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Jon Wood in conversation with David Dye
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Following the inclusion of David Dye's 'Distancing Device' (1970) in the Henry Moore Institute's exhibition *United Enemies: The Problem of Sculpture in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s*, curated by Jon Wood (Head of Research) in 2011, David and Jon wanted to develop things further and during the summer in 2014 they both corresponded by email with each other. Together they discussed David's attitude to revisiting earlier work, the role of sculpture, materials, mirrors and film in his work from the 1960s and 1970s and the renewed interest in conceptual art in recent years. This conversation, which they then edited and titled 'Rewind, Fast Forward, Play', is published here for the first time and on the occasion of the new archival exhibition of his work, *David Dye: Devices*, in the Sculpture Study Galleries at Leeds Art Gallery.

Jon Wood: Perhaps we can start with the idea that artworks can experience life at later moments, as much as at the time of their original making.

David Dye: Being asked to reconfigure or remake works over the last fifteen years I have become more aware of work having not only a life in the past, but also the present: an awareness that the past and present will still be alive in the future. Remaking a work recently, I was totally focused in the present: although I had lost touch with why I had made it thirty years previously, I paradoxically felt a sense of familiarity.

The medium of installation is durational and moves through time with variations on the original, similar to the performance of music or a play, or the rereading of a text. In a sense all visual art is durational. It's neither timeless nor only valid for its time. The way I work is not linear in the way that modernism seemed to develop towards an ultimate goal. By not subscribing to that narrative, then, like many artists, I find inspiration in my past as a way of continuing: of moving backwards into the future.

Jon Wood: I am struck by the paradoxical feeling you say you experienced on remaking – between being out of touch with earlier work and yet having a sense of familiarity with it too. Perhaps it's a bit like encountering an old friend and a former self simultaneously and having that feeling of 'picking up where you left off' as well as of a gaping distance at once. Can you say a little bit here about how the differences between being an artist then and today might feed into this?

David Dye: In the late 1960s and early 1970s I reacted against work that I saw as traditional. Maybe that was because I was young, but it was also part of the *Zeitgeist*. Culturally many things were seen to be changing. Sculpture was already off the plinth and entering the viewer's space; Caro was the big deal when I started college. Then there was the influence of conceptualism as seen in art magazines which chimed with my interdisciplinary interests. I realise now I was on the cusp of 'modernism' and 'post-modernism', which gives my work its oddness. I am still concerned with how something looks, but I also want the work to be quite open. Now, I react to my own past work much more, which is also maybe about age. Although it is a cliché to say 'anything goes' these days, I don't think many young artists feel they have to stand on the shoulders of earlier artists so much. I also think that multidisciplinary work is an accepted way for many artists now. Not only am I influenced by the differences between now and then, but also the changes that I and the 'art world' have gone through over the last few decades.

Jon Wood: What, on the whole, are you reacting to in particular with your own past work?

David Dye: I react to each of my older works in different ways. I may start with my original idea about the work, and then it mutates according to how I think about it now. Often, the context or space I may work in will be the catalyst: I may call on constellations of ideas once I have a particular space to work in, or the theme of a group exhibition to relate to.

I can think more clearly of how differently I used to work when I was much younger. I used to read around work, and then ideas would percolate through into my art work. Now I read to escape: after years of teaching theory I don't find that stimulating, so my reaction there might be to see if the original work has other variations to explore: the road not taken, as it were.

The work might go through many changes before I decide how it ends up. I might use different elements from different pieces in one work. I do have a material vocabulary like film or mirrors, but I am also open to trying out other media now, like video and painting, if it suits the idea. I am more interested now in 'letting it surprise me'. The early work was more planned in advance: I used to fill sketchbooks with visual ideas before I actually made the work, and then the final work did not differ greatly from the original sketch. I think that I take a more playful approach now.

Jon Wood: What underlying intellectual concerns do see you across the work?

David Dye: There seem to me to be three main ideas which have underpinned my work. Although some pieces might appear quite literal, these ideas are not ‘contained’ by the artwork, but act as catalysts to production, and perhaps, as background intuitive thinking.

Initially, existential thoughts underlay my work. There is a sense of doubt borne out of contradiction: a feeling that I have nothing to say, but am trying to say it anyway. The first play I ever saw in London was Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*, and I immediately connected to his tragicomic stance. I still have this feeling of making work out of ironic abjectness.

Related to doubt is a sense of absence or lack, so that my work could often be seen as a kind of *vanitas*: a reminder of the fragility of life. This subjective feeling of loss intellectually made itself manifest by a practice which is difficult to pin down. Unlike artwork which has a supposed ‘presence’ in the vacuum of the gallery, and exists without reference to the ‘real world’, I felt that a durational, reflexive practice was my territory: a fugitive practice with fugitive themes where the viewer and context are taken into consideration.

The vagaries of perception have also intrigued me, so much so that I have often thought of my works as ‘devices’ rather than works of art. There is a perversity to my work where it might give contradictory messages: ‘Distancing Device’ (1970) literally both attracts and repulses. *Spin* (2014), a DVD which projects an image of its mechanism, via mirrors, back onto itself conceptually, doesn’t project at all.

Jon Wood: The mirror, which has been used consistently by you in your work, seems to connect powerfully to all these ideas: to an existential outlook, fugitive experiences, questions of presence and absence and the artwork as a device for harnessing the imagination of the viewer with perceptual challenges. What was and is the intellectual charm of the mirror and how did your thinking about mirrors relate to works at the time by other artists, such as Robert Smithson, Keith Arnatt and Larry Bell, for example, who also incorporated them in their work?

David Dye: I was twelve years old when I first became fascinated by mirrors, through the illustrations in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice through the Looking Glass*. John Tenniel’s shadowy illustrations caught my imagination. The two pictures of Alice, first disappearing through the large mirror on a mantelpiece, and then emerging on the other side, were printed on either side of one page.

This *trompe l'oeil* effect brought to life the page, which seemed to me to have become like a mirror itself. In 1972 I was asked to make a magazine artwork which involved the turning of the page. While an art student I read Robert Smithson's 'Mirror Travels in the Yucatan', published in *Artforum*. The quasi-mystical text for this work in Mexico was less interesting to me than his use of mirrors in the landscape, reflecting the sun. I was more intrigued by Smithson's performative practice documented by photographs.

I was already using mirrors in my work and was aware of other contemporary artists using this same material or 'non material'. Keith Arnatt used it as a kind of camouflage when he lined a rectangular hole in the ground with mirrors. Larry Bell seemed to echo the blandness of Los Angeles with his minimal mirrored boxes, reflecting the walls of the gallery. More influential were Robert Morris' mirrored cubes placed outside the Tate Gallery, whose surfaces seemed to dematerialise their bulk.

While I was aware of the varying ways in which contemporary artists used mirrors, I was also fascinated by Velázquez. The chapter on 'Las Meninas' in his book *The Order of Things* by Michel Foucault gave me a sense of the radicality of this particular painting: the reflection in a mirror at the back of the canvas seemed to bring the viewer into the picture.

I also became interested in the use of mirrors around me in everyday life. One of my works was instigated by the decor of a coffee bar next to St Martin's. I noticed that two corner mirror panels, fixed at right angles, kept you reflected at their junction, wherever you moved. This optical effect I used in 'Mirror Box' (1972), which appeared in my degree show.

Jon Wood: I am struck by how in talking about mirrors you talk about photography and painting, as much as about materiality and sculpture. Did you – and do you – think of yourself as a sculptor and of your work as sculpture?

David Dye: You could say I was a sculptor 'in the expanded field', and I am intrigued by visual cultures in their many manifestations. While I was a student some tutors and artists wondered when I was going to 'settle down', i.e. become a sculptor in the traditional sense of carving, welding or casting. I think that was more to do with where I was at that particular time. The word 'sculpture' has broadened since then to include many different kinds of practices.

Categories are, it seems, necessary markers more for the viewer than the artist. How many times when asked what I do, and I answer 'I am an artist', is the rejoinder 'what do you paint?' I then find myself,

to save time, describing my practice as ‘multimedia’, which also gives the wrong idea. I have a disposition towards three-dimensional thinking, even if I can admire the material certainties of painting.

I don’t think many artists define themselves so strictly now, and it is more common for artists to move across media. Rosalind Krauss recently wrote that we are in a ‘post-medium condition’, but she was referring to the ubiquity of video, which for her changed art irrevocably. I don’t give much credence to the idea that artists are beyond considering the medium that they work in. I believe that the medium you use becomes part of the work: it is not a transparent vehicle. Nor is the medium the message, as Marshall McLuhan wrote in the 1960s, but it does ‘speak’.

Jon Wood: While you are discussing materials and media, how important was Lucy Lippard’s book to you in earlier years? How did you understand it at the time and is it still important for you today?

David Dye: Lippard used the term ‘demateriality’ to map art that was happening internationally, and her book gives a chronology of many different kinds of art between 1966 and 1972. It gives an overview of art and artists that eschewed overt materiality and were more interested in ideas and information. This manifested itself in printed texts, photographs, and events like performances, which also included symposia and conferences. Most of this book contains durational work documented with text and photographs: this evidence is often seen as the actual work itself.

‘Dematerialisation’ was a useful term, and I used it for my own work, but its radical stance mainly served to distance the art work it was referencing from traditional ways of working. There was also a ‘political’ element of not making any more objects to be consumed in the market-place. Ironically, many artists have since still made careers out of the flimsiest of objects. Texts, photographs, installation, performances etc. have subsequently been bought and sold at high prices. This work, also known as ‘conceptualism’, in hindsight seems naive in its wish to work outside the art market.

I see the term dematerialisation now as a historical term denoting a particular *Zeitgeist*. The ramifications of that time cannot be underestimated, and I and other artists still see echoes of this durational practice now in the current landscape of visual art. As a useful contemporary term, however, dematerialisation for me no longer exists.

Jon Wood: How exactly for you did avoiding the market-place or bypassing the gallery create new possibilities for your work at the time, and have you managed to maintain such possibilities in the fuller knowledge of what you retrospectively call 'naivety'?

David Dye: The possibility that directed me was that I showed film work outside the gallery system in the then more 'individual' world of independent cinema: I showed work in independent film festivals and through the Arts Council's *Filmmakers on Tour* initiative, where they paid artists using film to show work in different educational venues. I don't think that I avoided the gallery system deliberately. It was more that the gallery system at that time often didn't know what to do with some of my work. However, I did show work in galleries, mainly in group shows, but because I showed film-based work initially, there was not the more sophisticated set-up for artists using film or video, which is familiar to us now.

I may have overstated my case by mentioning naivety earlier. I did apply for, and got, some grants from the Arts Council, and did sell a photographic work to them as well as to the Victoria and Albert Museum. I was also fortunate in gaining a part-time teaching post at the then Brighton Polytechnic and later at Northumbria Polytechnic.

Contemporary art can often mean big business: when I was starting out we did not have the mainstream media attention which exists now. My experience of many young art students is that they have one eye on becoming well-known. Having said that, there are still only a few who manage to survive on selling work alone, and there are large numbers of applications for teaching posts.

Like many artists whose work is not easily sold, I survived by my teaching, whilst attempting to carry on with my art work. I may not have tailored my work to be more financially successful, but I think that comes with the territory.

I might call it idealism in hindsight, but I could not have done otherwise. I suppose my taste for teaching as my livelihood was inevitable.

Jon Wood: How has technology changed the way you work? I'm thinking about the shift from Super 8 to DVD, for example?

David Dye: I used Super 8mm film in a sculptural way, using space as well as the image. This led to what was called 'Filmaction'. The space of projection and the presence of the artist manipulating the

projection beam became a central part of the work. I also used it as a mechanical device which went alongside my other 'devices'.

There was an artists' video culture, but I found that I could not use the 'boxiness' of the monitors. However other artists used this in their work and often referenced domestic TV. I don't remember if there were video projectors around, but they were probably not in my price range.

I also used found film at one point, bought from a shop near St Martin's School of Art. This I manipulated, often through mirrors and gave it a spoken word soundtrack through a separate tape deck. This shop, giving you short versions of Hollywood movies, soon gave way to video while I was a student.

One drawback to Super 8mm film was its fragility. It was not suited particularly to days of constant projection in an exhibition, and wear and tear meant that I had to shoot lots of extra loops, or have copies available.

In the 1980s I gave up using Super 8mm except for remaking some work for retrospective group exhibitions. There seemed to be a move towards more narrative work and I did not want to move in that direction. I always preferred the shorter, loop-like installation, which was different from the cinema experience.

Interestingly, some younger artists have used Super 8mm film, perhaps enjoying the hands-on approach rather than the invisible technology of DVDs. Never say 'never', but I have no wish to revisit this technology.

I have had some films transferred to video then DVD for more robust use in retrospective exhibitions, but I am aware of what is lost in translation. The sound of the projector, the different timings of the motor, and light from the bulbs and the means of production seen with the celluloid, all added to the texture of the work.

A recent remaking of a Super 8mm film with DVD camera and projector was an interesting challenge and I was able to use the technology without compromising the idea of the work. So yes, technology has changed the way I work, but with both losses and gains.

Jon Wood: What is your attitude generally to the remaking of older work and which approaches taken by other artists to this issue have struck you as particularly appropriate?

David Dye: When it comes to remaking older work I have mixed feelings. On the one hand it is pleasing to be asked, for my older work to be worth exhibiting again. On the other, like most artists, I am more involved in spending time on current projects. However, as I have said before, this revisiting also gives rise to ‘new’ work.

The artist that first comes to mind with an appropriate response to remaking older work is Anne Bean’s brilliantly named *Autobituary* exhibition at Matt’s Gallery in 2006. Anne, as a performer, originally did not allow her work to be documented, which pointed up the one-off nature of her work. Subtitled *Shadow Deeds*, Anne showed work from 1969 to 1974 remade between 1996 and 2005, thirty video monitors were variously painted and often precariously positioned, with chairs, ladders and paintings strewn around the space. Every so often the monitors all switched off, which led the eye to focus on the installation. These ‘reformations’ as she described them, seemed entirely present, but I was aware they were also shadows of the past. The sudden disappearance of the image emphasised their ephemeral nature.

This next example of remaking is less appropriate, but still interesting in its effects. I went to the *Venice Biennale* this year, mainly to see the remaking of *When Attitudes Become Form*: (Bern 1969/Venice 2013) at the Fondazione Prada. This remaking was curated by Germano Celant, ‘in dialogue’ with Rem Koolhaas and Thomas Demand.

I originally saw the exhibition when it visited the ICA in London in 1969, and remember that many British artists were included then. The Bern exhibition consisted of many other European and American artists. The attempt, in Venice, to transpose the modern space of the Kunsthalle onto the crumbly Venetian Palazzo, was intriguing, but I was made less aware of the individual works than the space itself. More interestingly, when they could not get hold of an original work, they marked out a space with a dotted line and put up a small photograph of the missing work. This seemed more in keeping with the original spirit of the show in 1969. I felt that the importance of *When Attitudes Become Form* itself has become a curatorial artwork, while the work first shown has faded into history. The context had become more important than the art, and the effects of the original work had dissipated. I wonder what Harald Szeeman [who died in 2006], the original curator of the first *When Attitudes Become Form*, would have thought about this attempt to remake his exhibition in a very different space thirty-five years later?

Jon Wood: The work of artists active in the 1960s and 1970s has, of course, received widespread renewed attention in the last decade or so, as conceptualism, its legacies and its impact on contemporary art has been considered and assessed. Can I ask you what your overall feelings about this phenomenon and about contemporary appropriations of conceptual art are?

David Dye: I am a recipient – *and beneficiary* – of the widespread attention you write about, and you could say I have recently ‘appropriated’ my own work. This exhibition could be seen as a way of answering your questions, as it developed out of a text I wrote earlier. I attempted to answer these questions for myself in my doctoral dissertation, *Backwards into the Future*, which was completed in 2010.¹ However, I will try to give a much shorter and simpler answer here.

You ask about what I feel about all this. First of all the renewed attention gave my work an ‘afterlife’ and my early work was seen as part of an archival history. This also galvanised my enthusiasm for my practice. The way that young artists seemed to relate to my work is gratifying and the time between then and now seemed to dissolve. The durational aspect of many works of that time has, intentionally or not, helped to produce a landscape where so-called ‘reality’ and ‘art’ are only differentiated by language or knowledge. After ‘post-modernism’ contemporary artists made and make work which may reference many ‘isms’. I see ‘conceptualism’ as just one of these strategies, but I think that it should not be mistaken as meaning the same now as it did originally. In the 1960s and 1970s the context was very different so work meant different things then.

Jon Wood: What kind of differences do you have in mind? And what kind of differences might we find in and between your ‘devices’ and the different contexts and situations that your ‘devices’, made and remade, have operated within?

David Dye: I suppose I mean the differences generally in the climate for art. I was included in a group exhibition called *The New Art*, with British artists in London, or *The British Avant-Garde* in New York. Can you imagine exhibitions being called that today? Even the last *British Art Show* was notable in that it contained mostly international artists, but artists who had been educated in Great Britain, and also lived here now. There was no Tate Modern or Saatchi Gallery then, and hardly any artist-run spaces, unless you count Arts Labs. Even though London is still seen as a centre for art, many more cities in Great Britain have had their own burgeoning art scenes for quite a while now. I see art as more dispersed and global, whereas as a student in London it felt smaller and more localised.

I will cite a particular work to point out the differences between works seen in a context then, and as remade in different contexts since then. 'Distancing Device' was originally made in 1970 and exhibited in the open student exhibition, *Young Contemporaries*. Each year a different venue hosted it, that year it was the Royal Academy in London. This work was remade to specification, by the Whitechapel Gallery, in 2000 for *Live in Your Head: Concept and Experiment in Britain, 1965–75*. This 'Distancing Device' was subsequently in a display giving a view of *St Martin's Sculpture Department: An Alternative History*, in 2006, at Tate Britain, and more recently as part of the exhibition, which you curated, *United Enemies: The Problem of Sculpture in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s* in 2011 at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds. These archival exhibitions give a broader overview of my work as it relates (or not), to other artists working in the 1970s – very different contexts from the initial introduction of the *Young Contemporaries*. This is the first time 'Distancing Device' has been seen alongside some of my other works and perhaps this will give it another different meaning to viewers.

What you can't reproduce are the meanings surrounding the artworks as seen in their original context. These can only be translated in what is written about the work at the time.

Jon Wood: As you look back today at these earlier contexts, how do you feel about how your work was written about at that time and how this differs from how your work is discussed today?

David Dye: Two particular texts come to mind: an article for an art magazine and a review for an art column in a newspaper, both in 1972. These were very different in length: the first was an overview of seven years of my work, the latter a review of an exhibition lasting a week. The magazine text was more detailed and went into the perceived 'meaning' within several works over time. The fact that I was an artist using film was mentioned as a part of it. The review on the other hand gave the unusual medium, for that time, the foreground and the potential that film had within this exhibition. Many other short texts also focused on the fact that I used film within a gallery situation. At this point in time film was rarely seen in galleries, so it's perhaps not surprising that the medium I used was written about as a major factor of my work.

In the past fifteen years, I have shown in group retrospective exhibitions in which the artists have been asked to write statements sometimes. This approach brings up the differences between work which otherwise can be easily lumped together – in my case under 'conceptual art'. Often the catalogue texts for this kind of exhibition tend to explore the ideas underpinning the work. From my early days until now I have been involved in 'interviews' or conversations with writers, for magazines

and catalogues. These tend to be more satisfactory to me because I have more control over what is said, so this has been a regular vehicle for a deeper understanding.

¹ David Dye's doctorate can be accessed via his website: www.daviddye.co.uk