



Art

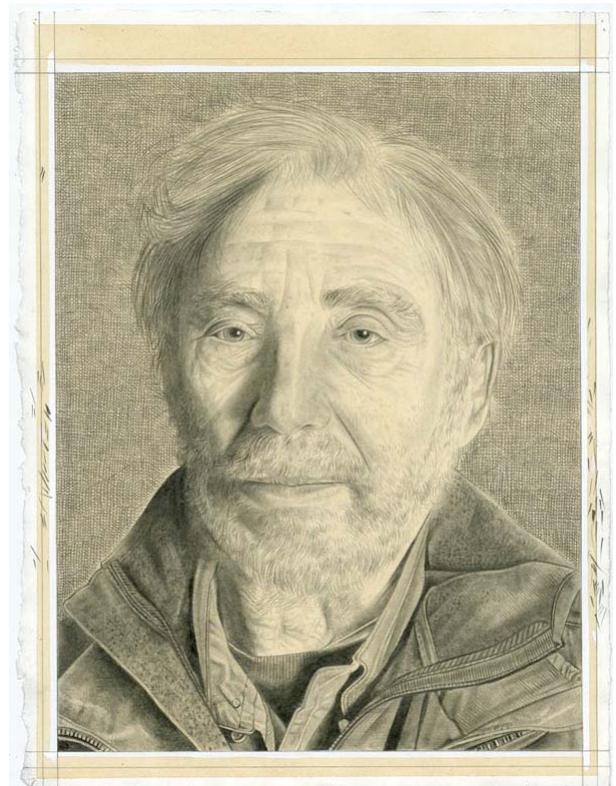
IN CONVERSATION

RICHARD NONAS with Alex Bacon

In conjunction with Richard Nonas's show at James Fuentes (*Richard Nonas*, March 8 – April 21, 2013), and upcoming solo booth at Art Brussels (April 17 – 21, 2013), the sculptor met with Alex Bacon to discuss his complex and imaginative theories of art and aesthetics, and their relation to his unique formation as an anthropologist who, in the 1970s, found himself an unwitting but enthusiastic participant in the New York art world.

Richard Nonas: It's very important to my thinking that I was not trained as an artist, and didn't in fact study art. I was an anthropologist for about ten years, teaching and doing a lot of field work with native people: American Indians in Northern Canada, and in the desert of Northern Mexico where I spent two years in a village of 50 people. It was an extraordinary time, like living in a surrealist painting where everything makes sense to everybody around you but doesn't make any sense to you. Holding both those things in your mind at the same time is quite a powerful experience.

I ended up back in New York, teaching anthropology part-time at Queens College and writing a book about something that had fascinated me in those two years in Mexico: the extraordinary way those people conceived and perceived the world spatially, ways they situated themselves contextually that were unlike anything I knew in my own culture. I was writing about how we arrange the world in order to understand it. At that time I had a sled dog that I had brought back from sub-Arctic Canada and was spending an hour or two every day in the park with him. I found myself picking up pieces of wood and staring at them while the dog played. One day I held up two pieces of wood,



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

pushed them together and, incredibly, they conveyed strong and specific emotion. It was identifiable emotion with no story, a disembodied emotion I could not fathom or explain. I felt like I had been hit on the head with a hammer. I realized all at once that it might be possible to communicate abstract emotion directly with objects, instead of indirectly with words. I started taking the wood home and moving it around. The idea of art never occurred to me. I had grown up in New York, I was interested in the world, was a sort of young intellectual. I knew the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, but, as I came to realize, in a totally superficial way. I knew the names, the forms, but nothing more.

This was in about 1967. A couple of months later, a friend came to my apartment and said, “Idiot, that’s called art. That’s called sculpture.” [*Laughs.*] So there I was, trapped. I realized that I had to figure out what all this was about. I met a stone sculptor and I borrowed a chisel and a piece of stone. I tried everything. I tried to understand what I was doing. I looked at art. I looked at the world.

Coming into the art world in New York in the '70s was strange, but I very quickly became part of a group of young artists, makers—Gordon Matta-Clark being one of them, and Alanna Heiss another—who were, each in their own way, fighting to cut their way through to the things that they knew they meant to say. By this time I had a studio and I was already making fairly big things, which were related to what I’m doing now. There was a very short period of time, a matter of a few months, where I tried other very different things, but I very quickly found a vocabulary. The sculptural tool that interested me most was extension: lineal extension, a thrust into the world. Which came from anthropology, and the field archeology I had done for a year or two, but found also in all the art that interested me.

I was trying to set up the physical and emotional conditions in which what I now called art could take place. Conditions that, in fact, became part of my definition of art, and of what art meant to me. But I didn’t start that process with analysis. Analysis always came second, was always the examination of something that I’d already done.

“There are physical places, spaces deeply imbued with human meaning.”

Alex Bacon (Rail): It seems that you benefited from not having the same training as your artist peers. Starting in anthropology meant that you began with a realization that those university trained artists had been trying to work towards by undoing their art historical and academic studio training. They were trying to get to a more direct, personal intervention into space and material, which was something they had to throw off the dross of art history to reach. But you already had that realization in the context of anthropology which was what drew you to art in the first place. And it’s timely of course that it happened in that moment of the



Richard Nonas, “Untitled (Wall Steel piece),” 2006. Steel. 8.25 × 8 × 1”. Unique. Courtesy of the artist and James Fuentes.

late '60s and early '70s in New York, because that was a time and a place in which the artworld had become tuned to those same ideas, so that you could enter and express yourself in that way, by making art. Whereas maybe if you'd come of age in a different moment it seems likely you would have continued to be an anthropologist.

Nonas: I think you're quite right. In fact, anthropology was the best possible training for art that I could have had. I was an anthropologist because I was fascinated by questions; questions as questions. I very quickly realized I was not as interested in answering those questions as I was in seeing where they led—that is to say, the questions that those first questions pointed at, the next set of questions, and the next set of questions after that, were what drove me. I believed that the jump of constant questioning was the strength of anthropology, that keeping the questioning going was its point. The aim was to land in a place different from where you expected to land.

And that's the way I thought art should be made too, the way it should be thought, and even seen. I'm interested in questions that I can't answer. I don't even want to answer them. Tension is the tool I'm after—excitement, friction, the movement towards even more than I think will be there, lies in the unanswered-ness of the unanswered question.

Rail: It seems that you take that even a step further. I think a lot of artists would say something about wanting to pose a question that can't be fully answered, at least within language. But in talking to me earlier about how you never see your works as definitively finished, you told me about how, having your studio filled with examples of your work everywhere, you often see something out of the corner of your eye and, while you liked it yesterday, today you want to change it in some way. So it seems to me that the test of your work is that it's not just that the question should be unanswerable, but rather that the very nature of the question itself changes over time.

Nonas: Absolutely. And it's not even just that the nature of the question changes, it's that the world in which, and about which, the question is posed changes too. There's a quote by one of the major quantum physicists, who said something like, "Not only is the world more complex than we think it is, the world is more complex than we are able to think it is."* That unreachable complexity, the searing pathos of a world more complex than we can understand, is almost my definition of beauty. What I want to accomplish, and what all the art that interests me seems able to accomplish, is simply an acknowledgement of that unreachable more.

Rail: I think this is a very loaded issue for abstract art historically, and it suggests a figure like Agnes Martin, who held similar ideas to the ones you're expressing here, but for whom they were explicitly spiritual, whereas it seems that you take a more materialist route. For me there's in fact a relation of sorts between the two apparently disparate positions, and you seem to establish just such a relation yourself.

Nonas: Absolutely, but I think that as much as anything else, language is the problem here. We are almost forced to unpack and specify thoughts like "undifferentiated more" in order to

able to communicate it, yet a great deal is lost by doing so.

This doesn't answer your question, but it keeps the questions going. If you ask those questions spiritually, you find yourself stopped at a certain point. If you ask them scientifically, or materially you stop the process at another point. You gain something in each case, but lose something else. (That's the "sticks in the park vs. the words in the book" contrast I started with.) And I'm interested now in seeing how far one can keep that questioning going without limiting the direction and form that the answer can seem to take.

Rail: I think that it is your approach to your work—with its role as a kind of tool in mind—that sets you apart from other artists, even of your own generation. I would like to think that maybe it allows you to retain something of what you have been saying about resisting the collapse of questioning, and the creation of distance between the work and its viewer.

Nonas: I hope so. But the image of art as a tool is part of the larger question of what that tool is used for. It seems to me that much strong art creates worlds, complete wholes. That is what I want from my work too. I want to find ways to build situations that can say almost everything while saying almost nothing. I want them to be chunks of reality that contain even larger chunks of reality. Chunks, I mean, of everything we react to, clumped combinations of intellectual, emotional, societal values distilled to what it means to be you—to see as you. A bounded clump of consciousness—that's what I mean an artwork to be.

If you stand in front of an Agnes Martin painting or a Rothko painting or a good early Ryman painting there's a world there, there's a wholeness that has the three-dimensionality of emotion, perception, a kind of literalness—all of those things at once. And that my relationship to that onslaught usually is, "How can I hang on to all this all at once?" How can I remember it without defining it away; without killing it?" That is the tension that memory of art brings to me. The positive tension of feeling it slip away from me. And I think the same tension of an immediate wholeness necessarily slipping away is generated by the best of the Renaissance paintings; it's true of Giotto, and it's true of some of the best African art, too. Each of these works has greater presence than I expect it to be able to have, more than it has any right to have, and more that it can actually retain.



Richard Nonas, "Untitled (oil on paper mounted on canvas)," 2012. Wood, paper, oil paint. 5 × 5 × 0.75". Unique. Courtesy of the artist and James Fuentes.

Rail: Does what you're calling a "clump of consciousness" reside in the object or in the person?

Nonas: It resides in the interaction between the two!

Rail: As you're talking I'm thinking about an experience with, say, a Rothko painting. I think part of the experience of such a painting is the sense in which it does indeed create a world, but it's a kind of alien world. Because I often feel that a Rothko in a sense changes the whole feeling of the room in which it's hung. It takes over the room such that in entering the room, you feel as if you have entered into the space of the Rothko, that the painting's space takes over from and subverts the experience of the room as a particular space. So I wonder if there is something different about your work, where it does seem to be much more about the interaction. I don't know if "hostility" is the right word in speaking about a Rothko painting, but there is definitely a way in which that work forces you into a particular kind of relationship with it, if you are to have an experience with it beyond admiring its color palette, or something of the sort.

Nonas: I think there's no one way to do it, but I think that the most interesting fact is that some situations do that or some objects do that, and some objects don't do it. But the objects that do do it, don't necessarily do it in the same way. The Rothko does say "listen, not all worlds are friendly; not all lives are easy." [*Laughs.*] And, each world, each strong object, is friendly one moment and terrifying in the next. But, friendly or not, for a moment those objects can include everything. They can say everything, and part of what they say is, "Get me out of here!" [*Laughs.*] I think it's perfectly reasonable that some strong art is frightening or threatening. I agree with you about the Rothko, but I think it's very important to realize that that's not just a quality that exists abstractly within the painting. It's a quality that depends on an interrogative viewer, a viewer able or willing to acknowledge that complexity.

I find the word "acknowledge" to be very useful here. Its neutrality, its recognition of distance, of otherness, of wariness and lack of control; its quality of waiting and watching is what I mean it to communicate.

I started this conversation talking about place, place-ness, about moving through worlds as an observer, not necessarily as an artist. What I realized in Mexico was that there are physical places, spaces deeply imbued with human meaning, that can have a great deal of power over us, places that affect us in an extremely worldly way. And those places are still models for the



Richard Nonas, "Untitled (Table, 2 Chairs, 4 wall pieces)," 2011. Cedar wood. Dimensions variable. Unique. Courtesy of the artist and James Fuentes.

kind of art that I want to make. But I find I cannot do that directly. What I can do, though, is to make objects that function as tools to force those powerful places into existence.

Rail: I think this is a very important point, because if you think about something like, say, Minimalism, and you think about someone like Robert Morris and his gray plywood objects, that kind of work is seeking a direct, immediate impact, but is not necessarily involved in this kind of multilayered, complex emotional world, right? That work just wants to be present in the now, there with you, and that necessarily involves, I think, a kind of emotional valence. But, I think for you, by zeroing in on that more directly, the work actually becomes something of an acquired taste, experientially speaking. In a way you have to be ready for it.

This reminds me of the anthropological experience you mentioned, where you go into another culture, and then, at least at the beginning, a lot of the emotional life of the people you are studying seems alien to you in a way you don't understand. It has meaning for them, while for you, it's something close to nothing. It's really mysterious, and so, in a way, there is something similar about the anthropologist coming in and trying to understand that mysterious distance and difference from his or her own culture, and hopefully in the process gaining a certain level of sensitivity. Your work seems to me to play with that thin line, where a lot of people they could come and see these few pieces of wood stacked one on top of the other, and think, "What is this? I could do this myself"—the classic philistine's reaction. Your viewer has to be *ready* to experience your work, prepared to engage in that kind of intellectual labor, which is far from unavoidable.

Nonas: Well, not quite. They do have to be open to it, but it's my job to make them, trick them, into doing it. It's my job to disorient them into doing it. The kind of perception that I'm after comes from disorientation. It is what one sees out of the corner of one's eye, rather than what one already knows. It is a kind of protective distortion. There are not only different levels of perception, but different kinds of perception as well. It is the job of the artist to set up the situation in which the perception happens, not just within the work, but around the work too. That's what I mean by context. It is the job of the artist to build that context in which, for a moment, one sees the world slightly differently. That's what the art is. One moment sets off the process.

And how do you do that? Well, you do it in a lot of different ways. All strong artists, I think, develop techniques to do it. Everything depends on where you are looking from. The act of looking changes



Richard Nonas, "NY Storm Cracked Buttress (Floor Wall)

everything.

Wood Piece black walnut)," 2013. Wood, 26.25 × 4.5 × 4.5". Unique. Courtesy of the artist and James Fuentes.

Rail: In that way it's very different from the more didactic expression of the same idea in Robert Morris's "Three L Beams," where Morris takes three identical L beams, and places them in three different orientations, such that there is, in that work, the idea of the L beam that is held in the mind, which is then juxtaposed with the experience of those beams in actual space, where each one feels or seems different from the others, based solely on a simple act of rotation. But in your case, I think it becomes important to imagine the way that you're using a certain kind of material and a certain kind of scale, which is very different from what Morris is doing.

Nonas: Placement separates my work from Morris's. What Morris is doing is counting, separating one element from another. I want it all to happen at once, a kind of superimposition. If any separation is to be made in my work, you have to make it; it's not done for you, and you are not told how to do it. Everything is superimposed on everything else.

Rail: For Morris that kind of disorientation is the beginning and end of his project, and in that way it's something of a closed question, operating not unlike it does in a basic perceptual psychology textbook, which also tells its reader, "You see the L beam one way, and if you turn it in space then it becomes different experientially." But in your work the kind of disorientation that comprises the entirety of Morris's work is simply the initial seduction of the viewer that engenders in him or her a level of curiosity.

Nonas: Not curiosity, but openness. You may not feel curious, but there is something there you want to figure out. I think that Morris's work is about analysis and mine isn't. I don't want the piece itself to be an act of analysis. I want the piece to be the clump that Morris's analysis is analyzing. I want all the aspects that he is separating to be pushing against each other at once and as a unit. I'm not interested in taking things apart, I'm interested in what happens when they stay together, when they are together.



Richard Nonas, "NY Storm Cracked Wood (Wall black walnut)," 2013. Wood. 24 × 4.25 × 4.25". Courtesy of the artist and James Fuentes.

Rail: In this way your idea of art-as-tool seems a very constructive concept. Literally, but also figuratively, as in how using a tool to take something apart is not necessarily a purely destructive or nihilistic gesture, but can be seen as essentially constructive. In the sense that with a tool one takes apart in order to ask, "How does this work?" Or "how might it be

rearranged?”

Nonas: Sure it is, but I am not really much interested in taking things apart. Except, maybe, as you suggest, to begin to build something new. I'm interested in wholeness, the connectivity that changes everything.

But there are different sorts of tools, and I should probably think more about how I want to use that word. The act of analysis is itself reductionist. The assumption is, “This is going on, and this is also (separately) going on,” and we should add them all together in order to see what's really going on. But the whole, for me, is always more than the sum of its parts, and the tension between the unpacked box and the packed box is what interests me. The uncut whole, the unanalyzed whole, the physical immediacy and intellectual presence that is lost in the process of analysis is still what interests me the most. I think that a lot of the art that has been made recently is actually about both analysis and art historical positioning. And something profound is lost in both cases.

Rail: Returning to the example of Rothko, you might not remember exactly what colors you saw, or the way they were arranged, but the real take away is the very deep and complex emotional experience his paintings engender in the viewer. Working from this, I think for an artist of a younger generation, such as yourself, it becomes clear that this experience is the most important part of the work, and that you don't necessarily need to paint a canvas to get there. In your case you use very minimal materials, because you seem to realize that if experience is what matters, it can take on any sort of form as long as the appropriately intense experience results.

Nonas: The difference between grand materials and poor materials is an interesting distinction, but more interesting are the differences in the intellectual and emotional resonances of any materials at all. As a sculptor I, perhaps, start closer to the tactile world than a painter does. I want earthly solidity, familiarity in my materials, known substances with known characteristics, basic materials, and old ones, each different from the other. I want materials on the narrow edge between nature and culture, the place where one category comes close to slipping into the other. I use the same forms, and the same arrangements of those forms in wood, steel, and stone. There is an immense and powerful difference if I make a line in wood, and the same line in steel or stone. The line in wood is slower. It's more absorbent, figuratively as well as literally. It is gentle but it is shaky. Your eye dances along it. The steel line is hard and fast and cold. Your eye races. My job is to use those differences.

Rail: Why do you think you've been drawn to those particular materials? Because those three—wood, stone, and steel—do seem to account for the majority of your work. You have these big ideas about the kind of experience you want to create for the viewer, but then the work itself takes these very specific forms that seem to have recurred for you consistently through time.

Nonas: I understood from the beginning that charged, familiar materials and clear simple

geometric forms were what I needed to build with. I knew that everything in that building must be self-evidently clear that there could be no mystery about any part of what I was doing except the finished product itself. I knew that, like the half and half doubleness of anthropological fieldwork, everything must make sense except the unexpected inexplicable result. All or nothing it was and is.

***This quotation is often misattributed to famed astrophysicist Arthur Stanley Eddington, but is actually likely a variant on British geneticist and evolutionary biologist J.B.S. Haldane's "the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose." See Haldane, *Possible Worlds and Other Papers* (London: Harper and Brothers, 1927): p. 286.**



Richard Nonas, "Untitled (Wall Steel Piece)," Steel. Unique. Courtesy of the artist and James Fuentes.