

Raymond Mason's Hands, 2011

<https://raymondmason.wordpress.com>

"There is something coarse about it. The figures have been modelled with a hand that was all thumbs. (Or so one might think at first).

Mason's masterpieces are awkward monuments made during the last quarter of this century to a class that was slowly disappearing, with many of its members forced into terminal unemployment. A class which today scarcely exists but which left the world its own word: solidarity. I don't think Mason thought about this as a project; it was in his blood, or, to put it more finely, it was in what he took for granted and worked from."

– John Berger: *'The Shape of a Pocket'*, 2001

Yesterday would have been Raymond Mason's 89th birthday, he was born in Birmingham on the 2nd March 1922. I didn't discover his birth date until today, the 3rd March 2011.

I spent the morning of what would have been his 89th birthday at the New Art Gallery, Walsall, and must have seen an image of Mason's 'Forward!' sculpture somewhere in the gallery shop. On the drive home, I started remembering the one occasion when we met in the late 1980s. In Birmingham. At the time, we were both making work for the city's new Centenary Square. I bought him a large Scotch. I remember noticing his hands. Sculptor's hands. As we talked, he made a point by sketching the image below.



Yesterday afternoon, I searched for pictures of his hands and also researched his family tree. This blog is about his hands and, to a lesser extent, his family history. It is also about his ill-fated sculpture for Centenary Square.

What was 'Forward!' really about? Was it simply "a literal representation of the people of Birmingham's march from smoky factories towards a creamy future", as suggested by The Independent in 1993? Or, in

the male figure (with raised “industrial” hand at the front of the crowd) and the female figure (“personifying the Arts throwing a kiss to the past”), is there useful comment on Birmingham’s regeneration agenda of the late 1980s/early 1990s and its current Big City Plan?

Raymond Mason died in Paris on the 13th February 2010. The Telegraph obituary described him as “an artist in the British narrative tradition of Hogarth and Stanley Spencer, sculpting complex crowd scenes packed with detail; despite this, he made his home in Paris, where he was part of an artistic set that included Giacometti, Picasso and Henri-Cartier Bresson.”

His sculpture ‘Forward!’ was destroyed by arson on the 17th April 2003. As the Birmingham Post (19.02.2010) commented, “It was supposed to represent the city’s early 1990s renaissance, but in 2003 it was burned to the ground, a wanton act of vandalism by teenagers who showed little appreciation for the art of optimism and inner city regeneration.”

As the first line in the Post’s obituary so elegantly puts it, “The artist who regrettably proved that forward thinking can lead to backward behaviour has died.”

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*(image: Carl Robbins / News Team International)*



*(image: John Reavenall)*