





Strange Relationships

A Conversation with

Richard Wentworth

A Room Full of Lovers, 2013. Steel welded chain, dimensions variable.

BY INA COLE

Richard Wentworth's way of seeing requires a spatial intelligence that perceives the world as a system of interlocking signs. He habitually walks the streets of London observing minutiae often missed by the untrained eye, and these observations then provide the nucleus for new ideas. In his work, inanimate objects are energized by their placement alongside other objects that just happen to reside in the same environment. It is a game of chance that conjures seemingly implausible juxtapositions, resulting in a perplexing riddle for the viewer to unpick. His projects range from all-encompassing installations—such as *False Ceiling* and *Black Maria*—to smaller sculptures that transform utilitarian objects into aberrant arrangements. Wentworth has held many eminent positions—including Master of Drawing, Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art at Oxford University, and Head of the Royal College of Art's Sculpture Department. He played a vital role in influencing the YBAs (Young British Artists)—including Damien Hirst, Fiona Rae, and Sarah Lucas—who themselves went on to revolutionize the British art world.

Ina Cole: *You spend much time wandering the city, observing how objects migrate to the most unlikely locations. This way of seeing, which is reflected in your sculptures and in your photographs, is explored in a new Koenig publication, Making Do and Getting By. London provides you with a never-ending supply of opportunities—you must have witnessed great changes over the years.*

Richard Wentworth: London wasn't a very fluid place when I was at the Royal College of Art in the 1960s, with few similarities to the London where I live now. It was populations, for the greater part, living where they'd lived for a long while—if they hadn't been bombed during the war or moved out through slum clearance. London was a dirty, modest, and quite conventional city, with a kind of parsimony right across the classes—powerful codes as to how things should be done. What characterized that period for me was how much disposable time and how little disposable income everyone had. Yet the delusions we now live by were then being invented—the idea that one could have everything or be in touch instantly. Also, it was a period when many of the world's

mysteries were revealed. You could see the city being made and unmade. You knew some of the people responsible for that, and so felt close to the fabric of it all. Now, you have to be much more inquisitive if you want to get behind the surface. I'm at a point where a lot of things I watched being built are now being demolished.

IC: *Black Maria was devised for King's Cross in collaboration with Gruppe, a Swiss architectural practice. You named the work after Thomas Edison's film studio, and it took the form of a timber atrium designed as a place of interaction and debate for London's communities. Do you think of your practice as altruistic?*

Black Maria, 2013. View of installation at King's Cross, London.



JOHN STURROCK, © RICHARD WENTWORTH

RW: I like the strangeness of relationships and enjoy meeting new energies that match mine. I see it as two-way traffic. When I was approached to do this project, I wanted to work with people I admired and trusted but didn't know very well. Working with Gruppe meant that I was creating something I didn't really own. Anonymity can be a great companion. *Black Maria* was an incredibly noble piece of work made in difficult circumstances. It was terribly cold, and I didn't know how to accommodate all the people on site. I was like a conjuror or agent, but altruistic? There are a few words that sit together—altruism, sermonize, missionary, evangelical—yet what else are artists doing when they make something and let it out into public space? It's loaded or charmed, and maybe that's the test of whether something is good or bad.

I don't like the conventionalized language used for these projects. There's something alarming about words like "participatory" or "relational aesthetics"—it's as if someone's dropped a damp blanket. I don't quite know what *Black Maria* was, so the language used was weak—"intervention" or the dreaded "respond to the space." We're a bit low on critical energy: visual arts activity has gotten so industrialized that everything has been named and tidied into boxes. Yet some artists travel confidently—they're handed their coats and they wear them. Various coats have been put on me, and I've politely taken them off. I'm never quite sure exactly what it is I do, but I've the confidence to believe it has content and meaning and somehow penetrates the world.

IC: *Until 1987 you taught at Goldsmiths College, where you exerted a powerful force over the YBAs, in an extraordinary period in British art. Looking back, what do you think lay at the core of its success?*

RW: The entire story is extremely circumstantial, and one should pay attention to the circumstances. The YBAs were students in an

isolated building rented by Goldsmiths in the middle of Camberwell. We all saw each other regularly and ate together: some of these things are so simple. We were a group of people who felt we could do what we liked in a city that wasn't regulated and offered plenty of space. It was a time of energy: the atmosphere generated by Charles Saatchi was that of the illiterate intellectual—smart and observant, but not highly educated. Now, technology allows the world to be regulated. I don't think it's sinister, but it's a big shift, which, like many things, can be made sinister. So if you're asking, "Why did those people who left Goldsmiths obtain the confidence they did?" I'd say, "Partly because they saw you could react." The city is around you, stuff happens, and you give it due accord.

I once met Henry Kissinger in Berlin, and he said to me, "Nobody had the luck of the English." Historically that luck relates to the actions of people we'd now call brigands, people who took enormous risks. The impetus to behave like that—which is partly informed by other empires—runs deeply in our culture. There's a brigandage in British culture that is practiced in all sorts of ways. I mean it as a metaphor, when people seize an opportunity and create energy. With the YBAs, a lot of that energy was about the outer ring of a city coming in and getting excited about the bright lights: there was a sense that the streets were paved with gold. But any serious city is an attractant, and what happens because of the form of its attractiveness is quite mysterious.

IC: *That notion of the brigand performing a reconnaissance of the city suits your practice, which involves a complex process of lateral thinking. The fact that you're not beholden to techniques or principles offers a certain freedom. However, you grew up at a time when people were still good at carpentry, for instance. Does your work only appear unforced because you have an intrinsic understanding of how objects are actually made?*

Black Maria, 2013. View of installation at King's Cross, London.



JOHN STURROCK, © RICHARD WENTWORTH

RW: I'm always aware that my point of view is an accident. If you were sitting here and I was sitting where you are now, I'd see the world differently. But because I'm sitting here, I'm obsessed with how those sash windows form two proscenium spaces, framing completely different stories. Neither story could possibly know that the other exists. It's an old dynamic used in filmmaking and genre painting. The two lamps outside never knew I was going to cite them in an interview, and they didn't know they were going to be in conversation with a rainwater hopper. I'm familiar with all the materials involved, and I wouldn't be surprised to touch them. I know the temperature of the downpipe; the surface quality of the white rendered wall; the ugliness of the coping stone; and the reason for the expended metal, which is keeping leaves out of the downpipe. I can see there's a little crack running up above the hopper, so something isn't quite stable. Many conversations are going on independently of each other because that's what a city is. And I think that awareness does come from having made a lot of things.

IC: *You take photographs as a mode of documentation, and your images often depict arrangements like the one you've just described. Do you use photography in the way that someone else might keep a daily diary?*

RW: My images act as a private place of recognition, like a little child's jewel box—a place of privacy containing something quite odd. But I'm not going out to observe, I'm just going about my business. I operate at quite a fluid level in the city and encounter the leftovers of other people's actions or conversations. It's like eavesdropping or overhearing, which, depending on your point of view, can be seen as sinister or alert.

IC: *Franz Kafka famously said, "Photography concentrates one's eye on the superficial. For that reason, it obscures the hidden life which glimmers through the outlines of things like a play of light and shade. One can't catch that even with the sharpest lens." I mention this because Kafka walked the streets of Prague observing the populace. It's interesting that he thought of the photograph not as representing but as falsifying the actuality.*

RW: But I think I'm proving him wrong. The funny thing is I'm not a photographer. It's such a complicated subject: What are images? Why do we see images? How do we nominate something to become an image or not? I'd really like to befriend a brain scientist or psychologist, someone with scientific or clinical experience of what it is we do when we look. Think how many images I've seen today and how brilliant I am at editing them. People often say they're bombarded by images, but images are passive. How we see and what we remember is mysterious. It's extremely luxurious to be educated enough or use one's time in such a way.



Above: *City*, 1993. Sprung steel, 110 x 152 x 38 cm. Below: *Mode—module—modular*, 2004. Wood and steel coat hook, 47.5 x 50 x 35 cm.



It's quite selfish: the act of taking images is a form of possession. In *Making Do and Getting By*, so many of the objects seemed to lie in wait for me—like an ambush. It's a poke in the eye—an epiphany that has to do with how things are energized. There's something most odd about being affected by intentions that are often anonymous. I can walk around a corner and see a building declaring, "give me some attention," but I may have no idea of the architect's name. Maybe the building's so old it didn't have an architect; maybe it was just made by builders. What exactly is that transaction for the human passerby?

IC: *On a subliminal level, maybe you're momentarily in tune with the building's history: it's as if the past is calling out, like an echo.*

RW: That could be on the list of possibilities, but the reason it happens is because that's what humans do. We're so eager for meaning and afraid of so many things about ourselves; quietly afraid, for instance, of how easy it would be to harm another person. Every time I pick up a hammer I think, "Be careful." We exist inside a social code that has moved around forever. As you get older, you realize you might even be responsible for generating a code that's being interpreted by people who wouldn't necessarily know why it ever came about.

I don't postulate about my work. I love it when I meet someone who says, "Oh, did you make that? I was 15 when I first saw it." For an artist, that's exciting, and I like the anonymity. I'm a profferer of experiences, but there's no accounting for what the consequences of those experiences might be. People are made alert by something and maybe that is art. How else do a few words thrown together with the name "Kafka" underneath become so full of meaning?

IC: *You made False Ceiling for the Lisson Gallery in London, and most recently for the Indianapolis Museum of Art. It's a vast installation made with books donated by the public, and it is said to be your most ambitious project to date. How did this work come about?*

RW: Art still seems to get measured by its size, the time it takes to make, its weight, or the cost of its materials. I hope Duchamp didn't pay too much for his urinal (*Fountain*, 1917) and just got on with it. When I lived in Berlin in the early '90s, enormous numbers of books were being sold by weight, most of which I couldn't penetrate because I don't read Russian, Polish, or German. It was as if a massive renewal was going on. Somehow that experience turned into *False Ceiling*, made for the eccentric architecture of the older of the Lisson Galleries. I wanted to make something that could assert itself against the architecture, but honor it at the same time. If you suspend books, the impulses to make sense of an image and to read run parallel. Yet it's not normal to do that above

your head; it makes you very physically aware. It's odd for the body to be in that space, yet it's enjoyable and quite voyeuristic to watch people who are in it. It's not that they have a choice; that's what humans do. They look up, make sequences, and then realize they're defeated. Deeply contradictory things happen because the subject matter of one book could be completely different from the next.



Above and below: *14 Rooms Upended*, 2005. 20-kilogram weights, glass, mirrors, and galvanized steel, dimensions variable.





Above: *lfs and Buts*, 2005. Galvanized steel with mirror, 2 elements, steel: 210 x 44 cm. diameter; glass: 35 x 50 x 230 cm. Below: *Plume*, 2012. Mixed media, 40 x 20 x 8 cm.

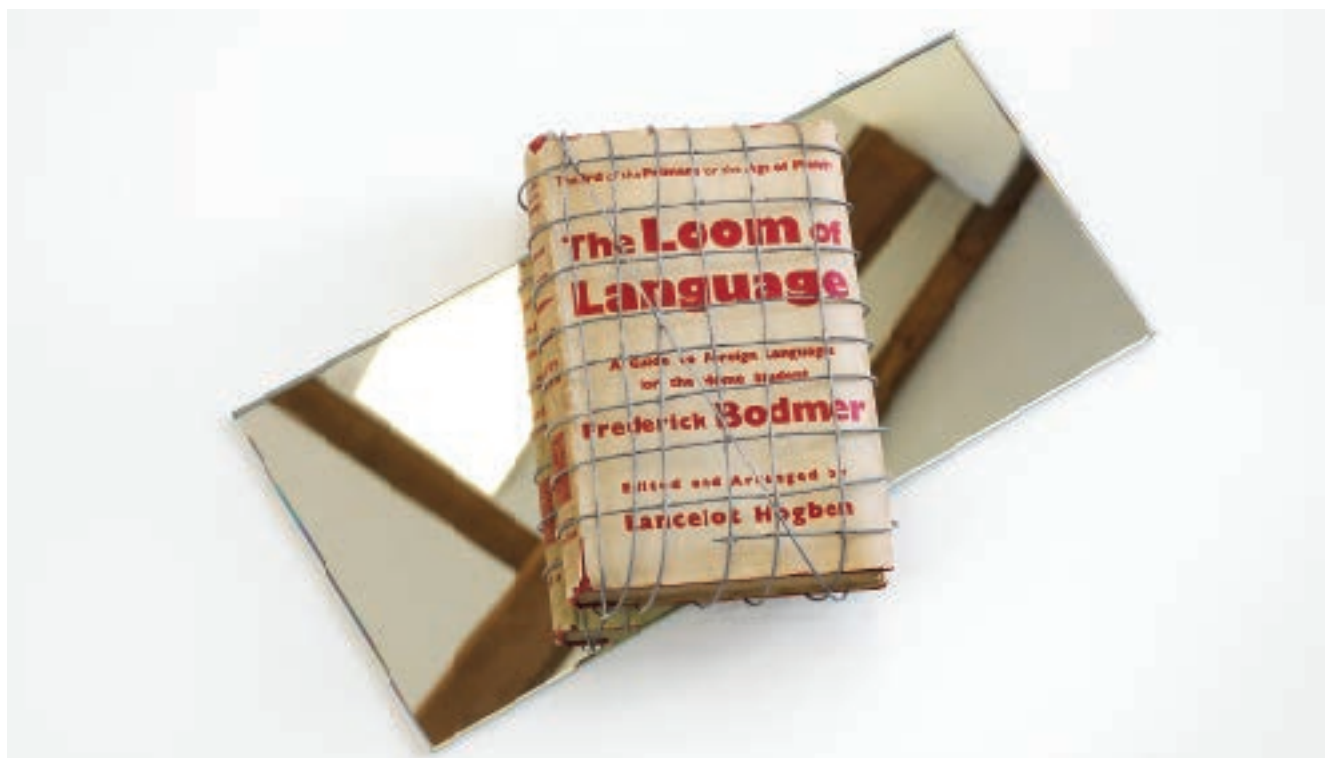
The Indianapolis Museum of Art has a very interesting architectural typology. I used the foyer space, which is like an enormous envelope, a vast porch or veranda housing escalators. It's the main circulation point of the museum and quite hard to read as a space. It has architectural vanity, and I wanted to make something to cut through that, but surreptitiously, because much of our information is received that way—like whispering. It's not as though I wanted to confront this atrium space, though; I just wanted to give it a good talking to and make something that was courageous yet gorgeous.

IC: *The work also seems to suggest the unattainability of knowledge in that the books are suspended above people's heads, teasing and alluring, as though all we can do is strive but not grasp.*

RW: But I don't think it's patronizing. We live in a time when we hear things like "learning," "processing information," and "acquisition of knowledge"—a lot of grand terms, but on examination they're rather technocratic. Think how capable humans are, whether they're educated or not. They have profound responses and amazing sentiments, even if they don't always know where the sentiments come from. There is something about the weight of the books and their sheer physical condition, but I don't think there's a wagging finger in there.

IC: *It's more a yearning, which is also present in A Room Full of Lovers. As with the books in False Ceiling, the chains cascading into the space were anchored up high, remaining essentially elusive.*

RW: The chains in *A Room Full of Lovers* were so strange: you've only got to hold two links and realize they're always in contact, and the point at which they're in contact is almost invisible. I'm very interested in certain kinds of pairing—as with the windows in



this room — and it's important to understand how elaborately the world is woven. Also, it's not unusual for me to play with ideas of impotence. Perhaps that's because one hasn't got very long to be effective, and a large part of our lives is spent worrying about being ineffectual. That's why we don't feel great when waking up in the morning and constantly have to reinvent ourselves. We haven't got very long; we're not going to touch all the cultures of the world. I'm not going to meet a senior Aborigine or have a conversation about the Kalahari Desert anymore. We all have a story and a short time to exercise our imaginative energy, so we do what we can.

Ina Cole is a Contributing Editor for Sculpture.

False Ceiling, 2015–16. Books and steel cable, dimensions variable. 2 views of installation at the Indianapolis Museum of Art.

