

MAD. SQ. ART 2008. RICHARD DEACON *ASSEMBLY*

May 15 to August 24, 2008
Madison Square Park
Presented by the Madison Square Park Conservancy



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FOREWORD.

Martin Friedman, Mad. Sq. Art's *eminence grise*, had the foresight to arrange my first meeting with Richard Deacon three years ago in London on July 4, 2005. A trip to Richard's studio requires a romantic-sounding walk from Herne Hill station along Milkwood Road, but the trek actually goes through a dingy, industrial section of South London. When I finally arrived at the studio at 10 a.m. on Independence Day, Richard had only the vaguest notion about this American who had tracked him to his workshop. Fortunately I came bearing photos of Mad. Sq. Art's two prior exhibitions, Mark di Suvero and Sol LeWitt, and that was enough to intrigue Richard into taking us seriously.

Over the next several years, Richard became a regular visitor to Madison Square Park whenever this indefatigable globe-trotter passed through New York. We walked the park with him and introduced him to our friends and our neighborhood restaurants. We also made many new friends through Richard.

The great Marian Goodman, who represents Richard in New York, became a champion of an outdoor exhibit of Richard's ceramic pieces in Madison Square Park. At the Marian Goodman Gallery, we met Leslie Nolen, Director, and Elaine Budin, Managing Director, both of whom provided crucial assistance in all aspects of the exhibition.

For years Richard has created his ceramic pieces at the Niels Dietrich Studio in Cologne. Not only did Niels work with Richard in Cologne to make the pieces for the park, he also came to New York in May 2008 with his assistant [Michael] May to install the intricate "assembly" works with a special gantry built and transported from Cologne. It gave us great pleasure to watch the three craftsmen—Richard, Niels, Michael—assembling by hand the exhibition of brilliantly colored ceramic.

I can't end without mentioning the board of trustees of the Madison Square Park Conservancy who support the development of our free outdoor art program—and the donors who make it possible. I want to thank in particular Anonymous, Agnes Gund, Jill & Peter Kraus, The Toby D. Lewis Foundation, The Leucadia Foundation and the Luce Foundation.

I want to close with a word about Richard. His brilliance as an artist is on view for everybody to see. Only after working with him for three years do you get the privilege of knowing what a fine, decent, funny, committed and visionary man he is.

Debbie Landau
President



SOME WORDS FOR ASSEMBLY.

by Michael Brenson

DESCRIPTION. *Richard Deacon: Assembly* consists of seven irregular glazed ceramic sculptures resting on flat, rectangular, aluminum over steel plinths, each one providing a stage that seems slightly too small for the ceramic activity. No taller or wider than seven feet, the sculptures are what Deacon referred to in 1999 as “middle-sized.” The application of glaze is gestural, the palette candy-colored, sweet, yet compatible with gardens and trees. The round and rectilinear ceramic shapes suggest animal, vegetal and mineral bodies and processes, as well as rising and falling buildings. The sculptures seem compulsively active — they will keep going and going... and yet unsure of their identity or agency. All seven are adamantly three-dimensional: all invite persistent circulation. Three are a single mass; the other four, their four, five or seven parts joined by steel bolts, are aggregates. In shape and glazing, the single mass sculptures, from 2006 and 2007, are more distinct from one another than the aggregates, all made in 2008, which clearly belong to the same family. Two of the aggregates, *Morning Assembly* and *Evening Assembly*, have the same configuration but

stand differently. Visitors can sit or lie beside the five sculptures installed on the main lawn of Manhattan’s Madison Square Park, which is open to the public from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. The two sculptures installed some 50-feet apart on the nearby smaller, fenced-in lawn, *Some Hope* (2006), a single mass, and *Evening Assembly*, an aggregate, can only be seen. This distance builds into the experience of the exhibition a demand for observation and analysis to go along with a desire for proximity.

LIGHT. The sculptures take to the sun with as much excitement as any Greek marble or Auguste Rodin or Constantin Brancusi bronze. They want light. Their glossy surfaces not only seek the sun: they seem to expect their desire for a place in it to be granted. When drenched by sun, the daubs, streams, splatters, stains, and swabs of brown, green, red, white, gray, and blue both reflect light and, like syrup or molasses, hold it. The sun does more than heat the surfaces: it makes the sculptures seem extroverted, if not exhibitionistic, hyperfriendly, immune to shame, as hedonistically

available as any sun worshipper shedding clothes in their midst. Without sun, the colors become darker and less transparent, and the sculptures turn shy and discreet, so that their rhythms echo those of urban dwellers who feed off the swarming multi-directional energy of the city during the day and go about their private business at night. Coveted by the sun, comfortable in shadow, convinced they are occupied by an inextinguishable life force, the sculptures seem to feel chosen.

DELIBERATE. Yet for all the immediacy of these sculptures, the processes built into and suggested by them are slow. Their formations began with small models — clay for the single mass sculptures, folded cardboard for the aggregates. With the help of the Niels Dietrich ceramic studio in Cologne, Germany, with which Deacon has been collaborating for nearly ten years, the sculptures evolved over months of modeling, constructing, enlarging, engineering, glazing, firing and cooling; Dietrich and an assistant installed this exhibition. Everything about the sculptures, including color, core,

edge, joining, shape and surface, was methodically considered. All the temporalities of development implied by the sculptures resist speed to the point where it can seem unclear if they are exiting or entering fossilization. In the four aggregates the placement of every long (four to six feet), nearly rectangular block has been gauged so that their positions, however assertive, seem as hesitant as the groping of blind men and women feeling their relationships to other people and walls. The other three sculptures evoke a different sculptural history — not of geometric, but of organic abstraction. Each suggests both hardness and softness. Each hints at its own evolutionary pace: with its faceted forms bubbling out of a rounded mass, the fetish-like *Temperate* (2006), the earliest of the seven sculptures, the only one that seems clearly female, and the only one that is a monolith, suggests animal and vegetal fecundity and with it a coagulating volcanic bloom; the horizontal and creaturely *Tropic* (2007), with its accrual of related yet distinctive angular facets, seems to be developing like a crystal; *Some Hope*, as seductively haptic as a Cycladic marble harp and the one sculpture in *Assembly* that integrates straight and curved, suggests a sentient bone and sea-smoothed stones. We seem to have encountered all seven sculptures during a decisive pause just as their strange faculties of awareness are trying to absorb what has been done to them while readying themselves for what will happen next.

(Previous Page, Foreground)
Other Assembly, 2008
Glazed Ceramic

(Previous Page, Background)
Temperate, 2006
Glazed Ceramic

(Below)
Tropic, 2007
Glazed Ceramic

(Right)
Evening Assembly, 2008
Glazed Ceramic





PLACE. In the company of these sculptures, it is impossible not to be aware of their interactions with the grass and trees and the tens of thousands of daily visitors who congregate and dream within this oasis of green. The sculptures mirror and therefore underline the visitors’ solitary and ever-shifting aggregate lives. It’s also impossible to be with these sculptures without being aware of their interactions with the rest of the city. Several of the twenty-one blocks with which the four aggregate sculptures were constructed suggest elongated and slightly flattened Monopoly houses: with their level or pitched “roofs,” these blocks bring to mind the city’s one-storey warehouses. The thinly rounded profile of *Some Hope* echoes the famous narrowing prow-like northern facade of the nearby Flatiron Building. Madison Square Park, like other parks in New York City and throughout the world, is home to commemorative statuary on plinths. It has four, including an 1881 bronze and stone sculpture of Admiral David Glasgow Farragut by America’s foremost pre-modern sculptor, Augustus Saint-Gaudens; this was his first public commission. With their aggressive, almost artillery-like projections, Deacon’s aggregate sculptures have the rhetoric of war memorials. It’s hard not to see in the composition of *Evening Assembly* a more specific reference: one of its five architectural blocks lies fallen and three others are in various stages of collapse; only one, flat on top, like a pillar from which its edifice has vanished, like those in the ruins of the Roman Forum, remains standing, and even this one has begun to tilt. Unlike the four memorials, *Assembly* is not heroic. Its impact depends upon an acknowledgment of disintegration and failure.

IMPROBABLE. Deacon’s sculpture has often been wacky, if not absurd. At moments *Assembly* approaches the improbability of Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, a book Deacon cited with relish in his 1992 published exchange with Lynne Cooke. The bizarre marriage of porous polychrome ceramic (organic) and polished and sealed aluminum (industrial) helps ensure that the sculptures will not be self-important. So does the ungainly awkwardness of the elongated blocks: those that are not prostrate seem too cumbersome to have gotten themselves into their precarious positions. The hint of extreme combat among the rectangles in *Other Assembly* (2008) has the feeling of disaster films, or of the ritualized slow motion violence that has been cinematically commonplace since Ang Lee’s 2003 film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The male and female sexuality hinted at by the projective rectangles of the aggregate sculptures and the bubbling fertility of *Temperate* are extravagant. From its north side, *Some Hope* brings to mind an ancient guardian head (viewed from the northwest, a head emerges in *Temperate* as well, this one bulkier and more domestic) but the personality suggested by its fish-like down-turned mouth is not coolly dutiful but a comic book sad sack. *Assembly*’s extolling of imaginative leaps and associative freedom helps explain why children are drawn to these sculptures, and why the littlest of them appear to be as at home with the sculptures as the sculptures are with them.

MODERNISM. *Assembly*’s sculptural family includes Alexander Archipenko, Brancusi, Mark di Suvero, Barbara Hepworth, Henry

Moore, Pablo Picasso, Joel Shapiro, David Smith and Tony Smith. Like Deacon, many of these sculptors made (or make) sculptures for galleries and museums, and sculptures intended to interact with sites outside them. Several also made (or make) geometric structures that were responsive to their sites while remaining independent from them. Like Deacon, several worked in series, followed different artistic directions at the same time, and were open to a diversity of materials. Also like Deacon, several could be immensely playful. Most of these sculptors believed that sculpture had a unique ability to respond to feelings of apprehension and amazement, and to the enduring human needs for gathering, revealing, transforming and telling. If there is one artist to whom *Assembly* seems closest, it is Tony Smith. Smith developed ideas in small models, studied science, was strongly influenced by D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson’s *On Growth and Form*, and worked small and large, and in organic and architectural languages. His 1962 *Die* is both a playful and a funerary sculpture. If there is a historical moment to which *Assembly* seems most to be speaking, it is the extraordinary period from 1955 to 1965. During these ten years, all the artists suggested by *Assembly* were working. Hepworth and Moore were still making highly tactile biomorphic sculptures; the associative freedom and interest in sublimity that helped characterize Abstract Expressionism still had to be reckoned with; David Smith, the Abstract Expressionist sculptor who most insightfully integrated Cubism and Surrealism, was installing dozens of sculptures in the fields around his

Adirondack home and studio, anticipating that his two daughters would use them as a playground and Donald Judd was defining his fabricated metal objects against tactility and free association. None of these sculptors, however, made ceramic sculptures as inventively as Deacon for *Assembly*. None made ceramic sculptures for a public urban site.

SCALE. Herbert Read’s *Art of Sculpture* was published in 1956, when Deacon was seven years old. Read’s meditation on where sculpture had come from, going back to prehistory, what distinguished it from other artistic disciplines, and what defined “unique sculptural emotion,” was trashed by the influential American art critic Clement Greenberg, who objected to its emphasis on touch and inner volume in an age in which sculpture had become a viable modern discipline because of its rejection of the monolith,

(Previous Page)
Morning Assembly, 2008
Glazed Ceramic

(Right)
Morning Assembly, 2008
Glazed Ceramic

(Left)
Tropic, 2007
Glazed Ceramic





(Left Page, Top Left)
Temperate, 2006
Glazed Ceramic

(Left Page, Top Center)
Some Hope, 2006
Glazed Ceramic

(Left Page, Top Right)
Free Assembly, 2008
Glazed Ceramic

(Left Page, Bottom)
Tropic Installation
Glazed Ceramic

(Right Page)
Temperate, 2006
Glazed Ceramic

freedom with materials and insistence on the primacy of vision. For anyone who still wants to think about the particularities of sculpture and what has given it its necessity over tens of thousands of years, however, Read’s book remains useful. In the first chapter, Read writes, “In the beginning there was neither architecture nor sculpture, as a distinct art, but an integral form that we should rather call the monument.” His other key term is the amulet, which he describes as “the small, portable charm, worn on the person as a protection against evil, or as an insurance of fertility.” The art of sculpture, he states, came “into existence somewhere between these two extremes—as a method of creating an object with the independence of the amulet and the effect of the monument.” In *Assembly*, the sculptures that suggest mini memorials resemble toys or games. These blocks seem to want handling—to want to be portable—but they remain immobile, too big and heavy to permit an intimate relation to the hand. Two of the single-mass sculptures, *Some Hope* and *Temperate*, have the look of ceremonial idols and personal relics. But they are too small to be the former and too large to be the latter. Both sculptures seem to carry the memory of some ancient purpose, perhaps protection “against evil” or “insurance of fertility,” but how to relate to them is uncertain. All the sculptures in *Assembly* seem to be the wrong size in terms of everything they suggest and yet the right size for sculpture.

MATERIALS. While the language and imagery of *Assembly* are familiar from modernist sculpture, their materials are not: glazed ceramic replaces bronze, stone and steel, with which modern geometric, organic and memorial sculpture is most identified. Deacon’s sculptures are not part of an edition. The majority of them were made for Madison Square Park in the summer of 2008. Unlike most modernist sculpture, their ultimate destination does not seem to be a gallery or museum, where they would be emblems of displacement. In addition, the animation and spread of color emphasize surface. Focusing full attention on the exterior helps the sculptures resist that illusion of sculptural interiority which, as much as its permanence, is essential to the desirability of bronze. Deacon’s ceramic sculptures do indeed seem receptive. They seem awake. But their responsiveness does not suggest that their interiors are endowed with consciousnesses. Or spirit. The distinctness of these sculptures depends on their eccentric plinths. On the most obvious level, they endow the ceramic objects with a presentational specialness. But they do much more than this. The plinths are solid; the aluminum is wrapped tightly around the steel. While the ceramic has a hollow core, the plinths do not have interiors. Because of the smooth and seemingly youthful, skin-like quality of the aluminum and the way it reflects light, the plinths seem to lift the hard but still porous earth, enabling the ceramic to float just a bit, thereby ensuring that despite their heaviness these objects (which weigh between 500 pounds and a ton) will convey a minimal sense of gravity. The comparatively small size of the plinths in relation to the ceramic objects mobilizes the ceramic energy as well by making it seem as if that energy will overflow the support that has been designed for its stabilization. Something does seem to be alive inside the cooked earth, something that can be experienced as soul.

POWER. After my first visit with these sculptures, the question that would not leave me was: What is their power? They seemed to me to have power, and to know they had it, but what was it? Their alertness, their undefensiveness about being there, their ability to adapt to an environment that was constantly changing, their sense of having been chosen, communicated more than attitude. It communicated efficacy. I asked myself, were these sculptures magical? Could sculpture be magical in a public urban site like Madison Square Park? Could sculpture be magical in a way that was distinguished from other manifestations of contemporary magic, including those that are taken for granted in cell and Internet technology and in entertainment spectacle? To be magical, *Assembly* seemed to be saying, public sculpture could not be exclusionary. It had to be visually dynamic and seductive enough to pull people in. Through echoes of immemorial acts around sculpture, like worshipping, and of sacred and healing objects, like crystals, it had to evoke sculptural practices associated with celebration and ritual. It had to be receptive to a multitude of stories, including those involving despair and hope. As with fairy tales, accommodating those stories within a language of transformation and fantasy would invest the sculpture with the capacity for enchantment. While it had to reveal its connection to the people who congregated around it, however, this sculpture also had to be set off from them. In Madison Square Park, the sculpture has to seem of humans, trees, and buildings, but not part of them; it has to seem attached to what is going on in that part of the city but sufficiently detached not to submit to a place or time. Such sculpture will seem endowed with rare properties, ones with which the people who encounter it feel they recognize and yet sense they need. If sculpture can do all this, it will have a chance to be experienced as potent, and functional, and in its presence individual and collective energies can be sufficiently located and released to enable the sculpture and its audiences to luxuriate in each other’s materiality and promise.

Michael F. Brenson, faculty member of Bard’s Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts, and art critic at the *New York Times* from 1982 to 1991, has been writing about art for three decades. Brenson’s books include *Visionaries and Outcasts: The NEA, Congress, and the Place of the Visual Artist in America* (2001); *Sol LeWit: Concrete Block Structures* (2002); and *Acts of Engagement: Writings on Art, Criticism, and Institutions, 1993–2002* (2004). He is currently working on a biography of David Smith.

(Right Page, Top)
Evening Assembly in the studio, 2008

(Right Page, Bottom)
Preparing *Evening Assembly* for Kiln



RICHARD DEACON.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2008** *Assembly*, Madison Square Park, New York
- 2007** *Personals*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, England
Welsh Pavilion, 52nd International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia
- 2006** *The size of it*, Arp Museum Bahnhof Rolandseck, Germany
Masters of the Universe: Screen Version, Public Art Fund, New York
- 2005** *Out of Order*, Tate Gallery, London
Infinity x 2, Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris
The size of it, Sara Hildenin Museum, Tampere, Finland
- 2004** Marian Goodman Gallery, New York
Lead Astray, *New Shared Sculptures by Bill Woodrow & Richard Deacon*, New Art Centre Sculpture Park and Gallery, Wiltshire, England
Atelier Brancusi, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
- 2003-2** *Made in Cologne*, Museum Ludwig, Cologne
Galerie Stadtpark, Krems, Austria
- 2001** P.S.1/Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Long Island City, New York
Richard Deacon Sculpture, Dundee Contemporary Arts Dundee, Scotland
- 1999** *New World Order*, Tate Gallery Liverpool, Liverpool
- 1998** *Sculpture and Drawing*, Shiraishi Contemporary Art, The Bathhouse, Tokyo
- 1997** Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, New York
Richard Deacon: Show and Tell, Musée Départemental de Rochechouart, Haute-Vienne, France
- 1995** *Richard Deacon: Esculturas: 1984-1995*, Museo de Arte Moderna, Buenos Aires; Museo Nacional, Santiago; Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Caracas Sofia Imber, Caracas; Wilfredo Lam Arts Center, Havana
Atlas and This is Not a Story, Customs House, South Shields, England
- 1993** *Skulpturen 1987-1993*, Kunstverein, Hannover, Germany; Orangerie, Herrenhauser Garten, Hannover
- 1992** Marian Goodman Gallery, New York
Art for Other People, Musée d'Art Moderne, Villeneuve d'Ascq, France
The Interior is Always More Difficult, École Régionale d'Art de Dunkerque, Dunkerque, France
- 1991** *Skulpturen und Zeichnungen*, Museum Haus Lange and Haus Esters, Krefeld, Germany
- 1990** Marian Goodman Gallery, New York
Richard Deacon: Nye Arbeider/New Works, Kunstnerer Hus, Oslo, Norway
- 1989** *Richard Deacon: 10 Sculptures 1987/89*, ARC/Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris
New Sculpture, Plymouth Art Centre, Plymouth, England
Kunstmuseum, St. Gallen, Switzerland
- 1988** *3 Sculptures*, Ecoles des Beaux-Arts de Macon, Macon, France
Distance no Object, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York
- 1987** Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht; Kunstmuseum Luzern, Lucerne; Fundación Caja de Pensiones; Museum Van Hedendaagse Kunst, Antwerp

- 1986** Marian Goodman Gallery, New York
Sculpture for Exterior & Interior, Interim Art, London
Galerie Arlogos, Nantes
For Those Who Have Eyes. Richard Deacon Sculptures 1980-86, Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Aberystwyth, England; Glynn Vivian Gallery, Swansea, England; Turner House, National Museum of Wales; Mostyn Art Gallery, Llandudno, England; Warwick Art Centre, England; City Museum of Art Gallery, Stoke on Trent, England
- 1985** *Five Recent Sculptures*, Gallery of New Art, the Tate Gallery, London
- 1984** Riverside Studios, London
Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff, England
- 1981** Sheffield City Polytechnic Gallery, Sheffield, England

COMMISSIONS/PUBLIC PROJECTS

- 2000** *Just Us*, Ocean Plaza, Fuxingmennei Street, Beijing
- 1999** *How Much Does Your Mind Weigh?*, Millenium Dome, Greenwich, England
No Stone Unturned, Bemalter Stahl Platz, Liestal, Switzerland
- 1996** *Gates and Railings for Custom House Arts Centre*, South Shields, England
One Is Asleep, One Is Awake, Tokyo International Forum Building, Tokyo
Zeitweise, Mexicoplatz, Vienna, Austria
- 1993** *Between Fiction and Fact*, Musée d'Art Moderne, Villeneuve d'Ascq, France
- 1992** *Building From The Inside*, Voltaplatz, Krefeld, Germany
This Is Not A Story, Rathausplatz, Waiblingen, Germany
One Step, Two Step, Landspitz and Nieumarkt, Nordhorn, Germany
- 1991** *Nobody Here But Us*, Auckland, New Zealand
Let's Not Be Stupid, University of Warwick, Coventry, England
- 1990** *Between The Eyes*, Yonge Square International Plaza, Toronto, Ontario
Once Upon A Time . . ., Gateshead, England
Moor, Victoria Park, Plymouth, England



PREVIOUS MAD. SQ. ART EXHIBITIONS.

- 2000

Tony Oursler *The Influence Machine*
- 2001

Nawa Rawanchaikul *I ♥ Taxi*
Teresita Fernandez *Bamboo Cinema*
Tobias Rehberger *Tsutsumu*
- 2002

Dan Graham *Bisected Triangle, Interior Curve*
Mark Dion *Urban Wildlife Observation Unit*
Dalziel + Scullion *Voyager*
- 2003

Wim Delvoye *Gothic*
- 2004

Mark di Suvero *Aesope’s Fables, Double Tetrahedron, Beyond*
- 2005

Sol LeWitt *Circle with Towers, Curved Wall with Towers*
- 2005

Jene Highstein *Eleven Works*
- 2006

Ursula von Rydingsvard *Bowl with Fins, Czara z Babelkami, Damski Czepek*
- 2007

Bill Fontana *Panoramic Echoes*
Roxy Paine, *Defunct, Conjoined, Erratic*
William Wegman *Around the Park*
- 2008

Olia Lialina & Dragan Espenschied *Online Newspapers: New York Edition*


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MAD. SQ. PK. CONSERVANCY

The Madison Square Park Conservancy, dedicated to keeping Madison Square Park a bright, beautiful and active park, is a public/private partnership with New York City Parks & Recreation. The Conservancy raises the funds that support lush and brilliant horticulture, park maintenance and security. The Conservancy also offers a variety of cultural programs for park users of all ages, including Mad. Sq. Art.

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