inside architecture, which is what a lot of my previous work has done. When you do that, you tend to get critics talking about the artist as vandal, that you are attacking architecture and disagreeing with the architect — but it's not that at all. My works are sensitively choreographed pieces. When you turn the façade of a building, plant a sculpture in the floor of a gallery, or take a window and bring it into the space to adjust the architecture, it needs to be incredibly thought out and sensitively worked. I wouldn't say hundreds, but there are lots and lots of drawings, sketches, and models made to get a work to sit properly and right in the space. It's not an attack, it's not an act of vandalism. I'm not the mad ax man coming in to attack architecture, as has been written about me.

RP: *That comes across as a strange accusation to throw at someone so deliberate in everything he does.*

RW: I can understand it, because often people don't know the hidden agenda of projects such as *Over Easy* (1999, The Arc, Stockton-Upon-Tees), *Turning the Place Over* (2007–11), and *Water Table* (1994, Matt's Gallery, London). When you know you have been given permission to undo a window, for instance, and you

Below: *A Slice Of Reality*, 2000. Sliced section of an ocean dredger, 21.34 x 10.6 x 8.84 meters. Right: *Over Easy*, 1999. Steel, glass, electric motors, render, and PVC seals, 8 meters diameter.



BOTTOM: © RICHARD WILSON

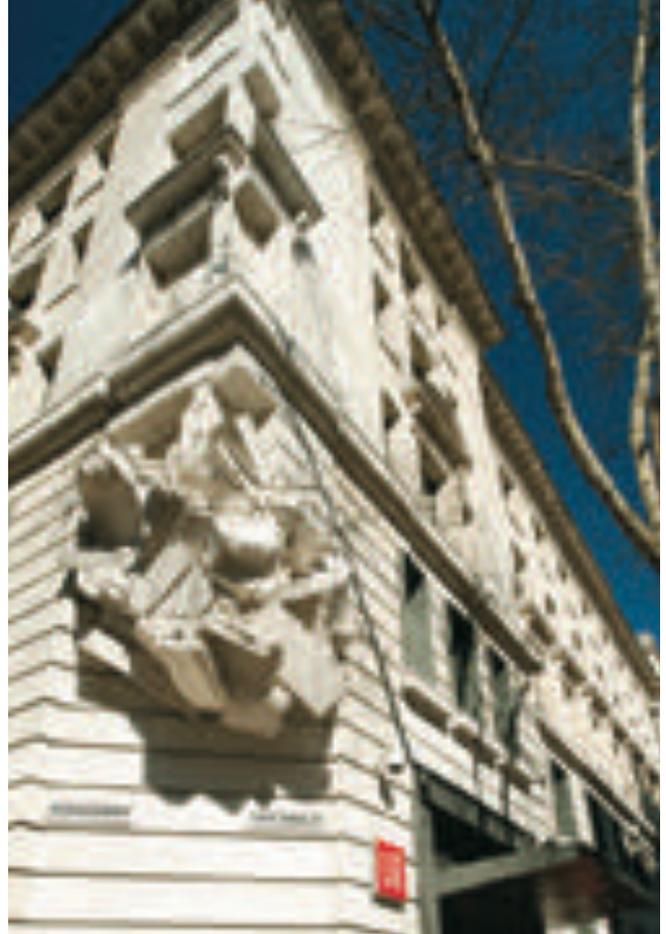
have a very good understanding of how that window operates, as in *She Came in through the Bathroom Window* (1989), you can just unbolt it, bring it back in, and put it back up afterwards. With *Turning the Place Over*, I knew that I could do a pastry cut in the building, mount that onto a spindle and spin it, because the building was going to be pulled down afterwards. Those were the hidden agendas, given that information. The same with the 1996 Serpentine Gallery exhibition “Jamming Gears.” The gallery was going to excavate the basement, and they had been given lottery money to put an education room down there. Therefore I could dig the floor, because it was all coming up anyway. There was an understanding that I would follow the parameters of what was allowed and doable; and in that respect, I probably challenged the architecture. But in the museum environment, the architecture is sacrosanct, you can't put a nail in the wall, you can't undo a floorboard; it is difficult enough taking out a light bulb, there are so many health and safety restrictions. I research all of those things, determine the available parameters, and then work out what I can do within those parameters as I understand them. It is not vandalism: I don't go in without asking or seeking permission and just assume I can do these things.

RP: *How integral is drawing when planning a work?*

RW: Drawings are vital for me, because I am working with teams, and I have to be able to express my idea sensibly and in a coherent way, so that there is no misunderstanding. Sometimes I am invited to make drawings and models to assist in the securing of funding; you make a maquette in order to convince someone, perhaps a local authority, so that they can say, “Oh, I get it, I like it, let's put money into that.”



I do these things to the best of my ability in order to convey, in the best possible way, the concept as it is at that moment in time. I also make drawings as a kind of work-out. In the same way that people go to the gym, I use drawing as a mental limbering up. I have to get very familiar with the work, because once I am familiar with it, it is handed over. *Slipstream* was made in Hull and assembled here, on site. The work isn't done in the studio, where you get time to look at it, duel over it, and change things—you've



Left and detail: *Turning the Place Over*, 2007–11. Façade, steel, machinery, and electrics, 10 meters diameter. Above: *Square the Block*, 2009. Jesmonite and aluminum, 18 x 1.5 x 1.5 meters.

got to get it right, like the architect's got to get it right. And you can't be seen to be wasting money. You can't say, "I don't like the middle, can we get rid of that and do it again?" because you look unprofessional, and you are throwing money away at that point.

RP: *There must be a point with certain projects when you have to be much less attached to the work, when you are less able to come back to something. How do you operate under those circumstances?*

RW: *Slipstream*, like the other major works in which the sculpture is rooted in a building, required me to work like an architect. That means you work, and work, and work on the idea to get it fine-tuned to what you consider correct, and then you hand it over to the engineers and the manufacturers. You don't lose control of it at that point, but you obviously can't chop and change it after that. When a project like this takes three years, your most intensive period is probably the first six months, at the very beginning. After that, you are following it, signing off on bits of it, or asking for a reworking of a section, but essentially you can't challenge your own aesthetic. You can say, "I don't like that bit there," but you can't say, "I don't like the way I have made that work, I want to get rid of all of that."

RP: *There is something almost contradictory about your lexicon for public sculpture; there is your wish to be sympathetic to a space and then there is the artist as actionist.*

RW: It comes with age. You start to realize that sometimes you can be a bit belligerent. You think the idea is right—you have tried and tested it on your models and drawings—and then some-

one comes along and says that it can't be that high, it's got to drop down a bit so you can see an existing sign. So, you drop it, and you think, "Actually, I'm glad that surfaced, because it could have been a bold, brisk attempt at saying, 'Here I am, flying up and away,' when, in fact, there is a subtlety when you reduce." Sometimes it's a blessing in disguise, though you rarely say, "I'm glad that went that way, because I had it wrong." You keep quiet about it and pretend that it was always intended. Artists have to work in this way all the time. I think everyone has to give and take in these situations. The building has to give a bit, but the sculpture has to give a bit back as well.

RP: *How important an influence was American sculpture for you?*

RW: I really used the library, and I became very interested in American artists at art college. I became very involved in Land Art and very involved with scale. Richard Serra, Mark di Suvero, and some of the big Land artists like Walter de Maria and Michael Heizer were very important. I came to Gordon Matta-Clark very late, after college. I was fascinated with that kind of bravado, the idea of that scale, and the very American idea that rather than use the path you know, get off the path and make your own trail—the idea that if you have something to say, say it. Don't follow the conservative trend, break away and be your own person, be your own ideas. And I always thought there was something wrong if anyone was making work like you; for me, it was about being unique.

Rajesh Punj is a writer based in London.



Above: *Hang on a minute Lads...I've got a great idea*, 2012. Steel frame, plywood, fiberglass, paint, hydraulic pump, and electronic timer, 11 x 2.5 x 2.5 meters. **Below:** *20:50*, 1987–2014. Used sump oil, steel, wood, and valve tap, dimensions variable.

