An Illusion about Understanding

In Richard Deacon's comprehensive solo show at the Prague Municipal Gallery, to see the large-scale sculptures viewers must get close, bend down, crane their necks upward, focus on the small details, and then again step back and look at the whole work. These exploratory actions that the viewers perform with their bodies and their movement through space have led Hagai Ulrich to try to understand how Deacon manages to physically express ideas, symbols, and signs that cannot be realized in time and space.

Critique / Hagai Ulrich October 16, 2017

In Richard Deacon's solo show "Free Assembly" (curator: Julian Heynen), which was on display until recently at the Municipal Library of Prague’s City Gallery (Galerie hlavního města Prahy), the artist presented works ranging from the late 1980s until now: sculptures, drawings, and found objects that exist in a realm of post-Minimalistic body-matter experiences. The show emphasized the encounter between the viewer's body and the matter in the space, as well as the illusion of trying to create a coherent, stable, collective syntax regarding its image.

There are many sculptures in the show, made of familiar industrial materials, easily identifiable: wood, aluminum, steel, terracotta, steel, glaze, and more. The physicality and sensuality of the works stand out. Their large scale and the positioning of the works in the gallery's wide spaces leave the viewers with no option to be passive or static. To experience the works, the viewers must walk around them, turn their heads to the ceiling, or bend down. Deacon leaves visible traces of the actions he has performed on the material: inserting screws, bending the aluminum, carving the wood, breaking it, shaping the clay, the direction of the dripping glaze, stains – small actions that are like fingerprints on the material – all of which obligates the viewers to move forward and backward, approach, retreat, and circulate in the desire to see the whole work.

Unlike the materials that make up the sculptures – materials which can be measured, quantified, sensed, recalled – many signs and symbols in the show are abstract: the figure 8, the Möbius strip, optical tricks. These signs, alongside the actual materials, create a sense of illusion or paradox that is revealed to the viewers only after the physical encounter and its examination in space, through looking: the approaching, the retreat, the bending, the head's raising and turning, the focusing on tiny details, and the urge to touch the sensuous materials – explorative activities that the viewers perform with their bodies and through their movements in space. *UW84DC#9* (2001), for example, is a piece made of wood, a thin rectangular surface measuring 11x358x133 cm. The planks that make it up are not straight; they look like waves. As in the other sculptures in the show, the sensual physicality of the material (wood in this instance) is juxtaposed with the shape (the wave), indicating change, movement, and lightness. Despite the silent mass of the wood, the work seems lightweight, appearing to hover above the floor. Such juxtapositions create tension, which is typical of Deacon's work – an attempt to concretely express ideas that cannot be materialized in space and time, except for the ability of each viewer to describe what they see or have experienced.

11 copy.jpg

[1]Richard Deacon, UW84DC #9, 2001
Wood (bent ash), aluminium

5 copy.jpg **[2]**

[3]Richard Deacon

Front - UW84DC#9, 2011, bent ash, aluminum
Back – Skirt, 1989, Galvanized steel, screws
Photography: Tomáš Souček

Out of Order (2003) is a large sculpture (190x700x570 cm) made of long oak planks, made to appear rounded and curled like a ball of yarn, or entangled ribbons. The large scale and the use of heavy wood (held together with steel and screws) are offset by the sculpture's airy appearance, as if it is hovering on the force of its own internal inertia. The title of the work may be about something that is broken, but also about something that has disrupted the regular order, perhaps the order in our minds, that is striving to fully comprehend the objects under observation by cataloguing them into materials and properties, measuring them intuitively or precisely, and quantifying them as physical measuring units (width, length, mass, time – arbitrary and virtual quantities, used as constant and consensual units to measure the properties of things). These standard measuring units allow the audience to receive information about the sculpture from different sources. The problem that the work brings to light can be associated with the difficulty in the conferring of physical expression to something that cannot be expressed in measuring units, maybe because it is chaotically, constantly changing. Accordingly, the mental processing of data through signs and symbols would not contribute here to the attempt to figure out and to answer the question: what is *Out of Order*, in which the rigid wood resemble a mess of paper ribbons frozen in mid-flight.

1 copy.jpg **[4]**

[5]Richard Deacon, Out of Order, 2003
Wood (steamed oak), stainless steel

Photography: Tomáš Souček

Something similar is happening in *Mammoth* (1989), another large-scale sculpture (210x485x346 cm). The work is made of aluminum, a heavy material that here appears lightweight. Its base is lying on the floor while other parts appear to soar, defying gravity. Thin rectangular aluminum plates are joined together with small screws into a long structure that resembles an air duct, like those embedded in buildings' walls. Here the elongated passages are curved, bent, and twisted so that a sideways look brings to mind a Möbius strip – a shape that cannot be executed materially and three-dimensionally, existing only as an abstract idea or as a two-dimensional illusion.

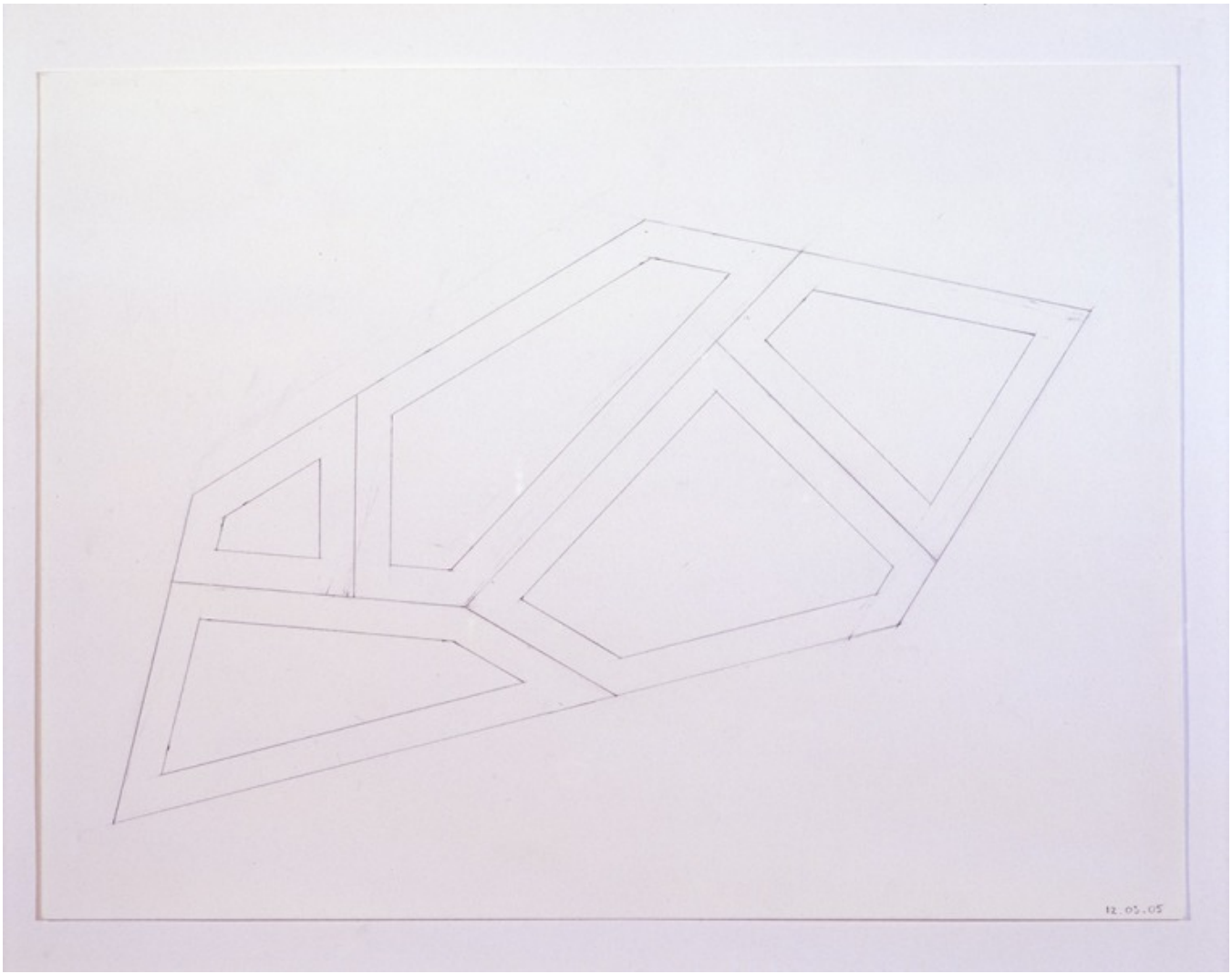
4 copy.jpg **[6]**

[7]Richard Deacon, Mammoth, 1989
Aluminium

Photography: Tomáš Souček

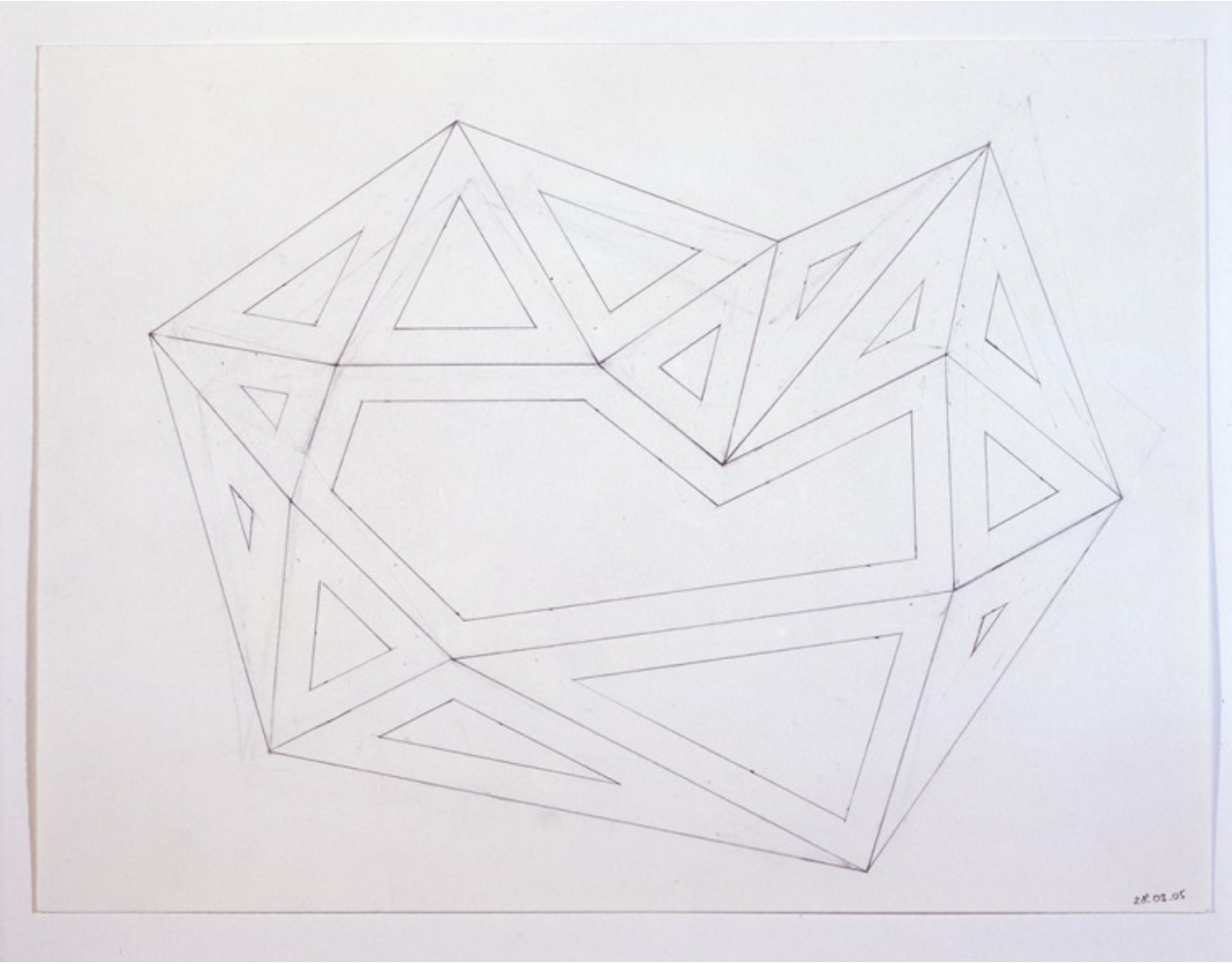
There are quite a few 3-D illusions in the show. For example, "Alphabet" (2004-2005) is a series of 26 small (36.5x43.5 cm), framed drawings in which various shapes join together to create triangles. The result is an optical illusion of the surface of an object that alternately seems to be two- or three-dimensional. The name of the series, "Alphabet," connects the abstract geometrical shapes to the basic signs of language to form a syntax that can be understood by speakers of the language within a comprehensive order. However, in Deacon's alphabet, the geometric shapes (the signs) form 3D structures that are optical illusions. All we can do is describe the shapes in the drawings: count the triangles or their sides, understand them mathematically, find the errors they display, but in that fashion they can only emphasize the intellectual failure to speak through or by them. What Deacon does is break apart frameworks of shared meanings through abstract shapes, exposing their "failure," the fact that signs can be used as language only if they are forced to submit to a shared sense. An abstract shape can exist on its own, but here the stress is on the tension that emerges. These signs do not signify communication but, conversely, stress the impossibility of communicating through them, of using them in a syntax in which a sentence creates a single, ordered, final understanding or a common world view. Thus, the equation that can be deduced here is, syntax equals an illusion about understanding.

9 copy.jpg **[8]**



[9]Richard Deacon, Alphabet, 2004-2005
Graphite on paper

10.jpg **[10]**



[11]Richard Deacon, Alphabet, 2004-2005
Graphite on paper

The alphabet drawings share characteristics with other works in the show, among them "Range" (2005), a series of sculptures about 100 cm tall, comprising three-dimensional trapezoid terracotta blocks that function as bases for clay sculptures covered in a yellowish-white glaze. The clay works look like joined tubes that make up triangles, and those, in turn, become a structure, as in the "Alphabet" drawings. They look as if each sculpture kept changing in its unique manner until it stopped at a specific moment in time. The terracotta trapezoids seem heavy, distorting the perception of the weight of the glazed sculptures they support. Their peculiar and "illogical" formation encourage an interpretation of the dripping glaze as sweat drops, and the material appears to have struggled to vary until reaching the form in which it had been set down. The title, "Range," speaks perhaps of a range of options for alteration, and like the other titles, it points not to a specific reference but rather to a whole, or to a range.

3 copy.jpg **[12]**

[13]Richard Deacon, Range, 2005
Glazed and lustred white earthenware, base: terracotta

Photography: Werner Hannappel

Another series of works, "Infinity" (2000), includes 30-80 cm-tall sculptures, made of stainless steel, laid on the floor as if they were two-dimensional images. Each is leaning on a rod that holds it up diagonally towards the viewers as they enter the space. These are images of shapes that symbolize infinity (hence the series' title) such as a circle, a figure 8, or a torus. The thin steel object is shiny, and the small depressions on its surface refract the light in various directions in response to the most miniscule movement of the pupil, so that it constantly shimmers, blinks, changes color. Somewhat like a *fata morgana*, it creates an illusion that the physicality and the form of the material are not in coherence to their foreknown characteristics (the steel is heavy but appears light; the shape is fixed but seems fluid, flexible).

6 copy.jpg **[14]**

[15]Richard Deacon, Infinity #10, 2000
Stainless steel

7 copy.jpg **[16]**

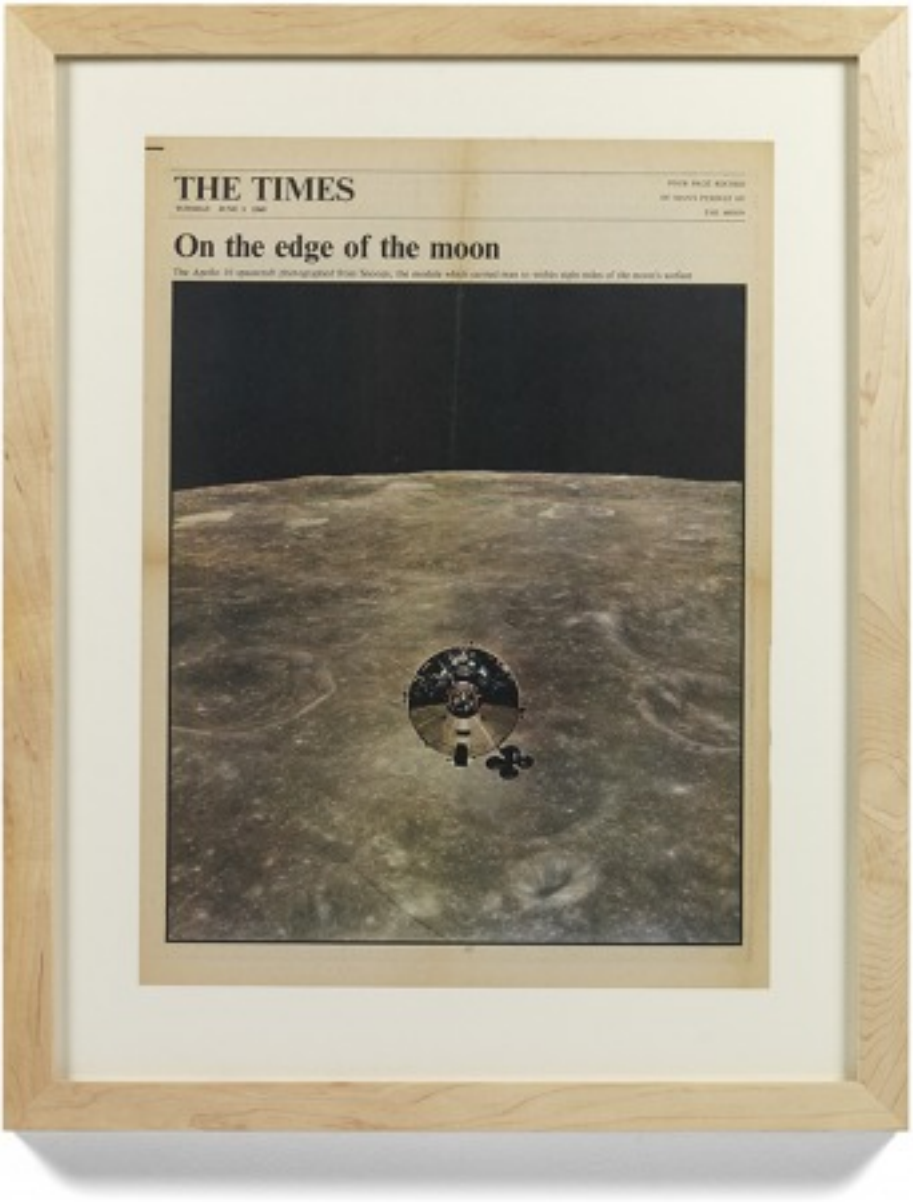
[17]Richard Deacon, Infinity #12, 2000
Stainless steel

"In My Father's House" (2006) – a series of original front pages of various 20th-century morning newspapers, which Deacon's father collected over the years - reside with the "Infinity" works in several gallery spaces. These pages feature news items about major historical events: President Kennedy's assassination, the death of Churchill, the moon landing in 1969, wars, and other events. The most recent one is the collapse of the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001. Newspaper front pages generate stories and provide journalistic reporting, creating an illusion that is described as the factual "truth" about what had happened or is happening. In the paper, the stories gain a sense of coherence, of unity, but in fact, they are multi-layered, replete with points-of-view, eye-witness reports, and conflicting narratives. The show demonstrates the paradox of the inability to find complete, comprehensive physical expression to ideas that have infinite parameters; the newspapers, next to “Infinity” and “Alphabet”, and beside the optical illusions seem to point to the abstract organization at the heart of the journalistic story, and to the function of the newspaper's front page as a "front," a delusory two-dimensional, superficial surface, and a shaky connection between an image and the ability to tell a coherent, structured, collective story about it. They seek a reconsideration of the illusion about them.

12 copy.jpg **[18]**

[19]Richard Deacon, In My Father’s House, 2006
Found newspapers

14 copy.jpg **[20]**



[21]Richard Deacon, In My Father’s House, 2006
Found newspapers

15 copy.jpg **[22]**

[23]Richard Deacon, In My Father’s House, 2006
Found newspapers

16 copy.jpg **[24]**

[25]Richard Deacon, In My Father's House, 2006
Found newspapers

The show's attempt to give physical expression to ideas that cannot be expressed materially, alongside the obvious, recognizable presence of the abstract, arbitrary, multi-faceted signs and shapes of the collective syntax, helps to regard all newspaper front pages in the same manner, as fallacious, and the impossibility of using its perplexing optics to establish an inclusive framework and shared comprehension for deciphering what we see or believe. The works in "Free Assembly" force the viewers to reconsider what they might have assumed about the viewed object in regards to the stability of matter and the collective story (concerning reality), as well as to look at things once more, draw near, retreat, investigate for themselves, and perhaps refrain from enforcing a single, general, apparently stable common denominator, that is based on ever-changing infinite ideas.

"Richard Deacon: Free Assembly [26]" (curator: Julian Heynen), Prague City Gallery, Municipal Library, 2nd floor, Mariánské Square 98/1, Prague 1, April 4, 2017 – September 17, 2017.

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