

Art Project

# Richard Wentworth Azzedine Alaïa

In this unique series of images, the pioneering photographer and leading protagonist of New British Sculpture enters the world of the great couturier

Might it be that Richard Wentworth is the Brassai of our time? Or the Atget? Or Henry Moore, Duchamp or Warburg? With Brassai, Wentworth shares a fascination for real-life encounters, brilliant and uncanny, and an outstanding ability to seize and manifest them into images. He is bound to Atget by his great sensitivity to daily life and the sense of time passing and vanishing; to Henry Moore, whose sculptures he helped to realise in the summer of Sergeant Pepper, by his sense of shape and the signals of the human body (almost always absent from his work); and to Duchamp, because he understood, in 1972, that sculpture no longer lay in sculpture, as Duchamp understood that painting no longer lay in painting, but in the eye's ability to see it in the ordinary world. With Making Do and Getting By, one of the most important bodies of art created today, an incomprehensible masterpiece, Wentworth has gathered more than 200,000 images of 'sculptures' taken from the world, where they were existing peacefully, unchallenged. It is ongoing. And with Warburg he shares an encyclopedic ability to bring together images that are fragments of life and, eventually, fragments of humankind.

But something was missing from his encyclopedia - which includes all forms of materials, of unconscious craftsmanship - something that once we understand it, we decipher to be essential and metaphysical: Fashion. In Richard Wentworth's book, fashion could only be couture. And couture could only be Azzedine Alaïa, in whom Richard Wentworth sees a proper "inventor-artist". In these pages, we see elements of the artist's visits to the Maison Alaïa. We discover architectural fragments of this couture house, where the designer - a master craftsman in the lineage of Madame Grès, Madeleine Vionnet and Cristóbal Balenciaga, but also a true empowerer of women and a revolutionary force in their contemporary life, like Christian Dior, Gabrielle Chanel, Rudi Gernreich and Yves Saint Laurent - primarily makes everything, controls everything, and pushes the craft to a level one would not have thought possible. Richard Wentworth was offered unprecedented access to the Maison Alaïa, unheard of in any couture house, where the secret of craft is jealously protected from any form of intrusion.

Here, for the first time, we are offered a sense of the fabric of couture; we experience how extraordinarily poetic and essential it all is, how humane. The images presented belong to a series that has been unfolding for the past three years, as the friendship between the sculptor and the couturier has become closer, and as the former's intimacy with the house has grown stronger. As Azzedine Alaïa says: "Richard's eye is wonderful. He has made me see things I do not see, I do not pay attention to. He sees it all. I am very private, but never, with him, have I sensed a difficult presence. He makes us see things in a way

we would have never seen them." Richard Wentworth's artistic practice is genre-defying: a sculptor in other media, including ready-made and photography, a teacher of life to all those who have the fortune to know him, a radical thinker in the guise of a polite and warm Englishman, a historian of modernisation.

We discover his unexpected affinities with Berenice Abbott, Richard Avedon and other major figures who have paved the way towards the aesthetics of today. We sense traces from Berenice Abbott's dual aesthetic citizenship: as an image-maker fascinated with the structure of bodies; as a photographer who was equally involved in what photography could do, how it could engage with the order of things, mirroring the relation of clothes to bodies with the relation between bodies and the universe. With Richard Avedon, he shares a treatment of the sensibility of the world in clothed bodies - bodies that say something of their time, leading to a notion of the present beyond the instant, semi-fictionally eternal while being completely of the moment. Each of the photographs taken by Richard Wentworth is an instant that his eye deciphered, and which he seeks to save from oblivion and disappearance - at least for the duration of human time. Such is the premise of Making Do and Getting By, of which these images are a part as well as a spin-off - somehow belonging to it while existing in their own space. From being part of this body of work and from engaging directly with fabrics and couture, each image is a momentous fragment of timelessness: It is completely of a given instant. It is there and then.

Maison Alaïa, 7 rue de Moussy, Le Marais, Paris. Part of the architecture of the extraordinary Alaïa compound - an entire late-19th-century city block - is unveiled. After moving in more than 20 years ago, the couturier progressively arranged the organisation of this space, which includes shop, studio, ateliers, archive, personal apartment, a kitchen where friends and collaborators gather for lunch and dinner, the Galerie (his not-for-profit exhibition space where these photographs are presented this September), a three-room hotel, and soon a bookshop featuring publications by his friends.

Some point in 2016 or early 2017... Here is the very dress on which the couturier was working for this very client; there is the fabric he developed for the sake of couture and, eventually, for women; and this is the preparation of the Spring/Summer 2017 presentation. This is also the history of all women who have ever worn dresses, of all humans who have ever dressed their body, and of those devoted to the cult of humanity who have made clothes for them. It is a human history, which involves all cultures, all lives, throughout.

With his unique ability to see things and read through them in order to retrace lineages and re-emphasise our position within them, Richard Wentworth reminds us that couture is not fashion:

It follows no other path than its own, but this path is intimately tied to the lives of human beings – to women. For that reason, when the attention and the intent of couture is brought into fashion – as it is by Azzedine Alaïa, who conceives couture-crafted ready-to-wear designs – magic happens. This is what the artist has been able to sense, and translate: These images allow us to feel the magic of time. In them, we see elements, objects, practices to which, had they been given the privilege of such access, Atget would have borne witness at Warth, or Brassai at Vionnet.

We also see the incredible, almost futuristic craft of design by a genius maker. As Richard Wentworth describes the creation of a dress: "It is like airplane engineering – it's just got to fly!" It starts with a deep knowledge of materials, how they can be explored, how they are to best serve women's lives. It includes experimenting with them, engaging in dialogues between fabrics that no one would have thought could come together. It unfolds in a vision, with a maker's ability to see on tracing paper what is going to happen 'for real'. It then goes through step after step of being worked and re-worked, made and re-made, until what was a prototype is finally realised. No wonder Azzedine Alaïa is so widely admired by the world's preeminent industrial designers, from Jean Prouvé and Pierre Paulin to Jonathan Ive, Marc Newson, and Martin Szekely.

In these images, we also have an entry into Wentworth's decades of studying materials – and pushing them to unexpected locations. Let us think of 35°9', 32°18', a steel ladder sculpture in the Tate collection. Wentworth found a distorted, abandoned ladder in Israel, bent, the structure of which was so unexpected it was obvious the artist had discovered something uncanny. The title refers to the location where Jacob supposedly dreamt of his ladder. It floats in the air with wires; it does not touch the ground, as light as a flying piece of textile. When looking at it, we are confronted with a certainty: "I've never seen a ladder like this before, one that does not even touch the floor." And we then see ladders – their tension, their torsion, the way we place our bodies within them – differently; nothing has been done, and yet everything has been created. This impression can only be evoked by someone who knows things: their genesis and their construction.

One also thinks of the method of such master practitioners as the architects Frank Gehry and Renzo Piano, where everything, all the construction that later becomes the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles or The Shard in London, starts with a set of lines, of cuts. It is then pushed to completion, involving the highest forms of technology. All of that designed to host humans, to offer them a dwelling.

Here, the artist and the couturier meet again. We sense, in the artist's vision, a drive to provide entry into the discrepancies of meaning, which can be textual as well as material – the whole

world is a text the artist reads. Textile is textual. Everything is layered meaning, from the moment we are sensitive to these layers, and to that meaning. And nowhere can it be more apparent than in couture and in Azzedine Alaïa's mastery: Every reader writes as he or she reads, and every writer reads as he or she writes. Couture is its own form of writing.

We are thankful to Richard Wentworth for reminding us that Baudelaire, Wilde and Proust were right: The dress is a text, sewn, tied; the world is a dress, and so is the text. All three exist in parallel. We are given to bear in mind Mallarmé's journal, *La Dernière Mode* (The Latest Fashion), which he designed as an encyclopedia of all the technical words of couture, as if, by mastering them, he was able to found the mystical text he was aiming to open.

While making a dress, Azzedine Alaïa reads all the information related to the physical, actual person who will wear it, and he brings into it all his experience as a reader, not simply of bodies and lives, but also of the readings of others, the history of couture, of which he might be the preeminent secret expert. There is no consistent reading that is not aware of the work of those who preceded us.

Thus, an existential principle appears: From reading, you write; Azzedine Alaïa authors life in dresses. Richard Wentworth reads life in making: He authors sculptural images and significant physical realities that all feature his quest for meaning, and his unveiling of it. This meaning is humanity itself. In the series of images on the following pages, we are allowed to read, first hand, an utter devotion to humanity, and traces of the patient, ceaseless service it requires.

There is a lot of writing in Richard Wentworth's images, from his own handwriting (literally, by his hand on his hand) to the name of the atelier (*flou, cuir*), to two words he found used across the life of the house, and that are so appropriate – *blanc* and *noir*. We are given a lesson in demanding, self-challenging writing, from two people who know how to write and read in a way so many of us will never be able to conceive.

It is both moving and inspiring to witness the encounter of these two generous visionaries and their activities, evolving to help others live. We now just have to see, and learn how to read again. We might never write like this, but we can be changed by the metaphorical power of making, and its ability, when at the most acute, to include present, past, and future.

As St Augustine said, there is no time but the present. The past is the present of the past, the future is the present of the future, the present is the present of the present. Breaking from our lives, Richard Wentworth's photography – the sculptor's – provides us with the intensity of the present, as does the experience of wearing an Azzedine Alaïa dress.

"Richard's eye is wonderful. He has made me see things I do not see, I do not pay attention to. He sees it all. I am very private, but never, with him, have I sensed a difficult presence. He makes us see things in a way we would have never seen them" **Azzedine Alaïa**

Richard Wentworth à la Maison Alaïa is at Galerie Azzedine Alaïa,  
18 rue de la Verrerie, Paris until 26 November 2017





# 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: *Ifs 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.



## This week's new exhibitions

Carl Slater | Paul Neagu | El Lissitzky | John Chamberlain | Angela Ferreira | Robert Mapplethorpe |  
Bold Tendencies



Agora by Richard Wentworth.

### **Bold Tendencies, London**

Located in a Peckham car park, gallerist Hannah Barry's summer regular Bold Tendencies – with its heady mix of sculpture, music, performance and one of the best views of the city – has gone from strength to strength in its nine year existence. The 2015 commissions see big cheese of British sculpture Richard Wentworth rubbing shoulders with the regular lineup of young guns. He has the open-air top floor, which he's painted with a giant network of snaking lines like a freeform Scalextric track. The live programme is impressive, too. This weekend Christopher Stark conducts the resident Multi-Story Orchestra through French spectral music maverick Gérard Grisey's *Les Espaces Acoustiques*.

*[Peckham Rye Multistorey Car Park, SE15, to 27 Sep](#)*

SS

# British art's invisible man

*Richard Wentworth has worked with Henry Moore and Bryan Ferry – and helped launch the YBAs. So why isn't he more famous, asks Mark Hudson*

## INTERVIEW

**I**'m just very nosy," says Richard Wentworth, pulling out his phone to snap a balcony, an odd postmodern intrusion into the early Victorian facades of London's Camden Town. "Walking through a city is where I'm most stimulated. You walk and stuff happens."

As we proceed through what Wentworth describes as "the most ambiguous area of London" – once respectably middle class, long shabby, now super-desirable – his feelers are out for its artistic archaeology, the "strange darkness" that drew the great realist painter Walter Sickert here in the 1900s, the "brown bread modernism" of Henry Moore and Ben Nicholson who lived just north of here in Belsize Park. Wentworth is continually distracted by quirky details, visual anomalies in the urban fabric: a crushed box with a wineglass symbol indicating this-way-up ("incredible how that image has endured"); a gap in the double yellow lines on the road where someone clearly drove while the wet paint was still wet; an elaborately moulded period window frame that is being installed in a basement, which Wentworth maintains must have been made on site.

At once boyish and avuncular, affable and just a shade enigmatic, Wentworth, now 67, has been a mover on the British art scene for decades: as artist, inspirational (if sometime controversial) teacher and tireless creative catalyst. He served as a teenage assistant to Henry Moore in the Sixties, built sets for Roxy Music in the Seventies, kick-started the New British Sculpture movement in the Eighties with Tony

Cragg and Richard Deacon, co-masterminded the notorious "Goldsmiths Course", which launched the YBA phenomenon in the Nineties. But it's only now, perhaps, at an age when most people wind down and contemplate their garden and carpet slippers, that his art of subliminal urban connections is coming into its own.

"That bead is as good as the original work," he says, peering down at the unpainted window frame. "We used to be able to do that. We had apprentices. But now it's very rare to see the world constructed around you in that kind of way, because it's taking place in a shed beyond the M25, probably in conversation with China. But these guys, who probably speak Polish, can do it, because they had Soviet apprenticeships. And what we feel about that is connected to an anxiety about loss, like when you can't find your car keys. What does it mean to know how to make something like that, I mean through the fingertips, with the body?"

It's this kind of lateral connection-making and feel for the textures and materials of the urban world that gives Wentworth's art its distinctive character. His is a sculpture not of monumentality and mass, but of elusive moments: two steel spheres, for example, hanging testicle-like beneath a domestic chair; a collection of brooms shoved through the surface of a desk; a library's worth of books suspended on wires above the viewer's head in a work called *False Ceiling*. And alongside these gallery works, he records his progress through the city – absorbing its "patterns and energies" – in

thousands of photographs that mix throwaway technique with a cool formal precision. Probably only Wentworth could invest an image of a couple of buckets put out to deter parking with the quality of a mysterious still life.

"I'm interested in spaces," he says. "In ownership and demarcation, the way we negotiate our way through a door, the funny look you have on your face when you're looking for the loo."

As we are about to move on from the basement window, the workmen, who are, as Wentworth suspected, Polish, emerge to find out what the

fuss is about, and within moments he is on easy terms with them, congratulating them on their craftsmanship and taking their business card.

Getting on with people has been a crucial feature of Wentworth's career: an ability to make social and creative connections across a vast acquaintanceship, ranging from high-end dealers and curators to completely unknown artists and students, in moves that are often as wayward as his conversation, which delights in riddles, gnomic wordplay and multi-celebrity, shaggy-dog digressions (an anecdote about meeting Yul Brynner in New York in 1975 with Christopher Hitchens, under the aegis of novelist Penelope Mortimer, is a typical example).

As we dive into a taxi on our way to his next engagement, Wentworth strikes up conversation with the driver, an Algerian, touching on the recent Paris events and the Algerian war of independence of the early Sixties, while making a stream-of-consciousness inventory of the grimy

north London streets outside: “1961 social housing that was very well meant, but didn’t work out and now we’ve got to maintain it; the worst

kind of Po-Mo nonsense; Victorian villas; bomb damage; speculation on a funny site in 1973.

“I see materials before I see colour. I could never have been a painter. I’m probably overly knowledgeable about how things are made, and I like making things. But I’m not really a studio artist. I’m as much an artist when I’m having a coffee as when I’m working in a studio.”

While Wentworth’s art may sound very conceptual – the sort of art that is really only about itself – it’s shot through with a fascination with the ways history and social change manifest themselves in the world around us – an interest that seems to be increasing. “I don’t think that’s unusual in an ageing person,” he says. “You become very alert to memory and you want to do something with it.”

This preoccupation is finding an outlet in *History Is Now*, a new exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in which Wentworth and other artists – John Akomfrah, Simon Fujiwara, Roger Hiorns, Hannah Starkey and Jane and Louise Wilson – curate artworks and objects that reflect their perceptions of post-war Britain. Among an array of idiosyncratic narratives, including the early-Nineties mad cow disease scare (Hiorns) and “optimism in late capitalism” (Fujiwara), Wentworth’s chosen themes, “the modernism of modest means” and “the beach as a discursive site”, bring together an unlikely range of figures, including Nazi rocket designer turned American space scientist Wernher von Braun, the English modernist Ben Nicholson and the Beach Boys.

“The theme of the beach was suggested by Ben Nicholson’s painting *Harbour Scene*, which was painted in 1944,” he says. “Having been born in 1947, I can smell that. As an Englishman driving through Normandy, which I often do, I always find myself thinking of my uncle who got shot – by Canadian friendly fire, actually. And I’m aware that as a young man no one shot at me, and that that experience is already deep

in history and will never happen again in that kind of way.”

His display reflects his fascination with the make-do-and-mend era, when “everything was a bit chilly and damp” – the period in which he grew up. Not that he suffered personally. The son of an executive at English Electric, he grew up in Hampstead and the Hertfordshire stockbroker belt, “a modest world of rice pudding, stamp albums and model aeroplanes”, until the age of 13 when he was sent to Eton, where Conservative MPs Nicholas Soames and Jonathan Aitken and choreographer Richard Alston were among his contemporaries.

While Wentworth felt “incredibly uncomfortable” there, Eton gave him a feel for social structures, webs and connections – “an interest in how things fit”, as he puts it. And through a gap in the housekeeper’s door, he became aware of other things “going on under the floorboards”, seeing the Beatles and Stones playing on *Ready Steady Go!* on her flickering black-and-white television.

The school art room was a place where you could “act and talk differently”, and on the advice of his teachers, but against the wishes of his “Edwardian” parents, Wentworth went to art school, first Hornsey then the Royal College. While he thrived socially, meeting “all sorts of interesting grown-ups”, he felt out of place in the Royal College sculpture department, which revolved around the bronze foundry in an essentially 19th-century fashion.

He eventually found common ground with a group of other young sculptors, including Cragg, Deacon and Bill Woodrow, whose irreverent taste for uncomfortable surfaces and trashy materials was seen as a reaction against the austere, “po-faced” minimalism that dominated Seventies art. Branded the New British Sculpture, and drawing in slightly younger talents such as Gormley and Kapoor, this tendency was launched on the public with a mammoth show at the Hayward and Serpentine galleries in 1983.

But it wasn’t long before this group’s position at the cutting edge was usurped by a band of younger, ruder artists which Wentworth himself has been widely credited

with/blamed for creating: the YBAs. Teaching at London’s Goldsmiths College in the late Eighties, Wentworth nurtured such talents as Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas and Sam Taylor-Wood with an approach that has been characterised as “teaching students to sell themselves in the market place rather than inculcating practical skills”. It’s a description that Wentworth, unsurprisingly, rejects.

“It was a moment somewhere between the death of Henry Moore and the creation of Pret A Manger, when the Cold War was still going on, and a group of very energetic young people turned up. Through a historical accident I had arranged for students to do work experience at commercial galleries. I think one of the things teachers should do is open doors. You may not want to spend your life hanging pictures at the Lisson Gallery, but it’s a bit of time in the real world. Some people learnt from that, and one of them was Damien Hirst.

“But the real model for Damien was Malcolm McLaren, who happened to be a Goldsmiths student (20 years earlier) – and the Artful Dodger. It was all quite Dickensian in a way.”

Wentworth still teaches and still enjoys the company of students.

“Aged 15 to 30 is an extraordinary time,” he says. “That’s when

interesting things happen and you meet people who can change your life, and you want people to keep that door open as long as possible. You can’t teach people how to do that, but you can tell them that when you get to my age you’ll get the panicky feeling that the door is closing. And you’ve got to decide whether you want to jump through it.”

So he doesn’t feel he’s done everything quite yet?

“Oh, I don’t feel I’ve done any of the things I should have done.”

While Wentworth is often cited

among the most influential living British artists, he hasn’t yet achieved mainstream celebrity. Why does he think that is?

“I’m interested in what’s behind the mirror, in things that aren’t really visible,” he says. “That may make my work seem obtuse to some people. But I have done and am

doing something important. I just don't know quite what it is."

● *History Is Now: 7 Artists Take On Britain* is at the Hayward Gallery, London SE1 (O20 7960 4200) from February 10 to April 26

***'I'm as much an artist  
when I'm having a  
coffee as when I'm  
working in a studio'***



KEN ADLARD; JOHN WEBB



**Shore things:  
images by Richard  
Hamilton, left,  
and LS Lowry,  
will appear in  
Wentworth's  
contribution to  
'History is Now'  
at the Hayward  
Gallery this month**

## Black Maria comes to King's Cross

Mon, 21 Jan 2013 | By [Emily Gosling](#)

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Having played host to an electric Christmas tree , a Quayola video installation and a filling station-turned restaurant over the past year, London's King's Cross is enjoying something of an art-assisted focus of late.



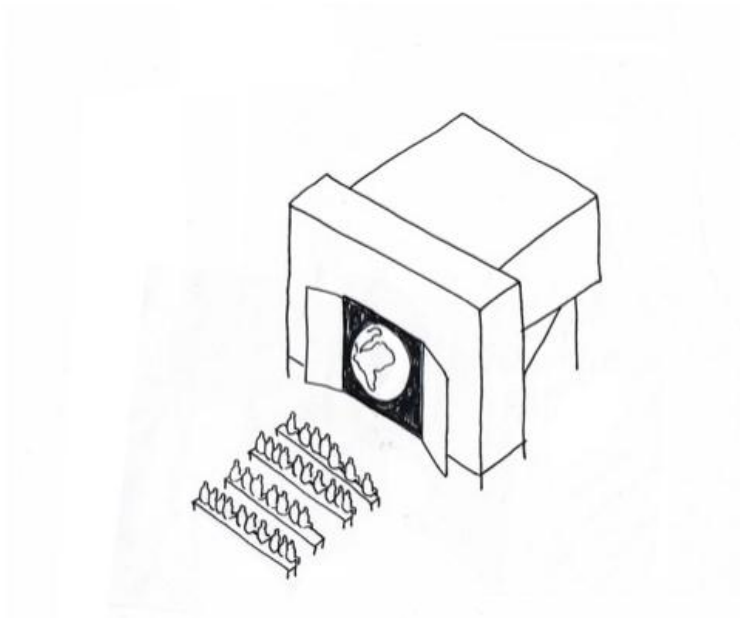
RELAY - Black Maria, by Richard Wentworth with GRUPPE at King's Cross

Now, British sculptor Richard Wentworth and emerging Zurich-based architecture practice GRUPPE are looking to the area to create a new temporary structure entitled Black Maria, to be sited in The Crossing public atrium space that conjoins the Granary Building to the recently-opened Central St Martins art school campus.



RELAY - Black Maria, by Richard Wentworth with GRUPPE at King's Cross

The structure will be used as a space for discussion, performance and moving image works.







Source: Courtesy of Richard Wentworth and Lisson Gallery

Richard Wentworth's photography

The installation will coincide with Wentworth's forthcoming solo show at the nearby Lisson Gallery, which will present a new series of photographs alongside his sculptural works.

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Source: Courtesy of Richard Wentworth and Lisson Gallery

Richard Wentworth's photography

As with Wentworth's sculpture, the photographs use everyday objects, patterns and odd situations to examine the 'uneasy qualities of the mundane', according to the gallery.



Source: *Courtesy of Richard Wentworth and Lisson Gallery*

Richard Wentworth's photography

The show will also feature a new site-specific installation, *A Room Full of Lovers*, inspired by the calculations used by Gaudi in constructing Barcelona's famous Sagrada Familia cathedral. Wentworth has created the piece using steel chains anchored from the ceiling, falling at various points around the gallery space to 'explore the role of gravity and perception as artistic tools', says Lisson Gallery.

*Wentworth and Gruppe's installation will be in place from 13 February, and the Lisson Gallery show runs from 30 January – 9 March at 52-54 Bell Street, London NW1*