

'So Much Depends': An Introduction to the Art of Richard Wentworth

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The pristine frame of a metal bucket; a shelving unit, precariously tilted; a box suspended in an angry cyclone of packing tape; an old dictionary stuffed with electrical entrails – or another, crammed with gaudy sweet wrappers.

And photographs (all colour): furniture, sunlit on a pavement; junked car parts wedged in a doorway; a tin of peas holding a shop door open; a cement mixer, a pile of earth and an arrangement of planks, like some abandoned circus act.

When you look at the art of Richard Wentworth, you see materials and objects which appear domestic, industrial or discarded, their function skewed or broken. Stuff from the depths of workshop cupboards or the backs of charity shops; the kind of light industrial leftovers and spare parts produced without pause by the relentless momentum of commodity culture.

But as these components are fused or arranged or assembled by Wentworth into new forms and shapes, or photographed by him (their oddity caught as occurrences within the landscape), so they begin to tease and massage our perception of them. Their banality becomes transfigured, their shape converted to some unknowable purpose, but their emptiness filled with meaning. You are looking at what appears to be some collaboration between sculpture at its most refined and the seductive environmental doodling described by found objects.

In its games with weight and strangeness, its humour – at once absurd, devoutly unironic and melancholy – and its ever-present microclimate of anxiety, the art of Richard Wentworth (coincidentally, like the poems of William Carlos Williams) identifies what we could call the secret history of the quotidian. Shed-shaped metal forms are suspended overhead (like an earth-to-heaven view of Dorothy's prairie home, en route by tornado to Oz), or perched in a cradle of folded steel rope; crockery holds tight on a sloping shelf. Anonymous presences make themselves felt. As, for William Carlos Williams, 'so much depends' on 'the red wheel barrow' which his poem describes, 'glazed with rain water', so for Wentworth you feel that everything and nothing are fused within the poise and high refinement of his abutted objects and precarious mises-en-scène.

The once mute, mutated tool (an inverted ladder, for example, its sides narrowed at one end to a single rubberised stump) appears intimate and troubling; the fresh machine-cut parts – aluminium casing, glass shelves – acquire, shall we say, a veiled intentionality. Reconfigured as art, these components own a gravitational field which draws you into their world, whatever that stilled yet heady place, in which appearances, values and sensations are the same but rearranged, might be said to comprise. One answer might be that the art of Richard Wentworth makes diagrammatic connections of profound aesthetic acuity

between our personal and historical experience of the modern world. Describing a late phase of the Mass Age (the latter decades of the last century onwards), in which there is an abundance of mass-produced objects – the landscape of the urban conurbation, the industrial hinterland and the retail park – his art seems to pose manifold riddles: hybrid psychological one-liners, as though tutored in the flamboyant rhetoric of surrealism but told in a brutalist language of contemporary manufacturing processes.

Simultaneously, Richard Wentworth has created an artistic language which articulates a rearrangement of the periodic table of cultural status, exploring the ways in which the landscape, technologies and clutter of the modern world, the maintenance and manufacture of its fabric, the litter and discard of its processes, the accidental and the chanced upon, can provide the materials and media for excursions into the human consciousness. In this his art identifies the point at which the monolithic processes of mass production and mass media collide with a sense of individual human enquiry, in all its ingenuity, frailty, anxious searching and irrationality.

Thus Richard Wentworth makes art which presents the viewer with objects that are also situations; in their turn, these situations can appear simultaneously meaningless and profound, declamatory and enigmatic. They seem to be held together by the sheer accumulated force of their internal contradictions and opposing tensions. To quote from the maxims of the Danish philosopher (and high priest of the intractable) Søren Kierkegaard, they are 'like the chess piece of which you say, "that piece cannot be moved"'. But then there is a further aspect, hooking up the circuitry of their extraordinary animation, and the force-field of their timeless modernity. We could look to pop for some help with this. Back in 1966, pouting and pronouncing the sheen and certainty of the modern world to mask volatility, shape-shifting and dead drops into sudden anxiety, the Who sang on their single 'Substitute' that 'the simple things you see are all complicated...'. It was a determinedly, elegantly, dizzying lyric. Within its imagery, nothing was as it seemed, everything celebrated for its conversion into something else. Stroppy, confrontational, deftly at ease with surfing the materials of modern life, 'Substitute' invoked a sort of pleasure and bravura insolence in the tangles and curves of instant transformations – of values and status turned on their heads, and of creating vertigo for those seeking a fixed point.

When you combine these two seemingly opposed perspectives – Kierkegaard's immovable chess piece and the Who's complicated simplicity – they create a third effect, hard as nails, forged from their contradiction of each other: namely, to evoke that which is locked in a process of change. And so the art of Richard Wentworth, in this regard, can be seen as reconfiguring the banal fabric and detritus of the modern world, but in a way which – with utmost, aphoristic certainty of purpose – renders its reconstituted, rearranged presence electrifyingly energised and mesmeric. His art thus appears both taut and fluid, disturbed yet filled with stillness, simultaneously discarded and iconic, vivacious and sepulchral, poetic and industrial, tactile and resistant to touch.

These qualities develop as though from a merger between that which cannot be transformed and that which is in a permanent state of transformation: a shelving unit caught in the act of falling, for example, which might also not be a shelving unit at all, but a device,

constructed in its correct position, for allowing objects to fall. Likewise a modern-style office desk, its top sectioned into coloured angular segments, but crudely studded with nails: boredom and violence, work and play, authority and attack, tool and ornament, objet d'art or evidence of psychosis? 'To will is to stir up paradoxes', writes Camus. The rewards of engaging with Richard Wentworth's art are immediate and visceral. There is a quality to his work which seems to speak directly to our experience of sensation. The tension in Wentworth's art most often seems to be that between passive and aggressive – fragility and density. In this, the situations created by these art objects are conveyed to our sensory imagination in advance, vitally, of the intellect's desire to 'solve' them. Unlike the delicate rococo tracery of postmodern mischief-making, however, the art of Richard Wentworth eschews irony, self-conscious quotation and the sheer aesthetic gorgeousness of fin-de-siècle decadence. Rather, in his fusion of the industrial, the anxious, the comic and the humble, he is an artist who confronts the substance and processes of post-industrialism with a purpose which might be compared to the excursions into the field of signs conducted by Roland Barthes.

For Wentworth shares with Barthes an insight into our relationship with the seductive illogicality of the modern landscape. At root, perhaps, he also shares Barthes's covert romanticism – the pleasure of the flâneur; the aesthetic connoisseurship of the philosopher-scientist. 'So much depends' – an aphorism to confound interpretation? But of course! Let mystery serve.