

Richard Wentworth in conversation with Anna Dezeuze

Introduction by Anna Dezeuze

This talk by Richard Wentworth and his interview with myself were part of the series 'Communicating Vessels: Surrealism and Contemporary Art' and took place at the Manchester Museum on April 21, 2005.¹ The event coincided with the artist's exhibition at Tate Liverpool in January-April 2005. The following transcript has only been edited minimally in order to remain as close as possible to the artist's informal way of lecturing; this choice was made in the belief that Richard's style is as revealing as the content of his discourse - as I suggest in our conversation, the flow of anecdotes, associations and insights in his discussions often evoke the manner in which materials resonate with each other in his sculptural work.

Richard made no secret of his ambivalence towards surrealism, and this proved to be a particularly interesting aspect of the talk and conversation, as two surrealist themes - death and eroticism - end up coming up again and again in his discussion of objects. In terms of more specific connections, our discussion focused on a comparison between Richard's photographs and the *Involuntary Sculptures*, a collaborative work by Brassaï and Dalí published as a page of the surrealist journal *Minotaure* (nos. 3-4, 1933).

Richard showed and discussed a series of his own photographs before responding to questions from myself and the audience.

Talk by Richard Wentworth



Landscape: View from a high speed train, Seville – Cordoba, March 2004 © Richard Wentworth

Richard Wentworth: [*pointing to the slide*]

Can anyone tell me what this image is of?

Audience: [*silence*]

RW: Anyone want to place it? Are we agreed it is on this planet? Even that's interesting.

Audience: North of France?

RW: Warmer, getting warmer. If I tell you it's a five-week old photograph, you ought to be able to do something with seasons.

Audience: Spain?

RW: Spain, yes. Whereabouts in Spain?

Audience: Just north of the telegraph pole?

RW: A man with a sense of humour. Anyone want to put it on a 'up, down, a little top left, bottom right' scale?

Audience: Middlish? South of the middle?



RW: It is south of the middle. Anyway, I think it's a useful thing to do. I suspect, if you had a slide show in here 80 years ago, I think people would have been able to make a better job of it because I think they knew more about the seasons, they knew more about things being grown, and identifying things. I think that's an interesting thing that we are getting less and less knowledgeable. I was on a train going from Seville to Cordoba. The colour was very extraordinary, and it's serious agriculture, but it's on a fast train, and fast trains are highly protected space, and the atmosphere on Spanish trains post-Madrid bombings is really pretty disturbing. You get checked. I don't have a personal fear of being blown up but I'm extremely conscious of that politic and I think it's a very, very serious condition that we're all in.

Ok, so I'm interested in how things are made, how we name them, how we think we say we know what they are, and how we know what they're not. I think Surrealism has something to do with heat, I think Surrealism is to do with weird sex, men dressed as women, Catholicism, very, very hard politics, politics the like of which I don't think anyone in here could possibly have ever known, I mean *really* hard. I think it's very sharp, I think it's about blood, I think it's very, very charged, and I was never that. I'm a sort of '1960s poster kid' at best. I was born in 1947. Surrealists - the real guys - were still around (most of them hadn't actually died),

but they didn't come and visit me in my cradle.



Ailanthus © Richard Wentworth

This is a tree; I happen to know what it is, because it's a tree I'm rather interested in. It's called a 'Tree of Heaven,' *Ailanthus*. In New York it's known as the 'weed tree' and they say it will just grow in shit, and it does. In fact next time you are in New York you will see *Ailanthus* which looks a bit like an ash tree. It'll just come out of anything, and if there has been spilt engine oil or something completely disgusting around it will come out of it, it's fantastic. I think that's a really Surrealist thing: you just build your wall, you just cement this tree, it grows, and that, to me is just extraordinary. I wasn't even aware of coming to give this talk - I passed this, and I just thought: 'that is so odd, it is so hard...' And I remember not that long ago whenever we went to Spain, which we always drove to, when we went over the border there would always be a dog upside down with its legs in the air that was dead within half a mile of the border, and we would go: 'oh look! Spain.' Incredible. I suppose I do think Surrealism is Spanish, actually - I hadn't really thought of that. I think that's probably what I really think it is.





Road Sign © Richard Wentworth

I am intrigued how signs have that habit of coalescing. I suppose I have the kind of nervous system which is tuned to it. [Pointing] That is the phalange symbol, that's the fascist symbol of all the arrows being bound together, as if proclaiming: 'there are more of us than you.' And I'm sure there's somebody here who could give a really eloquent reading of its heraldry. Heraldry is very interesting, it's very connected to Surrealism where you mash different images, different emblems of different families together, and make new emblems. I thought this was an exceptionally lively crossing sign and it was right next to the tree and I thought how funny that that sign, where the tree is all held together in this concrete at the base, just happened to be next to it. Clearly these things knew nothing of each other - I'm the agent, I'm the person who can't stop myself from seeing the relationship. I never expected to say this to anybody, or show them next to each other.



Cordoba, 2004 © Richard Wentworth

That's how I think of Spain. I think that is brilliant. Does anyone know what that word, *carcoma*, means? [No answer from the audience]. It means woodworm. I expect there is a better word for it but it generally applies to creepy crawlies. I think that's as good as graffiti gets, really. It's just fantastic, and you seldom see graffiti with that speed and calligraphic authority and collective currency in Britain. We have our codes, we have our things that we want to say to each other, but that just stopped me dead. That was in Cordoba.

I'm very interested in the folkloric. I like the fact that we answer back, I like the way that it's a very argumentative culture, I like the way that we need class wherever we can find it. We just really need to dislike each other if we can manage it in some way or form.





Cemetery, Liverpool, 2004 © Richard Wentworth

So cutting to our own chilly spot. I went for a walk with a nice man, a man called Joseph Sharples who wrote the new Pevsner for Liverpool. It's a really beautifully written book. And he took us to the cemetery in Liverpool, and under the new legislation, if a gravestone fell on you in a graveyard, not only might you be dead - which is rather appropriate, it's a rather good image (you would have to be transported less distance) - but of course the council would be responsible. So they

now have toppling machines all over Britain: all graves are tested with the toppling machine and if there is x amount of wobble, the headstones are levelled. I'm not a conservationist, I'm not particularly interested in heritage (I'm aware that I have one and that we are in bits of it), but I think this is a serious cultural illness. It sets up a tension with me because it's in a place of the dead, which again I think of as being something to do with Surrealism.





Cemetery, Liverpool, 2005 © Richard Wentworth

This is some kind of Surrealism, isn't it? Imagine walking into this cemetery. I'm interested in rituals, I suppose, and I think I was always somebody who has been fleeing the smell of the Victorians, and I grew up in a slightly Victorian household. This imagery, all of this, is rather weird. No mason would have been able to have made that until the tools that made that existed, because that's really a *big* routing. But if you are interested in that language, go into cemeteries now, and they're getting really wild and they are getting very complex, in terms of what they stand for, because there were many, many cultures represented here. But you arrive to this.

[He shows slide of French War Memorial]

This is a French war memorial. I don't quite know what that means, but I have got masses of stuff on war memorials, and how we behave in the face of them. Maybe because, as somebody said to me

– and this seems to be a pretty strong Surrealist remark - somebody of my generation said to me on the telephone: 'oh, we were on the beaches, weren't we?' And I said: 'oh, were we?' It seemed a very odd thing to say. And she said: 'you *know* we were, you *know* we were,' and she meant that if you were born in 1947 what did we hear for 10, 15 years? What do we hear now? We hear 'we won the war, the beaches etc.' How strange that the period in which you are actually born into is the period *at least* 15 years before, that's the cultural space you occupy. So there are people in here who were born in the 1980s who'll know a hell of a lot about the '60s - they weren't there, but they know so much. Partly of course because you are never born into a perfect historical moment: there's the old car, or the things in the kitchen, or the books that have been acquired, or whatever it is...



[He shows slide of Shop Sign, Liverpool, 2005]

And I'm very intrigued by the way we nominate things and then maybe get very confused about what they were. I was walking along in Liverpool and I thought: 'I don't need to photograph this, but I will.' The motive for photographing a sign saying 'pipes' was immediately explicit because there was a girl of about 15 with her dad on this walk and she said 'why are you photographing that?' And I said: 'well, tell me what pipes are.' And she said: 'oh I expect...', and then she realised that there might be a trick in it, and she said 'is it, are they plumbers?' And I said 'no' and she didn't know what a pipe was. And a pipe is a central Surrealist object - presumably because it's so sexually charged and it smokes, and it's ridiculous, it's a bit like sticking a steam train (of course another strong Surrealist object) in your face. (I don't smoke.) Anyway, I thought it strange that the word 'pipes' continues - it's just there, it's a bit lame, it's probably not going to make it. When I was a child, probably the word 'pipes' was everywhere, but it's nearly gone.

[He shows slide of Stanley Dock Typography, 2005]

That typography just makes we want to weep. I just think 'how fantastic!' but that was probably not even that special. That's lead inlay, so that's incredibly sophisticated, that's a piece of letter-cutting - that's effectively a piece of carbon - and then it's been filled with lead, which

incidentally is the same as Mies [van der Rohe] used in the National Gallery in Berlin, which was the first time I had ever seen lead used in that way in stone. But I do like the fact that buildings used to be nominated in that way. There are lots in the north, where people were very busy telling you who they were. So it's on the top of the building, and it's in the masonry, and it obviously has a very elaborate history but it seems very strange because of course you see that in the early Oldenburg who is most certainly a Surrealist.

[He shows slide of equestrian statue, Cordoba]

This is in Cordoba, and I hoped there might be someone who knows something about this plinth. This is such an exceptional sculpture. Equestrian sculpture is quite strange to us because we can't really know what all that would have meant, but you slightly know it when you meet a police horse: then you have some pretty strong sense of things to do with power and elevation. I don't actually know what the head is made of, but it was a change of material, and I thought there was something very special about that because things made of bronze hardly ever argue with themselves (unless Picasso went there) - they tend to be rather busy being bronze.

Of course that guy was a warrior and this is pretty much what we have come to. I was taken in an off-road vehicle in 1990 in California by a coked-up collector and he drove off the road



somewhere in one of those deserts in southern California with me and my wife on board, showing off. He drove up a dry riverbed with boulders the size of the tables - it was absolutely horrifying, but it was funny as well. He then got out his mobile phone, which was enormous, and he started saying to his wife, 'Hey Lesley, we're off-roading, we're off-road!' It was just one of those moments that I didn't seek, I didn't really know what any of it meant, but I remember having a discussion with him and saying: 'do you know what all this stuff means in England?' (that's now 15 years ago.) And I was trying to explain to him about land rovers and landownership and what at the time were the kind of values associated with having a 'Discovery.' He didn't believe me, so I bought him copies of *The Field* and *Country Life* with these people standing beside these cars (which of course they had already started to bring into the city, where they would wear this green stuff). And I was trying to explain to him that this is very, very late Gainsborough, but he is in southern California, and there was no way he was ever going to get it. But ever since that moment, I've been interested in this topic.



Warrior © Richard Wentworth

This culture and the naming of these two-by-fours is really interesting because it's always about the American military and possibly the Japanese: 'Shogun,' 'Patrol,' 'Cherokee,' lots of stuff to do with outer space, lots of stuff to do with the militarization of space. I have always imagined that there is a department of branding somewhere where they are going through the military possibilities...

[He shows slide of Cotton Exchange, Liverpool]

I'd like to say a few more things to do with how things are made. This building was made in 1900, Joseph Sharples told me; this is what's left of the cotton exchange in Liverpool, and its architecture is directly governed by the need to see. That glazing was the maximum glazing that the technology at the time could give, because in order to buy and sell cotton you had to look at it, and that sent a real techno-shiver through me because in 1900 there was nothing better, there still is nothing better than light. How fantastic that you were building for daylight and not building for other forms of illumination! I remember as a student going to a lecture by George Steiner, and he said: 'whatever people will say about the century (the one that's past), the thing they should say is it's the first century that got rid of the night.' And actually when you are anywhere where there is night (which I think is absolutely wonderful), when you really experience night, it is quite amazing what we have lost. I'm not suggesting we haven't gained



some things as well. And I think there is a lot of night in Surrealism.

[He shows slide of television screen with reflection]

I'm very interested in what good receivers televisions are. A television which is off is a fabulous object. I've got this feeling that perhaps televisions are actually - perhaps this is slightly 'Dr Who' - pulling stuff in: they're not putting anything out at all. If you get the light right, the telly gets very busy conversing with the world. And there is nothing better than a dumped telly, a telly away from an electrical supply, in a country hedge or on a street, full of its context.

[He shows slide of dock wall, Liverpool]

Oscar Niemeyer borrowed this construction from American Indian construction and used it a lot, and you see this also in Gaudí, but you see it all over Liverpool (this is, I think, one of the dock walls in Liverpool again). A friend of mine

said - and I thought it was very nice for me - 'the thing about Richard is he says he's very interested in how the world's put together, but actually he's really interested in how we can take it apart.' And of course the thing about that wall is that that's actually made. I bet somebody here knows how to do that, but that's just brilliant, that's worth a lot of Henry Moores to me. And that's done quickly, it's not done artistically. There are some really quite important questions about what somebody who was doing that, whom we don't get to talk to, felt about it, and if you look at one of those walls, you can actually see conversations between people who are probably different people, you can see different speeds, almost like handwriting. That sort of stuff means a lot to me, and like anyone who's fiddled, I've done little bits of stuff like that, but there is no way I've sold my labour to do that. I think it's an incredibly honourable space, really.





Handcrafted Mousetraps © Richard Wentworth

Getting onto the railway in Seville, I have a very powerful sense as I have already said of the dead dog, the heat, that the land is hard, life is difficult. I've got a lot of friends who have worked in Spain professionally, a lot of Spanish stories, things that happened, that there is something about the sun coming down and it's hard, and it's completely unlike the sort of softness that most people here encounter. I have a very, very strong sense of people making things for themselves, so I'm really interested in agrarian activities. But Spain has had so much European money spent on it, it's now so busy being euro-chic that you don't really expect to see that kind of agrarian activity at all. But as I'm about to get on the fast train at Seville, there's a man (whom I regret not photographing, I hardly ever photograph people...*[pointing]* I think that's his leg), and he's selling these *tiny* little mousetraps. And they are made of little bits of old crappy wood and

little springs. I bought two full size mousetraps from him (*[pointing]* I bought that one for 2 euros), and this guy is about 70 and he has obviously made mousetraps all his life, and these are key rings. I wanted to hug him... I didn't know... what to say to this man? It was like a little lightning conductor back to things that were absolutely central to that peasant culture 30-40 years ago, but also, I bet, that's the same pattern that Goya would have known and it would probably go back beyond that. But I would just be a patronising prat if I had that conversation with this guy. Anyway, I speak adequate Spanish, so we had a bit of a conversation about all the different grades of metal that were required for the springy stuff, the softer stuff, the binding stuff, and all the little pieces of wood. But it's partly the emblematic thing that it represents that affected me. He's just making them, the days go by, that's like a conversation with



the world, people come by, occasionally somebody from Britain turns up and buys two mousetraps.

[He shows slide of Liverpool graveyard]

This is the last of the Liverpool graveyard that I'll be showing you today. I thought that was just a fantastic monument. You don't really get sculpture as good as that anymore. And it is slightly how I feel about high Victorian. I can't really do high Victorian, it's just too disturbing to me.

And then (just to finish): those chutes that were only invented about 25-30 years ago for slooshing building stuff out of buildings - they're chains of interlocking cones. Only in Spain would they invent something as beautiful as this. It's made with some old awning which ended up being abandoned, or maybe it's one of those big sacks...That's the kind of thing where you think that you can't go home and make one of those: that would be a seriously bad sculpture. It was partly its relationship to the car below that was so good.



Rubbish Chute, Cordoba © Richard Wentworth





Reserved Parking Space © Richard Wentworth

I don't know what one calls that, but if you think about it, the special knowledge in that is fascinating. Again, it can't be anything but pretentious to say it, but the fact that not only is it broken but it's tipped the right way, and it seems to be saying 'I just want to keep my parking place'. It's like somebody who just puts together a really decent sentence and you think: 'well, I actually liked hearing that.' Maybe that's a noun, a couple of adjectives and a broken conjunction.

I was going to say that when I worked for Henry Moore I kept thinking: 'gosh, these are bloody bad Surrealist things.' He used to give me little things that looked as if he had taken a potato and carved it while he was a bit bored. He was very good at it - I'm not putting him down - but you'd be handed this sort of thing like that, and he

would say: 'times six,' and you'd go off into the garden and measure it up and make one times six. One of mine's in the Tate actually, with all the mistakes. This is 1968 or 1969, that's very late for that kind of work. There is no way Henry Moore is a Surrealist, but actually if you go back, if you're interested in how influences flow, you can see a moment when Picasso and Henry Moore and others cross - you probably know the date, but I would say it was probably about 1927 - and that's probably where it starts out.



Interview

Anna Dezeuze: Do you always choose to show your own photographs rather than images of your own work when you give a talk?

RW: I don't really like photographs of my own work, so why would I show them? I've learned more by doing that than I would by showing things that I've done. Maybe that's very rude to the audience, but I had to work harder to achieve that.

AD: Do you mean you have to work harder when you're trying to comment on the images, or when you select them?

RW: The hardest is trying to explain to myself why I would choose each one. Those are very specific acts. Photography's a crap art, I think. Everyone is a photographer. It's just a method of achieving something. And you can learn things and not learn things from it, but I think it's inappropriate to say photography's terribly important, and modelling in clay is not. Different people have done different things at different times, and they have an effect on the culture. But I am curious to know... When I have a sheet of photographs, I'm quite surprised, and I also like the fact that they might belong to three different cultures, they might have been taken over a month. The next sheet was in Miami, but I thought that was too easy, because it was so surreal. The photographs looked so surreal, they just looked wacky. But in a way, the word 'surreal' is so damaged because it's in the language. (And that's

why we've had a rather contentious conversation for nearly a year, where I get led to the edge of the precipice, and then I rush back and say I won't go over.²) I do think it's quite a damaged territory, but Minimalism is also damaged, Minimalism's kitsch.

AD: I'm interested in the way you use these images to talk about things you're interested in (but always as a way of talking about your sculpture without showing your sculpture). There is no obvious connection between the photographs and the sculptures, but they share a discourse, a set of interests.

RW: I think what they probably share is ... I am being a bit deferential (it's just embarrassing to say because it sounds naff), but in front of something like that dock wall, I always feel very humble. Well, actually in front of any decent brick wall I feel humble - it's a bloody amazing piece of sculpture, you know, if you know what a brick wall's doing. And that's why it's taken thousands of years to invent, and the people who build brick walls are not hugely celebrated, but they make the culture. And that's part of my daily pleasure. But it may be some very feeble sort of nostalgia - I don't know how you'd say it - wishing I were an artisan. It was not my ambition, but I suppose there are lots of people here who probably wouldn't even know what an artisan was, because now it's just so invisible.

AD: The Surrealists are not very well known for the sculpture that they created,



but at one point they were interested in what a Surrealist automatic sculpture could look like. The idea of 'involuntary sculpture' was illustrated in a page of photographs by Brassai, published in *Minotaure*, which I think you quite like, don't you?

RW: Shall I have a go at describing it?

AD: Yes, why don't you try?

RW: What's funny is that I'm not even sure how I first found out about them, but there is this very strange thing, which is that somebody says something to you, and you pay not much attention to it, but then somehow it's repeated 5 years later, or twenty years later, and these things start to grow into a bit of a knot and after a while they belong to you and you think: 'well, I really care about that,' or 'I really know about that,' but actually, it's been received in all these little social increments. There's a funny group of people that I knew – some have died, and some are very old - who were very, very generous to me in various ways (I don't know whether they were aware of it). Maybe one of them perhaps once showed me an original copy of *Minotaure*. Maybe even it was put through their letterbox - imagine somebody receiving a real art magazine or however one would describe it in 1933! And there was a little - what we, embarrassingly I think, now call - 'project' (I think every time we are about to say I'm working on a project, if you could think of another noun you would be doing culture a favour. It's really difficult but it is becoming

an illness). They did this project, and Brassai, who is, I think, a really wonderful photographer ... (I have always wondered - in fact maybe you could tell us – why do all those photographers come from the middle of Europe? They're not French, they all are Hungarians and Czechs, and so they're from that strip up the middle, which is very powerful.) Anyway, Brassai was Hungarian but ended up in Paris, and he knew a hell of a lot about light - and of course that's all attached to understanding black and white photography and contrast and all those qualities - and these photographs [the *Involuntary Sculpture* set of images] are really of things that are in the world, that are made by us, that we don't quite see. So one of them is a photograph of the end of a croissant or the end of a brioche, which of course is flat at some point and then it's rolled and gets put in the kiln - in fact it's almost more like a photograph of a ceramic, because baking and ceramics are really the same thing. And then the one that I really adore is a kind of neurotic furling of a bus ticket, which has somehow been folded in half and it's broken and it's got two volutes – to use an architectural term - two fabulous twirls of paper on the end, and they are photographed so that they look big. In fact, I always thought it would be great if one could have taken Roland Barthes to *Toy Story*: when I was in *Toy Story*, I thought: 'oh, I know it would be fun to be next to him here.' And in a way I'd not thought of this, but those photographs by Brassai are very like *very* good animation. And of course *Snow White* comes out about the same time, where there are the beginnings



of popular reference to scale change - something small and modest which is transformed and made very, very big and visually assertive. Brassai's photographs are very, very moving and they're very ordinary.

(I discovered something domestic only yesterday: I'd never understood why all the zappers in our house were so fucked up - I actually find zappers rather difficult to use - and my wife said: 'oh, don't you realise Felix always puts them in his mouth?' I hope there is no friend of Felix's here because he would be so angry - he's my younger son, and he is old enough not to do that, and he still puts the bloody zapper in his mouth! You know, it's obviously psycho-sexual: you're watching television, and you have to put this thing in your mouth... And these remote controls are all damaged, they have got these little teeth marks in them, and I was looking at one this morning thinking: 'that's rather nice, actually.' It's like the area of the chewed pencil, of all those neuroses...)

AD: The other images include a piece of soap, some discarded toothpaste... And they take on this monumental dimension because they are photographed in close-up and in a very contrasting, dramatic lighting. I was thinking about this notion that, in a sense, the *Involuntary Sculpture* photographs are about giving up, in fact, the notion of making an automatic sculpture altogether: you can't create it yourself, you have to go out and find it, as a kind of residue. So I was interested in thinking about your photographs as involuntary sculptures, and I was

wondering: at what stage do they become sculptures?

RW: Well, I'm really embarrassed by my photographs... There has in fact been a long-running row with my gallery because at different times people have pushed me in the gallery because they always think they know that they can sell these photographs and I've proved them wrong because they're not really that popular; they certainly don't give me a living wage. I think that's quite important: things can become quite mythic and become quite known, and be in a collective currency, but be absolutely bloody worthless in the marketplace. I saw a beautiful Schwitters yesterday and I thought: 'what a fat lot of use that did to him, he died of TB in total isolation.'

AD: Well I'm not comparing your photographs to Brassai's photographs directly ...

RW: No, but the point I'm making is that it's to do with how things enter the culture and become known, and whether they really have the physical existence ... (I've already admitted to you that I tried to steal a Brassai photograph but Mrs Brassai, who is an extremely assiduous widow, whisked it back from me just as my little fingers were going out after it.) Do you think you should tell everybody what 'automatic' is (because a lot of people might not really know the ideas behind the 'automatic')? And then we can go back to my idea that, because gravity is such a



bastard, it's much more difficult to do the automatic in sculpture.

AD: It was automatic writing that was most important for the Surrealists at the beginning, and then they tried to find forms of involving this, in painting for example. The idea was to somehow channel the subconscious into the act of writing so that you didn't make the decisions of sentence construction, themes, narratives, syntax etc. in a rational way. So the difference between the conscious and the unconscious was the basic opposition. And the question arose: how do you make an automatic sculpture?

RW: Well, I would say there are some examples. There's a lot of automatism in Pollock, for example - his paintings are very nearly sculptures, because if you put enough gobby paint down, painting in effect becomes sculptural. There's something about viscosity and gravity which he understood very, very well - he's very good at it. That definitely goes directly to Richard Serra's 'thrown lead' pieces [*Splashing* (1968) for example]. Richard Serra is a small man of Italian parentage (perhaps Italian-Jewish, I don't know), very competitive, very tiring to be with (I'm not very good with those sorts of blokes). But of course that always comes with a really fantastic energy. You've probably all at some point seen a photograph of him doing these lead throws. [A 1969 photograph shows Richard Serra making his 1969 *Casting* at the Leo Castelli Warehouse]. Lead is good fun; most men have melted lead (women tend not to do it

- we can have a discussion about this). Most men, when they are between seven and thirteen - interestingly - melt lead and do things with it. It's very powerful, and it's very strong - I happen to have done it recently, so I re-thought how strong it is. You take something which is not quite like a piece of steel, but it's definitely a metal, and suddenly it becomes like cream, hot cream, and it's quite dangerous, it changes its condition and it is very exciting, as you appear to have power over it because you have to hold it to a flame. And if you're really going to work with it, you need to dress up: you have leather gloves and helmets and all that gear, so you become rather heroic in a sort of Japanese manner. And the documentary photographs are of Serra dressed in this way, with a cauldron with a regular supply of lead, and he's throwing it. So he's got his physicality (a direct reference, probably self-conscious, to Pollock), and there is this hot lead flying through the air and zapping into the joints of the floor and the wall. With the lead throw, you've got something which is changing, which has already changed its condition, which is on its way to changing it back because as it's going through the air it's stiffening and beginning to harden; you've got gravity; you've got the thing that we call the wall and the thing that we call the floor, which is completely different (and it's important that we know which is which because it's something to do with how we behave); and you get, effectively, a mould of the space, and space is expressed by his physical 'oomph.' That would be a



good automatic sculpture. I didn't think that until I said it!

AD: I don't know if I agree. I'm just trying to connect this to the images you were showing earlier, which, I personally *do* see as involuntary sculpture...

RW: Well, I see, they look like it, but I think my motives for taking a picture are so banal. Michael Craig-Martin and I taught together for quite a long time and I remember - it would have been about 1972 or 1973 - I said one of my pathetic little things like maybe 'that looks like a Rauschenberg,' which I'm really careful not to do now, and Michael said something like 'oh, you'll find the world often looks like art,' and I remember being so crushed. (I've never said that publicly, I'm not even sure I've said it privately.) So in culture that's the predicament (and I don't mean to say this badly). By definition, what's happened culturally is that we are really damaged now because we would barely know a Warhol if we saw one, because we have seen so many - you know, the latest GAP campaign is probably inspired by Pop Art. Art is in everything, so the days when all the complications of where art is, and who it belongs to, and where the bourgeoisie are, have gone. Now that everyone is bourgeois, and we've all got a mobile phone and the right shoes, it's really difficult... So I'm very nervous when I... When I take my photographs, I think I'm just trying to remind myself that the world is made, actually, I think that's what it comes down to. Maybe it did start with a rather babyish 'that looks like a Jasper

Johns,' but you have to do babyish stuff to grow up. I'm amazed at how iconic some of my photographs have become, but then everybody takes photographs like that. The other thing is I feel very strongly they don't belong to me, it's a linguistic space, if you like.

AD: So do you think of them as an expression - if you were using the idea of the 'unconscious' - of a kind of 'collective unconscious'?

RW: Yes, I think I would. A brain scientist friend of mine, Mark Lythgoe, said that the reason that people smile when they look at those pictures is because it's attached to the fact that you need to remember that stuff because that's how you survive. And he has a really - it's actually in the catalogue for the Tate show - nice thesis about what it is that each of us needs to remember, so if I one minute I yell 'Fire!' you will almost without hesitation - only the really dozy ones will fail to - remember you came through a door in that corner [*points*]. When you walked in here you were not thinking: 'now, if there was a fire what would I do?' Our lives would be impossible if we did, but it is interesting how much we are geared up - if we weren't, we might all rush to the window.

AD: Actually, I was quite annoyed by this conversation in the catalogue that you have with Mark Lythgoe because it seemed to reduce everything to a kind of Darwinist survival instinct. When I see your photographs I don't think 'this is going



to be useful for me when I want to patch up...'

RW: No, he was talking about the mechanism that... We would be nerds if we were doing that, we'd all be nerds. We'd be going round with our little pad going 'oh, remember wobbly table, put this under.' Although that, in a way, has always been for me a kind of pleasure - I've always thought 'isn't it funny how we know that stuff?' Going out of the building carrying two bags of rubbish and your suitcase in your teeth, you use your arse to do something with the door, and you notice that there's an old slipper that's fallen out of the rubbish and you jam it in... And the speed with which those spaces are articulated and with which we all know what to do, and the value systems that they contain, maybe they're not edited that well: you just did it, *that's what you felt*.

AD: Well, I just got a feeling that Lythgoe was taking the involuntary sculpture out of your work, the sculpture which is this totally useless thing that we look at, that takes up room, that has no function... I thought that by orienting the discussion towards function, and how we make do and how we cope with situations, he seemed to lose the ...

RW: Yes, I remember, even in the conversation, thinking that a little bit with him, I think that it's true. But there's another thing that might be worth saying, because obviously there are a lot of people here who look at images and make images. There's a man I'm very fond of

who wrote a lovely book that was very important to my generation, *Eye and Brain*, a man called Richard Gregory. We had to do a talk like this together in Bristol and he said: 'I take photographs too, they're really absolute rubbish. When I see your photographs, they are marvellous, marvellous, marvellous.' And then he said: 'but I had an idea the other day. What if we got some really nice oak frames and we went around the town and we placed these oak frames wherever you wanted them, would that be good enough?' And I said 'well, no.' It's to do with the strangeness of what all our perceptual conditions are. I was with somebody who lives in Switzerland yesterday in the tube and all I could see was how filthy it was, that's all I could see. She's not even Swiss, but because I was with somebody whom I knew had flown from Zurich that morning, I saw things differently. I think that's an incredibly interesting part of our cultural condition; we are all doing that, this sympathising, with each other, all the time. We are aware of our next-door neighbour, how they're taking to this conversation or not.

AD: What's really interesting in the relation between the photographs and the sculptures is that you didn't decide 'oh, this is such a beautiful, or intriguing object in the street, I'm going to take it and put it in the gallery' - some artists do that. I was wondering about how the processes you explore in your photographs are echoed in the space of your studio in terms of the way you bring objects together. How do



the objects in your studio end up in your studio?

RW – Well, I seem to be marooned in anecdote today - forgive me. A very tender thing happened on - I think it was - Saturday evening. My eldest son, who is 25, rang up and said: 'we've found some steps in the street and we think you'll really like them.' Probably there is nobody, not even my wife, who would know my 'nervous thing,' and he gave me a fabulous description on the phone of how it had paint drips on it and it was a little bit homemade, and it might have been cut down from some taller steps but he wasn't really sure, and he gave descriptions of the cords, and how it was slightly abject (he doesn't use words like abject, but that's what he was saying), and he was talking about gravity, clearly referring to the gravity of the paint that lands on the step as opposed to on the side pieces (the verticals and horizontals express things differently). And I have to say it was quite erotic, it was a quite juicy 'I bet you'd like this.' But at the same time, he was presenting it very, very nicely, which I think is something that lots of us do, by saying: 'and if you like it you can have it,' rather than saying 'I got it for you.' He's just moved into a new flat, so he was implying: 'if you don't want it, I'll mend it, and we need some steps.' So I was forced into a quite complicated social thing where I didn't particularly want to go over (I've lost my licence at the moment, so I was thinking 'I've got to walk round there and it's a bit of a pain'), but then I was thinking it was discourteous not to go and complete

the transaction, so I went round and his description was immaculate, it was really, really good, it was a really nice piece of what you get from people you have a close relationship with. But unfortunately I realised it was absolutely no good for me at all, and I thought a lot about it, and I think that's because I didn't find it. And I think that's actually pretty straightforward - this is difficult territory, but I think that's an erotic thing, somehow: you don't want people sent to you because somebody says 'this is your kind of sexual treat' (this happens in novels and films and so forth, it's never happened to me, or at least I'm not aware of it ever having happened to me). However, if I find myself in a condition of engagement with somebody, which has some expressed or unexpressed erotic content - that does happen to humans - that's a very specific electrical, or whatever you want to call it, line. And as I said 'no, I don't think I'll have the steps,' I felt as though I had given up something. It was quite an agonising thing, and I think that's the best reply to your question I can give.

But what was really important was that he understood that I don't look for things - I very, very seldom look for them. I don't want to go into that kind of catalogue-type condition. I spend time in Brick Lane market, a little bit, but it's less and less interesting because it's more and more self-conscious. I like to be near things that are falling - actually sometimes physically. I like to be near things at the end of their social life. There was a market I used to go to in Berlin that was absolutely extraordinary because



everything had fallen to this same point. The market used to open on a Saturday and a Sunday and it was absolutely straight commerce; they could see in your eyes that you collected glasses – ‘*zwei Mark!*’ - or whatever it was, and you did or didn’t buy it, whatever those games of purchase or barter are. But on the second day, at I think at about 4.30pm, people started shouting ‘*Billig, billig, eine Mark, eine Mark!*’ [‘Cheap, cheap, one mark!’], and everything became one mark, so the whole mood changed, and at 4.50pm they would say ‘*Alles frei!*’ - ‘everything is free’ - and the place would go absolutely barking. So people were scrabbling, taking home a torn lampshade, both the rich and the very poor, it was incredible. (I often suspect I should probably have been a filmmaker but I’ve done nothing about it, and I wish I had been able to film one of those moments, where you see everybody running around with these objects). I have one very old friend who has described what displaced persons’ camps were like at the end of the war, and she said that what is fascinating is that everybody was reduced to exactly the same level - you know, people are ill, they are disconnected from every aspect of their culture, they are very close to a kind of mental illness, but they’re not mentally ill, because they’re fucking going to survive... So they’re all in the camp together, and she said they absolutely exhibited their national stereotypes. She said the Portuguese did what the Portuguese did, the Serbians did that, and it was a really incredible description (of course, I’ve never been in such a situation). I don’t know why I’m

saying these things, but I suppose because my life’s quite privileged, all our lives are privileged, you can’t not speculate about that. But if you’re in a flea market, that plate lying in the gutter is symbolic, somehow; you know you can save that plate, you can take it home and put it on the wall and never eat off it, and so it’s the most important plate in the world, you can put back into it all that meaning, or you can stand on it and it’s on its way to a landfill. I find that moment ... It’s probably not an accident that I showed some photographs in a cemetery. I bet there is an analyst in the audience.

AD: It seems very obvious that the sexuality and the death drive that you identified with Surrealism are channelled through the erotic encounter with the object and the interest in objects that are about to die.

RW: Are you speaking for everybody or for me?

AD: It may apply to everyone (I don’t know), but I was thinking of your work specifically, because of your interests.

To go back to how the objects in your studio get together, you mentioned earlier the Surrealist image, which is often approximated to dream images, in the way it brings together disparate elements. Is that the kind of process that happens in the studio?

RW: I think the kind of process for me is much more like... It’s more American, and I think that’s because of my time. The

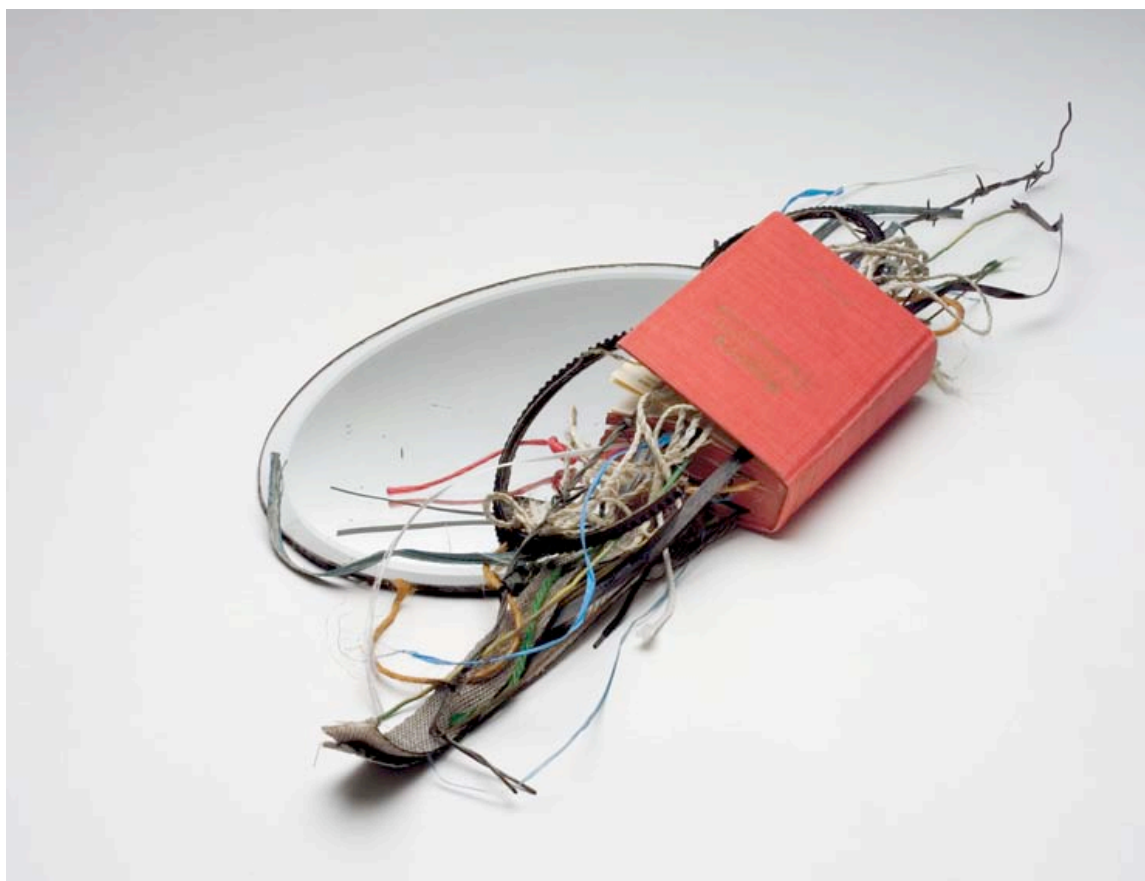


artists I really identify with, whom I obviously cannot be, are... Oldenburg once used this expression which I thought was absolutely brilliant, he called them the 'inventor artists.' (I gathered that it is a term, but I'd never heard it at the time.) Inventor artists are people like Calder, David Smith, H. C. Westerman, perhaps. Well, I'm probably about to show up how little I know, but the idea is that they are people who are resourceful, and their resourcefulness somehow goes into their work in a very particular way. Perhaps that's also specific to their time - pioneering in the States didn't really finish until the end of the '40s, a lot of American political advertising propaganda from the '30s and '40s is effectively Soviet advertising with different strap lines, Roosevelt-types going west, building dams and what have you, and you feel that very strongly in David Smith. And that is attached to something which is rather more domestic, and a bit meaner, because this takes place in smaller places: like your grandmother who never threw away bottle caps because they might be useful, and then, one day, she discovered that they fitted exactly on the bottom of her walking stick, and her walking stick would always have one of these on. I have to say that I think that's also a rather sexual thing. Discovering that things fit... I am a fiddler, and I like that thing of...I was taught for a brief period by a lovely man called David Pye who was a naval architect who became a furniture designer and ended up as a kind of super whittler really.

Something would be on a bench, he would say: 'four and seven sixteenths,' and then he would take out his callipers and he would be right. But that was because this guy had spent his entire life making judgements about size but also because he was quite intellectual. I don't want to know the size of things, and I seldom measure things, I measure with my feet or a piece of string, or I have measured houses I'm going to buy with a five pound note as my unit of size, and I've found a broomstick and done something which allows me to say: 'it's that sort of stuff.' It's like there are people it's fun to move furniture with because they're just spatially cool when they get to a turning. In contrast, my wife is half my height, and she has no idea about that kind of space at all. She's an extremely intelligent, able person, but it is a really unpleasant experience to move something with her. (I'm sure she's giving a lecture at the moment saying the same thing about me.) But I think those sorts of things are essentially special comprehensions. It's also like knowing when something is for you. It's probably attached to aspects of shopping.

AD: So in a sense the resonances and associations that you brought out in your talk operate in the same way as what occurs, as a kind of language, between the objects and the materials lying in your studio?





Width, 2004, book, looking glass, string, steel, rubber and plastics © Richard Wentworth

RW: I think so. It's now very accelerated. For instance, probably not more than ten days before the Tate show was meant to open, lots of work had got lost, and I thought: 'well, I'll make lots of new work suddenly, so I'll have a kind of safety net.' I was arriving on the train with bags full of bits of shit. And one of the things in the bag was all the string, all the long stuff that's in that red thesaurus with the mirror stuck in the back. I don't need very long to think about it, but I realised that what that was, was that in the English language (and you could do it as a party game) how many words are there for something that's long and thin? There's thread, and cord, and string, and line, and obviously this is to do with the fact that we live in a mongrel world, we speak in a mongrel language,

we like speaking in a mongrel language, we behave in a quite 'mongrelish' way. After this talk, some people will go for an Italian meal, some people will go for a Chinese, some people will go for an Indian, somebody will go for something that's Moroccan mixed with Thai, because that's what this culture has done for a long time, and now it's very accelerated. So I don't do any rationalisation any more, and I was just putting this string in this book and the book says 'thesaurus,' and I don't like hearing myself say this now because it sounds so laboured and it sounds illustrative, and that's not how the work is made. I have a friend who's a very celebrated '70s illustrator, he worked with Hypgnosis in a company called NTA, his name is George Hardy, and George is a



real fusspot illustrator and everything is rationalised to the ultimate degree. The drawings are like death because he can't just let it do it's own thing, because everything has these huge mythologies and complex double arrangements, and everything, even down to measurement, is controlled. But that's maybe what graphics does to peoples' mind. (George is so smart. He once said 'Coincidence which we know you like, Richard, is only half as interesting as you think, because you were there already.')

AD: Well, I think this rebellion against control suggests that there is some automatic sculpture going on somewhere in your work. But let's have some questions from the audience.

Audience: This is do to with what you said about the bricks and the guy with the mousetraps, and how you didn't want to patronise the guy who made the mousetraps, and how a bricklayer is never celebrated... Is art something that you would do that's not part of being a programmed, or a problem-solving, human being anymore (humans have always evolved because they solve problems)? Is art another problem to be solved, is it beyond a more practical thing? As you start thinking of art and trying to understand things through art, is it becoming less and less intrinsic to what a human being can be? Or further away from the animal, from what a human being is? Does it make it more separated from that kind of life?

RW: That's a really fab question. God, what a question! Well, I wish I knew... I read a lot about the history of processes, in the most undisciplined way. If I find a book on the history of the industrial revolution I nearly always buy it. I read a chapter in the middle of the night the other day about needle-making, it was just from heaven. Needles used to be made in one village, Long Crendon in Buckinghamshire. There was no explanation as to what was going on there. Then the industrial revolution gets going and it all gets very different very quickly. But the thing about humans is that we give meaning to things besides, so we don't know who invented the brick, we are never going to meet them, they're not celebrated - it was obviously like the wheel, invented in a lot of places more or less at the same time. It turns up, changes how we behave, and walls start appearing, walls start to have meanings, they are used in different ways, they express different kinds of power, so it's obviously very different to make a wall for somebody else as opposed to making one for yourself. All sorts of things to do with defence, lots of things that we find really difficult to imagine. I find it very difficult to imagine small walled towns where you go out into densely wooded landscapes in the Middle Ages, go out in the day and do things in the woods, and then flee back into the town at night and shut the door. We all experience certain kinds of violence, but not that open-landscape type of space, the stuff that's represented in usually not-very-good films, where there is smoke in the distance, they all get together with the



mayor and have a word about what that could be...

We're very bad at computing where religion comes into this, where things that are difficult to get hold of come into this, when in an Art History lecture somebody tells you that the hat in *The Arnolfinis* is like Prada to the power of a million. We're so bad at seeing that that hat or that cloth is a Mercedes Maybach or whatever it's called. So the fact is that's what humans do, they keep giving belief to things (we've talked about that already). I haven't read any anthropology, I really regret that I haven't because, although maybe it would damage me now, it would be really interesting to find out more about all our behaviours. I've done - we've all done - odd things which have broken some social code, and we've felt quite strong and weird about it as we've done it, and sometimes we might have done it belligerently, but sometimes we might have had to do it for some other reason. It's only when those things happen that you register how codified it all is. So I suppose what I meant about the bricklayer is that it's a class predicament. I do know some people who build brick walls but I just sound like an overeducated prat if I

start talking about 'your gorgeous walls.' You have to know somebody very well to start that, because for a start bricklaying is an all-weather activity, it's very, very tough - I'm not being romantic about it. But I think what is made is wonderful and is a kind of art, because it's got all that complexity in it.

AD: I think you could spend a long time trying to respond, that's such a complex question, so maybe we should move to another question.

Audience: At Tate Liverpool some of the work made me feel uncomfortably precarious, it gave me quite an emotional feeling, the feeling that something's not quite right, do you know what I mean?

RW: Yes [*laughs*]. Most of my life.

Audience: [*continues*] Is that what you do: just sort of move things about and say: 'That's it, that feeling's not quite right, therefore, it *is* right'?





Cumulus, 1991, wood, glass and ceramic © Richard Wentworth

RW: I think that's a really nice question. I like heights and I like the danger of heights. I'm not a climber or anything, but I've noticed over the years that I've done a lot of things up ladders and on tops of walls, and I'm not a clever-dick, steeplejack person but there is something very odd, which is sort of... 'Sexual' is a bit strong, but it is a very powerful thing, that thing. One of the primary things about being alive is trying to stand upright, which is why the act of falling over is really quite a catastrophe, and as you get older it becomes a *real* catastrophe, because bits fall off. I've had a sequence of major falls in foreign cities. One of them was because I had an erotic thought about my wife in Tirana on a staircase, and I fell the whole fucking staircase on my arse, and it was a

stone staircase and I can tell you I didn't have the thought at the end of the stairs (but I was still holding my camera which I was trying to keep off the floor). But the act of falling and losing the thing we have taught ourselves to do in evolution - to stand up - is catastrophic. I fell over last May in Rome in the traffic, and the traffic drove round me [*laughs*]. What I just said is because you've reminded me that these things are quite strong. I don't set out to illustrate anything, but the first time I put a piece of glass in the wall and made it stick out longer than seemed like it was a very good idea, the next morning I took the bracket out from underneath and I got a real buzz. And there are lots of things in our lives that are like that: it's like getting away with something. If you're a good



painter, that's getting away with some gesture or an overloaded brush, which is not my talent. There are lots of things that are somehow exhilarating, but maybe the exhilaration is precisely that I have that feeling, and it's very nice for me to hear you say that it has the possibility of projecting the inverse back to somebody I've never met before, but maybe it's because we're all going to die.

AD: That, we can't argue with. Another question?

Audience: Just a quick question: you were saying earlier that you don't seek objects, you find objects along the way. How do you react to the 'happy accident' within your work? Or does that not happen?

RW: Oh yeah, it happens. That's the first thing I would say to any student is: 'this is an art school, none of us know what we're doing, you are speculating. You were good at drawing at school or something, you've come to an art school, some of the people teaching at the art school were like that once, they don't know what they're doing, but we could have three years of good fun and see how much luck we could make.' And in fact, you discover that some people in art school make buckets of luck. It's not a creepy thing at all; they manage to set up enough risk and then they get payback from it, and it's a fantastic pleasure to watch. I think I've got so good at it I really must trust it. I'm not showing off, I'm just astonished at the level... I really love a good coincidence. Obviously, as you get

older you must get more coincidences, as you've got more stuff to work with, but some of the things that happen to me make me think: 'oh, come on!' But that for me is a little engine, I can't then go off and make a little model of the coincidence - that's not what happens - but it's good for the spirit.

Audience: Why is it, do you think, that Giovanni Anselmo has been such a big influence on your work?

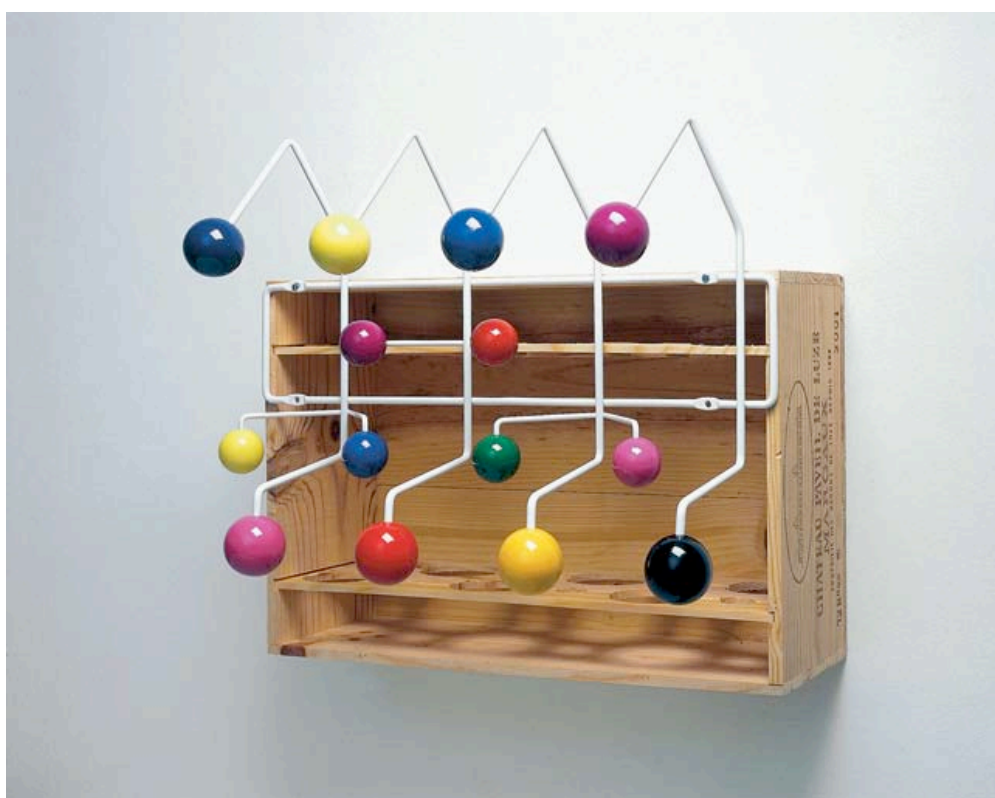
RW: Oooh. Well, it's so funny because when people ask me about influences... I read something - probably only this morning - which was that influences are good as long as you can absorb them, which I thought was a really nice description. Influence just means flow, the 'flu' in influence just means flow. Where it's not something that is stuck on you, but it becomes part of you, then that's good. I realise I've got no books about Joseph Beuys, no books about Arte Povera. And if I did have them, I'm not even sure I would look at them. There is a Matisse show in London at the moment which is plying a very specific little argument about his relationship to his childhood in this dreary North French town that made very high colour textile, and there's a proposal that it just stained him in some way, well at least that's how I read the argument. But that's true for everybody. Everybody grows up in a cultural moment, and there's a noise, you could say, in the background, and that never goes away, so you have to do something with it. So those Italians [the Arte Povera artists] are probably ten years



older than me. I sort of knew that the smell of Richard Hamilton and a certain kind of 'Poppishness' didn't have any air in it for me to breathe, not because I even knew what it meant to be second generation, it just didn't seem like I could grow anything in that, and I'm sure that it's as silly as that when you're a young artist, because you're just looking for somewhere where you can speculate: 'if I put something in here and water it, might it come up?' So

Anselmo isn't somebody... In fact I missed the show in Birmingham. It's a bad answer but it's an attempt to answer.

AD: Well on this very modest note – 'an attempt to answer' - I'm going to thank you very much for your willingness to give up your uneasiness with Surrealism momentarily for our pleasure, and I would like to thank our audience for coming to this talk. Thank you all very much.



Mode - module - modular, 2004, wood and steel coat hook © Richard Wentworth

¹ The talk and interview were transcribed by Kerry Cundiff.

² Wentworth is referring to the conversations with myself as I was trying to convince him to come up to Manchester to give a talk for the AHRC Research Centre for Studies of Surrealism and its Legacies (AD).

