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## INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD WENTWORTH

*Benjamin Eastham*

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RICHARD WENTWORTH IS AMONG THE MOST INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS ALIVE IN BRITAIN. HE EMERGED IN THE 1970S AS PART OF THE LOOSELY GROUPED NEW BRITISH SCULPTURE MOVEMENT, DEFINED BY THEIR COLLECTIVE REACTION AGAINST THE PREDOMINANTLY PO-FACED AUSTERITY OF MINIMALIST AND CONCEPTUAL ART.

Wentworth's sculpture takes as its subject the semantics of the everyday world, taking readymade and frequently incongruous objects and arranging them in a fashion that forces us to recognise the drama inherent in that which we too easily dismiss as routine. His photography captures the unusual or counter-intuitive behaviour of things, treating the (generally urban) landscape as consisting of readymade works that merit the same attention as more traditional art objects. The effect might be compared to having a film of dirt removed from one's eyes: it is often said by his students that, after talking to him, one begins to 'see the world as a Wentworth', meaning that one suddenly has a heightened awareness of the position of objects in one's environment, and a refreshed curiosity in how they came to be there and how we might interpret them.

Wentworth is an enormously charming companion, his conversation characterised by a deft sense of humour, the lightness with which he carries his evident intelligence, and a whirling, associative means of answering a question. Thoughts and ideas are energetically chased rather than followed, the whole exercise being more reminiscent of pursuing a fox possessed of bountiful and very advantageous local knowledge through a series of prickled bushes, many-specied undergrowths and unaccommodating tight-spots than the more stately process described by the traditional metaphor of travelling behind a train. The effect being, of course, that both the journey and the final destination are infinitely less predictable and more exciting. Between 1971 and 1987 Wentworth taught at Goldsmiths'

College, London, and has been described, along with Michael Craig-Martin, as a 'godfather' to the Young British Artists (YBAs) that emerged from under his tutelage in the late 1980s. In 2002 he was made Master of the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art at Oxford University, and also tutors at the Royal College of Art, London. With his determination to rework and glorify the everyday, his evident distaste for the notion of the artist as hero or redeemer, and his sincere belief that what surrounds us is as fascinating as that which we feel obliged to gawp at in a gallery, he influenced a whole generation, and continues to influence a new one.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — You've said of your son that he's 'smart like an artist is smart'. What makes an artist smart?

ARICHARD WENTWORTH — I said that of my son because he went to Oxford but he found that he wasn't suited to the course. He found himself on a high maths course. He'd thought it was an engineering course. And he's very very smart but he's smart like artists are smart. He's not an artist but he has that kind of observational intelligence possessed of artists which is a nice thing, but it's not an academic intelligence, or often isn't.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — How is this observational intelligence distinct from academic intelligence? Is it related to thinking in images?

ARICHARD WENTWORTH — It might be, I don't know. It might be that some people are travelling in images in some immensely elaborate way, in the sense that all images are translated. But I still have no idea what an image is, I think it's amazing, and I've even less idea of what makes an image successful. For instance, I just spent an afternoon looking at 6,000 images of artworks for an open exhibition and I don't suppose more than five did *that*. It doesn't mean it was all bad work but there's something very odd about the way that some can just trigger an alert. I'm very interested in whether people think through text, or how they use text. I'm not a good reader, for instance. I seldom read a whole book. I read parts of lots of books. That's obviously some procedural fault in me, something to do with impatience or wanting to pick things out of the cake. I now realise that's something I was living with when I was a child. But I don't come from an intellectually engaged family.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — What's the process of translating images? Who does the translation? Is it a cultural thing?

ARICHARD WENTWORTH — Well it has to be a cultural thing. Saying that, when I meet people I know almost at once whether there is a mutual kind of engagement, whether we interpret things the same way. And it would upset me to think that this is merely a tribal thing, dependent on having a shared education or cultural space. It's necessarily about being restricted to the same cultural confines — but when you meet those people you don't have to do much translation. There are two or three people with whom I exchange photographs on an arbitrary basis — I send them something, they send me something and we don't need to say anything

else, we don't write anything to accompany the photo. That's something of what an image is — it has to have a component which is unaccountable, which sweeps over you. That seems to be beyond translation.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — So the image should actively resist translation?

ARICHARD WENTWORTH — Well it's an art school cliché that bad work is illustrative. What makes things incredibly difficult is the shocking fact that we're all literate. It's very difficult to find anyone who is in a technical sense illiterate. So we're always translating things. It's very difficult to imagine, psychologically, what it would be like to not translate everything. If there was a sign over there that said 't-o-i-l-e-t' I would have registered its meaning without really looking at the letters. Something about the transferrable and legible is very hard to delve into.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Do you think that our collective literacy, and the amount of time we spend with words, means that we're inclined to reduce images to words? We unconsciously ascribe meaning to things without actually looking at them?

ARICHARD WENTWORTH — Well I think that's what reading is. I suppose when you're really alert to this is when you're with an under-five. When I was at school, I remember being hit for not forming letters properly — I remember having a 'd' and 'b' crisis, not being able to remember which was which. My son was very dyslexic, and for a long period he would point at the sign above the Jobcentre and say 'That's my name.' And we'd say 'No! You're called Joe!' And of course all the fundamental energy of recognition was at work, however that's organised. And if you think about it, the difference between those two words, in terms of the image, is tiny — two small semicircles.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — But now we can't stop ourselves 'reading' everything?

ARICHARD WENTWORTH — I become more and more interested in organisational imagery, which is a kind of text. Everything can be read. Floorboards can be 'read'. The fact that you're sitting comfortably in this room suggests that you've 'read' from the surroundings that the ceiling is unlikely to cave in. A lot of these things you can test by reversing them, by finding those times when you read things wrong. You can become alert to misperception. You have to work hard at it though because the whole point of misperception is that you correct it. So, just as you start to trip or misjudge the height of a step, you correct yourself. What I've enjoyed doing is trying to collect up those moments, those milliseconds.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Is it then about counteracting

ARICHARD WENTWORTH — You try and interfere

the automatism of the way we perceive the world?

with your own robotic actions, I suppose. One of the things that's interesting when you send a child out to get something in an urban situation, when you ask a child to engage in first basic life tasks, is that a child is in fact so animalesque that it won't actually walk in front of a lorry to see what happens, even though it may never have encountered one before. That's a huge part of how we are, that instinct, but it's set against another force, which is curiosity. So I watched that same son put his fingers into a power socket to see what happened while I watched from a ladder. And I couldn't find the language to tell him to stop quickly enough. He got his first electric shock aged nineteen months or whatever. But he's that sort of guy. How we know what to be curious about and what not to be curious about fascinates me. There are many things we are curious about that we shouldn't be...

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Fire?

A RICHARD WENTWORTH — Well I've actually had little arguments with Marina Warner after saying that men are more interested in fire than women. She's offered to come and do something at the RCA on the subject of risk. Curiosity is related to risk. Risk is important. I think that testing to the point of breaking is important. I'm from the generation that could be said now to have taken lots of sexual risks. And you're from the generation that has internalised all these lists of reasons to maybe not, like health and safety assessments. So there's a generational difference in attitudes to risk. But risk occupies a speculative space. Artists are on the whole like that.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — It's interesting to hear you talk about the speculative because your work is very precise in its assembly of objects, it's very meticulous. Yet there remains that sense of precariousness, of the possibility, even likelihood, of failure. Is that part of this boundary space, this arena of speculation and risk?

A RICHARD WENTWORTH — Failure is the right word, yes, or the possibility of it. I need to learn more about the quattrocento word 'disegno', which doesn't translate as 'design' but is obviously related. Instead it covers the whole realm of organisational intelligence that humans have. For instance, out of a kind of unsureness about what to do I'm eating from a tray. You were given a saucer and I wasn't. And I remember thinking: 'Do I mind?' And you know a saucer is a classic art object — it's a base, it's an arena, it's a performance space. It's the basis of Cezanne and Picasso. Incredibly well built-up organisational protocols exist to control these variables. And I think that when I put something into the world I'm negotiating with those protocols, but not in a 'design' way. But people mistake that, there's a critical group who think that it's much more deliberate.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Is that about the agency or authority of the artist? Because the more traditional understanding of the artist's role is that he or she determines composition, that the artist plays God and is by nature infallible. But you seem to be giving greater independence to the objects. This suggests you can be wrong.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Can you expand on this idea of fearfulness? Is it an anxiety?

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — So we have to invent frameworks of meaning and impose them on the world?

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — This idea of recognising one's spatial environment without necessarily registering it consciously is a biological thing, no?

ARICHARD WENTWORTH — Well it's not animism, but it is to do with giving some of that agency back. I read somewhere recently, I can't remember where, that there is a branch of physics, a space between science and philosophy, in which people are arguing that, for example, these packets of sugar are in a physical sense having a 'conversation'. It's absolutely typical that I don't have a hold of that. I remember reading it and thinking 'that's very close to what I think.' I derived a sense of companionship from it, a reassurance that I'm not an idiot. But what I do is not theorised. It's not coming out of a set of highly codified elements which I've worked out how to lock together. And that fear — that fearfulness, a nice biblical thing — is actually what enables me to function as an artist. It also prevents me really from being any good as a studio artist. I find that production process like a petite mort.

ARICHARD WENTWORTH — The absolutely fundamental anxiety is the classic artist's anxiety: 'Am I any good?' But it's typical of an artist to say that in an interview. It's presumptuous to say that anxiety is the artist's prerogative. I think it's fucking tough to be a human. Mostly we don't know what the point of our existence is and spend the majority of our cheesy little lives trying to invent some internalised meaning beyond survivalism, beyond avoiding the truck when we cross the road.

ARICHARD WENTWORTH — Well I think it's about how you scope the world. I'm quite interested in the image of a handrail. You don't need it but it's good to have it there for when you trip. Part of civilised intelligence is to have noticed that it existed before you trip, not to be looking around for it mid-fall. I'm coming to the age now where I see people ten years older than me using the handrail and I find it horrifying. There's a crossing over there between the metaphorical and the simple biological fact of our spatial intelligence.

ARICHARD WENTWORTH — Yes, well it happened to me at the bus stop actually. I was fiddling with my phone and I took a step back and found, to my horror, that the bus stop against which I wanted to lean wasn't where it was when I had arrived. Someone had come into that space between me and the back of the

bus stop, because it was raining, and I trod on their toe. A minor social thing ensued. What engaged me about the incident was that I hadn't figured that change. It's interesting that I'd moved into the bus stop and recorded the distance between myself and the back of the bus stop, and later relied on that stored information without considering it. That knowledge of where things are in relation to you is a spatial intelligence. In a way that's very like vocabulary. It's like the moment of risking a new word when you're young. That age between 15 and 20 is so self-conscious — you can be determined to shoehorn the word 'ambivalent' into a sentence because you've recently learned it, and often you make a fool of yourself doing it. If you're lucky you're around other people doing it too, because that creates a cultural space in which that kind of behaviour is acceptable. There's a collective pleasure in trying stuff, with the ultimate aim of learning to inhabit the world. Words are tools to that end. Conversation is a miraculous thing. It's extraordinary that we can meet and talk.

<sup>Q</sup>THE WHITE REVIEW — It's interesting that you conceive of language in spatial terms: you talk about language as an 'awareness' of things, an environment almost. And there are gaps and spaces in it.

<sup>A</sup>RICHARD WENTWORTH — In every form there's a sense of inadequacy. It's why I talk so much, because I have a profound sense that it's all wrong. It's nearly neurotic, a kind of overcompensation. Dorothy Cross has said that the two of us 'suffer from gregariousness'. Which is needy in some way, there's no other reason I'd spend time working with young artists. Fuck knows why I need that but I do. It's rewarding, for me at least. It's a very privileged position, to be part of the work of a new generation. I can't start wearing leather jackets again but you know it's nice to be there. There's something there to do with imprecision. You know I spend quite a lot of time in etymological dictionaries. I did Greek and Latin, but I was such an unhappy schoolboy I fucked up my Greek, hopelessly, and I really regret it because I think it's a great privilege to have those languages. It's like having extra keys. And a lot of this is tied up with being English, or speaking English at least. It makes you spectacularly hybrid. Every time you form a sentence you're dashing around Europe. It is phenomenally juicy, it's like a toolkit. I don't believe anyone ever told me that though. I've spent time around people whose work is words and I've always felt like the idiot. I don't think I'm without intelligence, but I think I'm somehow criminally smart.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Criminal? In the sense of stealing ideas?

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — So you come across things by accident? And then take possession of them?

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — There seems to be a conscious effort in your work to remind us of the processes by which we think, to reinvestigate the everyday. When we see a stop sign we stop, we don't consider the word and then stop. But in your work, your photography particularly, I see an impulse to reconsider these things?

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — This seems to bind in with your approach to etymology — a means of reminding ourselves that words have a narrative rather than a fixed meaning. So meaning is contingent?

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Do you think of constructed ideas or objects as knots? You know, people always talk of your work as a putting together of incongruous objects, but it's always seemed to me to have more to do with pulling things apart. You're presented with something and you want to break it down?

ARICHARD WENTWORTH — There is something of that. I am quite light-fingered I suppose. I'm very acquisitive, but I'm not a shopper.

ARICHARD WENTWORTH — I need to believe it's by accident, although what accident is, or whether there really is such a thing, I couldn't say. I am nosy though.

ARICHARD WENTWORTH — Well yes. Look at this handrail. This handrail could be considered a weapon, but because of the context we don't consider it as such.

ARICHARD WENTWORTH — Contingency is exactly the right word. I like the contingent. I hadn't thought of it before but the etymology of contingent includes the word 'touch', the Latin 'contingere'. It's something to do with that idea of contact, that friction, that I really love. Years and years ago I remember getting my first copy of Partridge's origins — I think I have five copies now, I have one wherever I spend time — and I remember finding out that 'cornea' and 'corner' and 'horn' share a root. That's just amazing. I'm interested too in monograms, though not very knowledgeable. You don't see them very often now but I think they're rather extraordinary. At the end of the nineteenth century they were popular — you can see one in King's Cross — KXL for King's Cross Laundry. It's arts and crafts. It's very beautiful. All the crafts available at the time are employed in the manufacture of this monogram — there are a series of forged monograms in the metal fence, one built into the stonework. There are these different languages. This was a high point of that language. That's very much like what a good etymology is like. It's like a rebus. Like a knot.

ARICHARD WENTWORTH — Well I'm interested in the way things are constructed. I'm from the end of that period in which people were good with their hands. If you were nicely brought up it was considered slightly odd to be interested in these things. In fact, I'm only really one notch away from the 'gentleman carpenter', the slightly nutty old guy who lives in a stately home and makes things. That culture was the prevailing

culture at school in the 1950s though. Everyone studied carpentry. My best friend really understood cabinet-making, without being a beard-stroker. You know, I continue to associate that friendship with a specific place. I have very direct psycho-spatial associations, and the area in which he died, too, will always be bound up with memories of him. We shared a studio down in Dalston Grove in 1969. I used to live there. I watched Heygate and Aylesbury housing estates being built, and applauded. I believed that was the future. And it's very odd now to be old enough to see and to comprehend social failures. You realise that all architecture is made in a space that is barely thirty years long. You can't fold that awareness of how things work forward. It's part of the job of being in the world to have a go though. Architecture is built in that space, to be able to handle only the immediate future. But it's almost instantly in a state of fallibility. You're dealing with contingencies and fallibilities. You know I look at this handrail and, even though it is horribly constructed, there is something laudable, something moral about the motives underlying its construction.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Moral?

A<sup>R</sup>RICHARD WENTWORTH — Well there's an attempt to put value into it. These joints aren't glued. They're actually excessively well welded together. There are however moments of apology where they change the language. There's a mixture of lightness and heaviness, and different types of fixing points, and it's like they forgot that they were constructing something coherent. And all that was apparent to my eye within a millisecond, and that's because I make things. I don't mind art being ugly, but it has to be wilful ugliness.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Do you think that value is inherent to the energy and thought invested in constructing something?

A<sup>R</sup>RICHARD WENTWORTH — It's to a degree about the legibility of something. I think the circle and the square are both jokes. You never see a square. You see them in art but rarely elsewhere. It's like the word of God. The circle is not far off. When you see a circle you never see it as a circle, you see it as an ellipse, because it's in space. I made Idiot Circle – constructed out of coat-hangers – and there were two responses; people who were horrified that you could see that it was made semi-competently, and another group who loved the work's fallibility.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — You give your works titles, which seems then to encourage a textual interpretation of things. But you seem to be saying that the language of your work is expressly non-verbal, non-textual?

A<sup>R</sup>RICHARD WENTWORTH — I think I shouldn't give things titles. I sometimes cringe at it. But it's like naming the cat. There is something about the act of nomination — sometimes I really love it, like launching a ship. I remember the strangely over-celebrated little dictionary with all the sweet papers in it Tract (From Boost to Wham), 1993]. I remember almost making that with my children. I remember explaining to them on long car journeys that the name of the particular confectionery couldn't have any sense of rhyming nomination. I wasn't interested in Aero. But the proposal in something like Boost or whatever was appropriate. It was a process that took place over a year or so, which began with me finding a book with a Kit Kat wrapper used as a bookmark. And I thought that it set up a really interesting space between the oral and the aural, and the word. But it was initially just idle speculation. I think a lot of my work starts from idleness.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — That relates back to this idea of allowing for contingency, for the outside world to interfere in the process of making art?

A<sup>R</sup>RICHARD WENTWORTH — Well yes but it also makes me feel guilty. I feel like I'm not a productive artist. I've known Anish Kapoor and Anthony Gormley since we were students and, while I don't want to be like them, I often think I ought to be more visibly productive. I had lunch a couple of months ago with Hussein Chalayan recently, who I don't really know, but he grabbed my arm at one point and said 'This man is a Mediterranean trapped inside an Englishman's skin!' and I thought 'I want to sleep with you!' It was so nice. I don't know what I'd said but I'd said something about the discomfort of being a northern European, this determination to rationalise everything. It's like not feeling you're breathing deeply enough. It's why English Modernism is so sad, because they want to get to meaning. I was told recently that my students say of me that 'things happen to him and then other things happen to him'. And they're right.

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