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The All-But Architecture of Richard Serra

David Rifkind
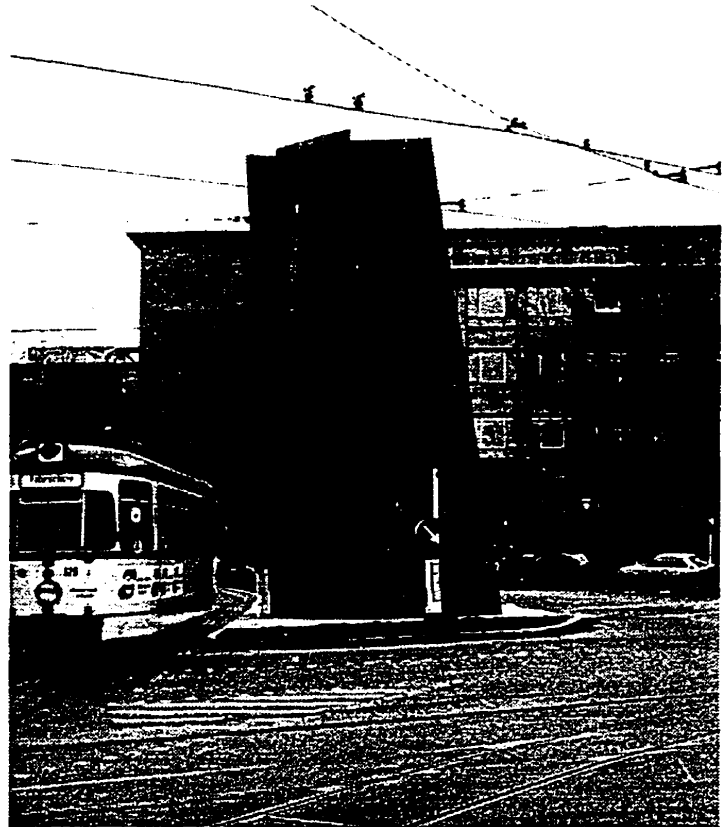
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abstract

Richard Serra's sculpture constitutes a political act through its analytical and operative strategies: analytical, when the work exposes the structures that frame our intersubjectivity, and operative, when the work acts as an example of resistance to the habitual acceptance of these structures. The significance of this oeuvre to architecture is that Serra's sculpture deliberately presents itself as something just shy of architecture, claiming its critical role to be that abandoned by – and proper to – architecture.

L'oeuvre sculpturale de Richard Serra costitue une action politique par ses stratégies analytiques et fonctionnelles: analytiques, quand l'oeuvre découvre les structures qui encadrent notre intersubjectivité, et fonctionnelles, quand l'oeuvre sert d'exemple de résistance au consentement habituel de ces structures. La signification de l'oeuvre sculpturale de Serra pour l'architecture est qu'elle se présente délibérément comme quelque chose de très proche de l'architecture, réclamant ainsi son rôle critique abandonné par, et propre à, l'architecture.

acknowledgments

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I especially want to thank Tony DeLeon for foregrounding architecture's unyielding control over human subjects.

And most of all I want to thank Holly Zickler for her love and incisive editing, and for making these studies both possible and meaningful.

If art mirrors the world, then the mirror is magical; it changes the world.[1]

introduction

Ten years ago I was a second-year architecture undergrad in Ross Silberman's design studio at the Boston Architectural Center. The subject for the semester was public art, a topic about which I had no clue, but was eager to learn. Maybe I thought that public art was something like architecture – a creative discipline with a component of public utility. I thus was wholly unprepared when we drove off to New York to experience firsthand Richard Serra's sculpture, *Tilted Arc*.

What little I had heard of the piece beforehand in no way qualified me to address it. I did not even know how to begin. It stood silent and obdurate, as though waiting for a question it would refuse to answer. I sought a resolution to this standoff and found myself posing existential queries like some latter-day Paul Gaugin: *why am I here? what purpose can this object serve? what do I do with it?*

Two years later *Tilted Arc* was removed from its site in front of the Javits Federal Building. I am haunted by the memory of this long-destroyed object. Perhaps it is because I find myself still asking these questions of it that I've returned to the subject of Serra's work. This thesis tries to resolve the suspicions that first arose in me ten years ago, that Serra's work acts as a kind of invitation to self-inspection, and that it resolutely questions its context in a fundamentally political manner.

The argument that I've tried to make in the thesis is that Serra's sculpture constitutes a political act through its analytical and operative strategies; analytical, when the work exposes the structures that frame our intersubjectivity, and operative, when the work acts as an example of

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1 Octavio Paz, *Children of the Mire*, 60.

resistance to the habitual acceptance of these structures. The significance of this oeuvre to architecture is that Serra's sculpture deliberately presents itself as something just shy of architecture, claiming its critical role to be that abandoned by – and proper to – architecture. All this despite Serra's own conviction concerning the boundaries between his art and architecture proper.

The claim to interdisciplinary intent is pervasive in today's architectural practice, as is the appropriation – by architects – of works in other fields under the banner of *other architectures* (e.g. the philosophy of Derrida or the films of the *Nouvelle Vague*). Yet architects have met the urban work of Richard Serra with suspicion, perhaps because this work represents an appropriation of architectural space, matter and technique – an appropriation that specifically criticizes the role architecture plays in the metropolis. This thesis tries to flesh out what Serra only hints at aloud, that his sculpture presents an operative critique of architectural practice, hinged about the political vector of public art activity.

The importance, and even the validity, of pursuing this critique of architecture rests upon a single, contentious question: *is the political realm properly an architectural concern?*

Perhaps the clearest answer – in the affirmative – lies in Serra's work, which posits the political as not only proper, but essential to architecture. The difficulty, though, of demonstrating this proposition lies in Serra's refusal to name the political as a central preoccupation of his mature work. The effort required to read this vector through Serra's oeuvre is necessary, I feel, for architects facing the unameliorable itch of our own cultural irrelevance at millennium's turn. Serra's work reminds us that architecture can again speak critically of its context, and in so doing, help us (as a polity) to define for ourselves appropriate action as we transform our world through the poetic imagination.

It is not difficult to see the political activism of Serra's early work; he discusses this period, for instance, in terms of resistance to the gallery-economy of art. In his later sculpture, though, Serra has consistently fought the efforts of critics to reduce his work to political commentary. Yet his work reveals that the political dimension is inseparable from that of the poetic for an artist engaged in the public realm. The issue here is Serra's assumption of the critical, poetic and tragic roles abdicated by architecture.

This thesis will focus primarily on the specific critique of architecture offered by Serra's work, but it will also examine the manner in which Serra challenges the structures which frame relationships between social subjects. These structures – including geometry, intersubjectivity, authority and property – are interrogated through sculpture by the participating subject who asks: how is the frame of our interactivity constituted, and what are the consequences of our actions? This critical stance is best evidenced by Serra's urban, site-specific works, and it is around these works that this discussion will revolve.

The most contentious area of this study is probably my defense of Serra's claim that his work is non-representational and non-metaphorical. He would say rather that the work's "content" resides in its relationships to site and participant. The question of how a work can be poetic without being referential is a difficult one, and so I ask the reader to temporarily suspend disbelief while I work through this argument.

Because this thesis attempts to focus on a specific aspect of Serra's relationship to architecture, I've avoided recounting the well-publicized controversies that have dogged several of his public works. The most notorious episode is that of *Tilted Arc*, which was destroyed two years after its construction. These controversies reflect another aspect of art's intersection with politics, but one that has little relevance to the study at hand. For those

interested in the case of Tilted Arc, I recommend consulting Serra's own accounts in *"Tilted Arc* Destroyed" and "Art and Censorship" (both reprinted in *Richard Serra Writings/Interviews*), and the collected testimonies and legal decisions in *The Destruction of Tilted Arc: Documents*, edited by Clara Weyergraf-Serra and Martha Buskirk. For more on several of Serra's other major conflicts, consult Douglas Crimp "Serra's Public Sculpture: Redefining Site Specificity" in *Richard Serra Sculpture*.

I offer one last note as a prelude to this thesis, a caveat regarding repetition. There is a strong sense of déjà vu awaiting the Serra scholar. Often his texts – articles and interviews – contain statements repeated from previous texts, each time modified slightly in (and by) a new context. This repetition and transformation parallels a similar strategy we find in his sculpture – over and again a repetition of form, each time incrementally different in form or context, each time revealing a reciprocal operation as object and context change one another. The subtleties of size, scale, orientation and adjacency play out through a temporal dimension viewed over an entire oeuvre, and mirror the experiential subtleties of physical relationships contained within each installation. In order to embody the experience of revisiting works transformed thusly I've employed repetition as a structural strategy throughout the thesis.

Serra: *In my work I analyze the site and determine to redefine it in*
         terms of sculpture, not in terms of the existing physiognomy.
         I have no need to augment existing contextual languages.
         I'm not interested in affirmation.

Eisenman: *But you are also not interested in negation.*

Serra: *No. I'm interested in sculpture; site-specific sculpture.*[2]

first skirmish with the subject

How are we to speak meaningfully of a political vector proper to architecture? Our focus is the sculptural activity of Richard Serra and its critique of architecture's politicality, yet what we first need to establish is just how architecture can operate politically, and whether this political action is indeed necessary. This is not to say that Serra's work takes the political responsibilities of architecture as anything like a primary obsession; yet neither does it imply that political content can be separated discreetly from other aspects of Serra's work. Perhaps it is just that in Serra's vocation we can recognize a role that architecture has neglected and must recover.

The political realm is the ethical horizon of sociability. The political is both situational – existing in the interrelationships of subjects, things and actions – and judgmental, in that we are constantly faced with the burden of choice before the necessity of action. Our judgment is a constant translation into action of criticism and interpretation; the basis for judgment is a set of political values that are inherently conditional and motile, and forever in need of reconciliation with the immutable principles of philosophy. We forever negotiate the political terrain of existence, trailing our verdicts like footprints.[3]

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2 Richard Serra quoted by Peter Eisenman, "Interview by Peter Eisenman" *Richard Serra Writings/Interviews*, 147.
3 One of my principal sources in these assertions is Benjamin Barber, *The Conquest of Politics.*

But what has architecture to do with this negotiation? If anything, architecture's role in maintaining the continuity of culture makes it a force in conserving, not challenging, societal values. Yet at the same time architecture has long operated as a place of orientation, the site where we can recognize ourselves in the world (our relationship to a universe of others) and resolve our roles and choices of action (our responsibilities to those others). Such recognition of relationships and choices within a society constitutes political reflection. Architecture has served as signpost and vessel for this orientation which manifests our sitedness in being (our situation in the world) and establishes a stable reference for our critical faculty, a vantage from which to understand and engage the world.

More immediately apparent are the consequences of inaction by architects in failing to address the inescapable political function of architecture. In repressing this role under a veil of economic accommodation, architecture has come primarily to reflect market, rather than moral, values.[4] The question is not the inability of architecture to speak meaningfully to a public that lacks a shared metaphysic, but rather the responsibility of architecture to acknowledge its existing role in perpetuating the economic, spatial and other habitudes that form the ethical structure of society. It is these habitudes that Serra explores directly through work that approaches architecture – at once announcing the inseparability of political and poetic imagination in art, and

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Barber might disagree with my interpretations of his project, which chiefly involves the reconciliation of philosophy and politics – striking a balance between theoretical and practical action, between reason and engagement. He posits political judgment as a communal interaction that aims to establish a world of common ends, and thus he would particularly dissociate himself from any implication on my part that a single subject participating in Serra's work is capable of political judgment; rather, Barber would place this activity in the Kantian category of aesthetic judgment. "Indeed, common civic activity constitutes what we mean by political judgment." 199.
4 There are numerous sources for the argument that architects have abdicated certain responsibility for society and the metropolis, such as Eisenman's in his brief article, "A Critical Practice: American Architecture in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century" in *Education of an Architect*, Hejduk, ed. This belief underlies Eisenman's own political aspiration "to disconnect, to displace, to dislocate" and he returns to this theme repeatedly, more recently asserting that, "...architecture has become the accommodation of the real... There can be no ideology of confrontation here;... It is an ideology

declaring the primacy of such concerns for architecture. These assertions begin with his choice to operate in the public realm.

With *To Encircle Base Plate Hexagram* (1970-72) Serra chose to engage the public directly. Without the mediation of representation (the most common experience of his land art contemporaries' work) and the institutional aegis of the museum, Serra presented his work in all its vulnerability – in the public domain. This choice to engage the public initiates Serra's ethical concerns. His choice to trade obscurity for vulnerability is based on the belief that poetic expression finds its relevance in accessibility to, and interaction with, the public. His poetics reveal relationships: of self and world, of power and propriety, of alienation. This process of revelation is manifested publicly through participation in a work which declares a role – a matrix of responsibility – for the artist, the

To Encircle Base Plate Hexagram

architect, the cultural producer and the public itself.

Serra's urban work is a different kind of obelisk, a marker revealing orders of control in the metropolis. But this marker is not like the obelisks of Sixtus V, which symbolized and reinforced papal power in Rome – Serra's arcs and props reveal conditions of alienation in western culture, and offer clues to the roots of these conditions. Serra's work is critical of the property structure that allows anything (land, art, ideas) to be bartered, and therefore alienated. But beyond economics, he also reveals the limit conditions of Cartesian geometry as a spatial habitude that frames intersubjectivity. In fact, he forms a

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of capital accommodation." Eisenman, "Eleven Points on Knowledge and Wisdom" *Anywise,* 50.

critique of numerous systems that structure relationships: including intersubjectivity, spatiality and authority, along with property.

The homogeneity of space, a key Cartesian concept is exposed critically through gallery installations that declare "their own place and space." Serra conflicts with the geometers' belief in the interchangeability of dimensions, presenting depth as something fundamentally different, a dimension that speaks of human engagement in the world (see below, *The quiet Serra*). The canonical status of authority and the genius-myth of artistic invention are challenged by Serra's use of rigging, a collaboration with construction workers that shows the poetic content of art to reside elsewhere than in the artist's skillful handiwork. This stance foregrounds the possibility of artistic expression by any citizen, and presents that expression as the basis for critical action by an engaged polity (see below, *Poetry without metaphor*).

In particular, he shows architecture to be the place of orientation and of resistance, where we can understand these relationships and engage them critically. As a place of orientation, architecture is the site of self-questioning, where participating subjects can recognize themselves in a world they actively transform. As a place of resistance, architecture is a vehicle for unearthing and contravening the frameworks and consequences of interactivity. Yet these roles are shown to remain as possibilities unfulfilled. Serra's work assumes the place of architecture — adopting the materiality, process, space and scale of architecture — and declares architecture guilty in its inaction (despite its claims to neutrality, in the mode of Bataille's *Literature and Evil*[5]) denying architects the innocence assumed by a profession that abdicates ethical responsibility in favor of economic accommodation.

> *You can say that every context or frame has its ideological overtones. We*
> *are talking about a particular kind of artist who was interested not only*

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5 Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, x. "Literature is not innocent. It is guilty and should admit

in materiality but in production processes and a critique of the frame and all the social relations that define this frame. A highly figurative or symbolic architecture is as interesting as any other situation in that it can be revealed and criticized. However, most of the work that attempts to do that allows the context to dictate the critique. A lack of critical distance will reduce even abstract work to a representational rendering of a given context. Only work that points to the condition of the frame and at the same time maintains a certain degree of independence can elicit the critical connotations.[6]

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itself so. Action alone has its rights, its prerogatives..."
6 Serra quoted by Alan Colquhoun, "A Conversation with Richard Serra and Alan Colquhoun" *Richard Serra Writings/Interviews*, 234.

a political history

Serra's critical stance first focused on the institutions of the art market and the mechanisms of art commodification. By 1966 he was working as a sculptor, and at that time the art market's alienation of art product from artist/producer was very much the subject of concern for artists in Europe (e.g. Daniel Buren's marxism) and America (e.g. Robert Morris's *Document*[7]). What set Serra apart in this context were his methods. He used site-inseparability to counter the portability (and thus commodifiability) of the art object. Portability is a key aspect of commodification, allowing items to be bartered discretely, which is to say, separate from any context, including labor, history or site. Serra linked commodification and aestheticization (both a removal from context) in *Splashing* (1968), *Casting* (1969) and *Tearing Lead from 1:00 to 1:47* (1968). These works were executed *in situ* in a manner that would not allow them to be removed from their *physical context*. At the same time process was manifest in the works' final form, foregrounding industrial production techniques in lieu of the artist's fetishized handiwork, partly denying the aestheticization of the object, its removal

Splashing

from a *cultural context*. From the beginning, Serra's work announced its unwillingness to be transported to a familiar venue for comfortable viewing; his sculpture created its own space and declared the terms on which it demanded judgment.

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7 In 1963 Morris withdrew artistic value from his earlier homage to Duchamp, *Litanies*, which he had sold to Philip Johnson, "Statement of Esthetic Withdrawal. The undersigned, ROBERT MORRIS, being the maker of the metal construction entitled LITANIES, described in the annexed Exhibit A, hereby withdraws from said construction all esthetic quality and content." Maurice Berger, *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960's,* 19.

Splashing, Casting and *Tearing Lead* were the works which first brought Serra recognition in New York art circles – ironically, considering that they were in part a critique of those circles. In particular, *Splashing* heralded the radical practice that lay ahead. It could
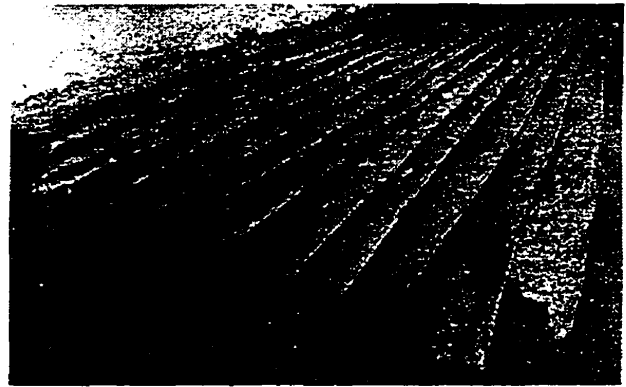
Casting

barely be understood as sculpture, as Douglas Crimp wrote, "Along the juncture where wall met floor, Serra had tossed molten lead and allowed it to harden in place. The result was not really an object at all; it had no definable shape or mass; it created no legible image."[8] It was inseparable from a site which it resolutely altered. Yet for these
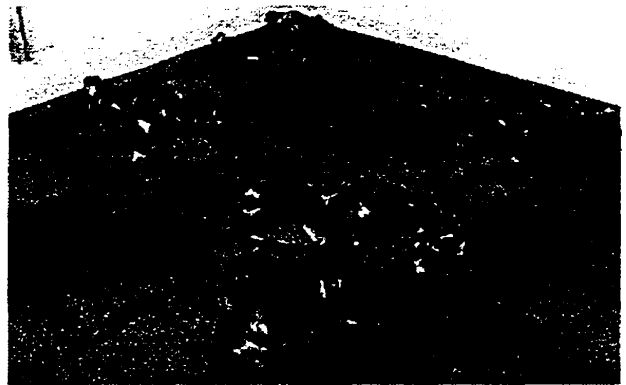
Tearing Lead from 1:00 to 1:47

projects, as well as for the indoor prop pieces which immediately followed, the work could still be read in canonical terms of figure and ground, sculpture and pedestal – conventions that Serra sought to leave behind, at least partly in order to liberate art from values (such as mercantilism) foreign to it.[9]

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8 Crimp continues, "...And we could see that by effacing the line where the wall rose up perpendicular to the floor, Serra was obscuring a marker for our orientation in interior space, claiming that space as the ground of a different kind of perceptual experience. Our difficulty with *Splashing* was to imagine its very possibility of continued existence in the world of art objects. There it was, attached to the structure of that old warehouse on the Upper West Side, condemned to be abandoned there forever or to be scraped off and destroyed. For to remove the work meant certainly to destroy it." Douglas Crimp, "Serra's Public Sculpture: Redefining Site Specificity" *Richard Serra Sculpture*, 41-2.
9 "These pieces utilizing the floor and the wall retained a memory of pictorial concerns even though their content was predicated on their axiomatic building principles." Serra quoted by Bernard Lamarche-Vadel "Interview by Bernard Lamarche-Vadel" *Richard Serra Writings/Interviews*, 115.

Fortunately, serendipity lay just around the corner, or more precisely, was propped up in the corner. While using a small piece of metal propped by the juncture of two walls to make *Splash Piece: Casting* (1969-70), Serra realized that he needed nothing more than a room's corner to stand up a plate of steel. He experimented with scale and size, settling on an inch-thick plate eight feet by twenty-four feet and weighing nearly three tons. The careful rigging and precise balance of the work culminated his growing concern for the thresholds of construction, a concern that continues to obsess him.

The piece in question, *Strike* (1969) established a new paradigm of sculptural installation. With this work (and *Twins* and *Circuit*, both 1972) sculpture thickened. Architectural space (at first in the galleries, later in the exterior installations) assumed the relative opacities of human (lived) experience when transformed by Serra's sculptures, predicated as they were on the experience of a subject implanted in the world. The presence of an experiencing subject (whose
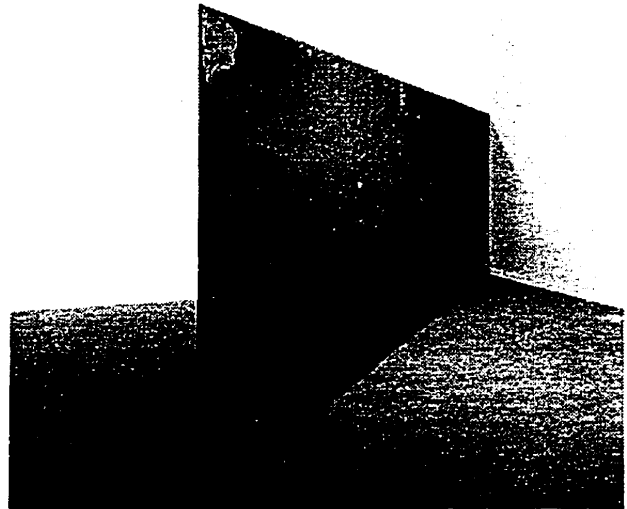
Strike

embodied perception is both temporal and forever incomplete) who actively probes these works stands in sharp contrast to such immediate modern precedents as the complete transparencies promised by Constructivism, and the atemporal experience promoted by Michael Fried, writing in the context of post-war Abstract Expressionism.[10] Rosalind Krauss discusses how the literal transparency of Constructivist tectonics (especially in drawings and sculptural materials) represented theoretically transparent hermeneutics,

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10 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" in Gregory Battcock, ed. *Minimal Art.* Fried's contribution

illustrating the Constructivist belief that history could be rendered fully legible through materialist critique (as though the structures of Althusser's ideologies were as apparent as the structures of Chernokov's projects).[11] In contrast, Serra depends on the sitedness (spatially, temporally and historically) of a subject who can interrogate existence from within. Krauss's phenomenological analysis shows that Serra's work acknowledges the necessary presence of the participating subject in space and time –

Twins

through the physical body – and in history – a hermeneutic perspective whose limits are the vantage of a subject situated in history:
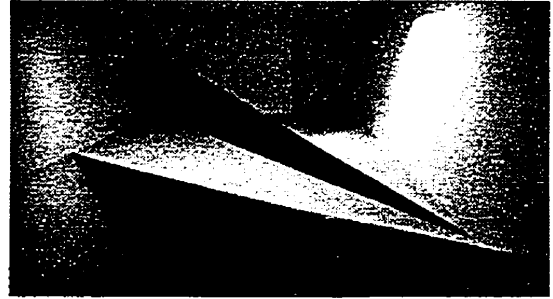
> *Thus insofar as* Twins *articulates its own concern with the double-sidedness of each element, it coordinates this with the conditions of the viewer's body: the fact that that body has a front from which it sees and a back which it knows to be there but cannot see. Yet it is this very unseen, and unseeable, side that thickens the world for the perceiver, that assures him that things have reverse sides, namely, those aspects that, being hidden from him, are revealed to each other. And just as the continuous presence of the body provides the ground of continuity for seaming together the cuts of* Circuit, *so the sitedness of that body is revealed as the precondition for 'knowing' the density and multiple-aspectedness of the structure of* Twins.[12]

The experience of the work is a process of discovery that is above all a process of self-discovery. In a space transformed by Serra's work we recognize

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to 1960's art discourse is discussed in detail in the chapter The Weight of History.
11 Rosalind Krauss, *Richard Serra Sculpture*, p.28.
12 Ibid.

that the condition of "knowing" means drawing a link between perception and judgment – a link, Octavio Paz tells us, that consists of imagination. Our construction of correspondences (between what is perceived and what is already assimilated) in order to understand the world enacts the poetic faculty of analogy.[13] As much as they announced the primacy of direct physical experience in sculpture, *Strike*, *Circuit* and *Twins* foregrounded the necessity of each participant's poetic imagination for comprehending that experience.
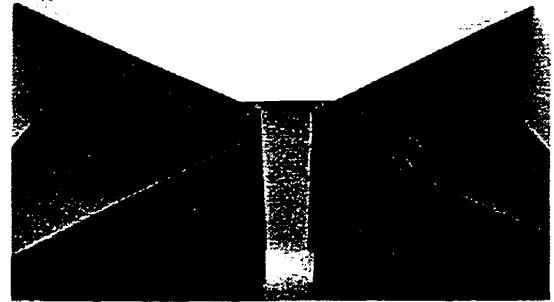
Circuit

Yet as much as these works engaged their participants in an active negotiation of content and meaning, still they sheltered in the aesthetic retreat of the museum. The problem with this context is its insularity from public life – those participants who are engaged are drawn from a relatively small slice of the populace. Serra found this situation problematic, and so he chose to leave the gallery altogether in 1970. That year, *Shift* joined *Spiral Jetty* and *Double Negative* in leaving behind (at least temporarily) the world of commodity relations that had enmired contemporary sculpture by seeking remote locations – far from the New York and Los Angeles galleries – in which to practice site-specific art.
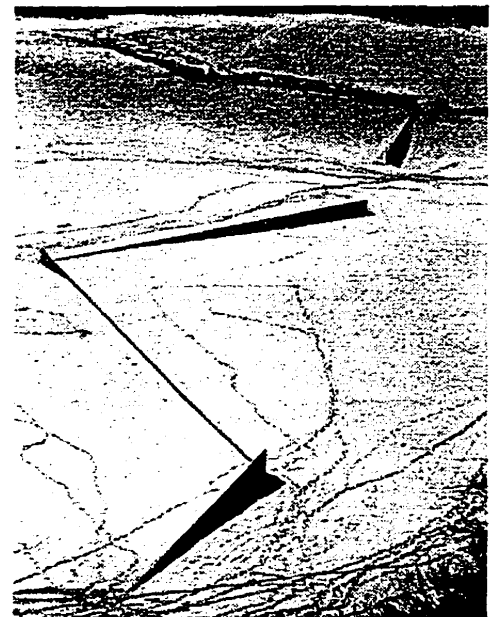
Shift

Built in a farmer's field outside Toronto, *Shift* came partly from Serra's experience helping Robert Smithson lay out

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13 Paz, *Children of the Mire*, 52.

Spiral Jetty. But *Shift* also grew from Serra's interest in the relationships between bodies in space, an interest fueled by his collaboration with performance artist and filmmaker Joan Jonas. *Shift* traces and choreographs the movement of two people trying to maintain visual contact across a small valley. The six concrete sections each run perpendicular to the immediate land fall, starting flush at grade and stretching horizontally until the ground has dropped five feet. Not just a record of two people once there, *Shift* reveals the reciprocity innate to vision by simultaneously enabling vision and visibility. Vision, the bellwether of a perceptual gestalt with which we constitute ourselves as subjects, is shown to be always and at the same time the means of our objectification, our availability to a world of others. This situated experience of being forever caught up in a world we coincidentally survey is understood here in relation to a perpetually moving horizon.

> *The plates' top edge functions as a surrogate horizon being placed into specific elevational intervals as you walk the entire field.*[14]

The phenomenological implications are powerful in this work, which testifies to an act of measure-taking against the index of an investigator's body, as opposed to the abstract geometries of cartography. Its witnesses are two subjects exploring a place from within. Serra describes the internal horizon of the work as fluid, like the horizon in relation to a person in motion. *Shift* makes clear Serra's concern for the relationship of sculpture to conditions exterior to the work itself, particularly site and participation. Serra's work prompts an active negotiation, an unraveling through walking and looking that through

Shift

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14 Serra quoted by Liza Bear, "Interview by Liza Bear" *Richard Serra Writings/Interviews*, 46. See

analogy transforms the interrogation of the sited object into an investigation of one's self in relation to site.

I became interested in larger scale and larger masses. The discrete object dissolved into the sculptural field which is experienced in time... All the landscape pieces involved anticipation and reflection and walking and experiencing the time of the landscape... At that point, the basic content changed from a discrete object in the round to walking in time, which has to do with anticipation and reflection. It is a different concept of organizing space.[15]

The remote location of *Shift* proved problematic for Serra. Its isolated site, like those favored by his land art contemporaries,[16] served as an analogue to the removal of the gallery, a distancing from public – common – space that removed art from immediate relevance to the public. "What most people know of Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, for example, is an image shot from a helicopter. When you actually see the work, it has none of that purely graphic character, but then almost no one has really seen it."[17] For Serra the work must engage the public, and it must do so directly.

If you build a piece in the desert, you have the possibility of remaining private while working on a large scale, and then bringing your private concerns back to the public in the form of documentation. I have never found that satisfying. I would rather have the actual experience of the work at urban scale. I made a definite decision when there was a possibility of working in an isolated site by saying, 'no, I would rather be more vulnerable and deal with the reality of my living situation, which is

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also note 82.

15 Serra, "Rigging" *Richard Serra Writings/Interviews*, 98-9.
16 Of his project *Lightning Field*, Walter De Maria wrote, "Isolation is the essence of Land Art." quoted in John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond.*
17 Serra quoted by Crimp, "Richard Serra's Urban Sculpture, An interview by Douglas Crimp", 129.

urban.' Works in remote landscapes involve a contradiction that I have never been able to resolve.[18]

But why a specifically urban public and not just a gallery or desert public? It can be argued, after all, that Serra's sculpture could just as easily remain indoors, engaging an (albeit smaller) audience better tuned to his aspirations. But like representation, location is a choice that always bears the mark of exclusion.

> *I think there's another thing that is absolutely true – that once you get out of the institutions which codify the work – the museums, corporations, galleries – the work relinquishes their protective moral envelope. My real aspiration – and what I've been trying to do for twenty years – is to take it out of the places that are considered the cultural institutions and bring it into a greater dialogue, for better or for worse, with the general condition of where people are. My works deal head-on with their architectural sites.*[19]

With *To Encircle Base Plate Hexagram* Serra chose to engage the public directly. Without the mediation of representation and the institutional aegis of the museum, Serra presented his work in all its vulnerability – in the public domain. The choice to engage the public, which initiated Serra's ethical concerns, appears here explicitly.

To Encircle built on the importance Serra had accorded to participation in *Shift*, yet now Serra brought his concerns to the city – specifically, to a derelict site in the Bronx (the best site New York's bureaucrats would allow him). [20] He had come full circle to understand that the poetic potential of sculpture stems from its active interpretation by an invested public, and that that

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18 Ibid.
19 Serra quoted by Robert Morgan, "Interview with Robert C. Morgan" *Richard Serra Writings/Interviews*, 187-8.
20 It may be misleading to draw a linear path from *Shift* to *To Encircle Base Plate Hexagram*. Both were conceived contemporaneously (along with *Pulitzer Piece*, an outdoor work in Saint Louis), and are also tied to work and observations Serra made in Japan during that time. The interaction between these works is complex, and perhaps outside the parameters of this study; it is important

potential is realized when the work engages the city, the places *where people are.*

Here the quiet and disquiet of Serra appear very clearly, as the interplay of existential self-questioning and an art of resistance. The thickness of Serra's work is the oscillation between its quiet and disquiet conditions, each a type of ethical concern. The first condition asks to what end *are* we; the second, how must we *act*?

...

to understand that from this period on he was to pursue work in the metropolis, "where people are."

the quiet Serra

In the quiet of Serra's work, we are left only with our self and with this object which has no obvious use and no pictorial reference – it simply is, and continues to be. We are confronted with action and existence as we struggle to locate purpose, much like gallery-goers in 1967 who found themselves lured by an exhibition invitation inscribed with the *Verb List*, a collection of infinitives punctuated with prepositional phrases. Just as the *Verb List* points to act after act and leaves us asking *to what end*, these transitory sculptures point to our existence and leave us asking the same question about ourselves. We are left as subjects seeking an object, a direction.

Serra's work provides no easy point of entrance. In the absence of representation we face the fact of materiality. In the absence of utility we ponder purpose. In the context of Minimalist painting, Toby Mussman wrote that in "intruding on our normally functional world" the work of art "demands our investigation and contemplation."[21] The work's apparent silence begs our questioning. We have to ask, as Hans-Georg Gadamer does, how it is that the work of art comes to address us.[22]

to roll	to scatter
to crease	to arrange
to fold	to repair
to store	to discard
to bend	to pair
to shorten	to distribute
to twist	to surfeit
to dapple	to complement
to crumple	to enclose
to shave	to surround
to tear	to encircle
to chip	to hide
to split	to cover
to cut	to wrap
to sever	to dig
to drop	to tie
to remove	to bind
to simplify	to weave
to differ	to join
to disarrange	to match
to open	to laminate
to mix	to bond
to splash	to hinge
to knot	to mark
to spill	to expand
to droop	to dilute
to flow	to light
to curve	to modulate
to lift	to distill
to inlay	of waves
to impress	of electromagnetic
to fire	of inertia
to flood	of ionization
to smear	of polarization
to rotate	of refraction
to swirl	of simultaneity
to support	of tides
to hook	of reflection
to suspend	of equilibrium
to spread	of symmetry
to hang	of friction
to collect	to stretch
of tension	to bounce
of gravity	to erase
of entropy	to spray
of nature	to systematize
of grouping	to refer
of layering	to force
of felting	of mapping
to grasp	of location
to tighten	of context
to bundle	of time
to heap	of carbonization
to gather	to continue

Verb List

What is at stake is the possibility of self-understanding enacted through participation in the work. "The intermediary step, in the direction of existence," wrote Paul Ricoeur, "is reflection, that is, the link between the understanding of signs and self-understanding." The hermeneutic operation is predicated on phenomenology's perspectivism, which holds that any

...

21 Toby Mussman, "Literalness and the Infinite" in Battcock, ed. *Minimal Art.*

knowledge is from the vantage of an individual, questioning subject; any understanding of the exterior world is necessarily and always in relation to that subject. "The purpose of all interpretation is to conquer a remoteness, a distance between the past cultural epoch to which the text belongs and the interpreter himself," Ricoeur continues. "By overcoming this distance, by making himself contemporary with the text, the exegete can appropriate its meaning to himself: foreign, he makes it familiar, that is, he makes it his own. It is thus the growth of his own understanding of himself that he pursues through his understanding of the other. Every hermeneutics is thus, explicitly or implicitly, self-understanding by means of understanding others." [23] In attempting to interpret the work we encounter the possibility of self-understanding. What distinguishes Serra's work from other "texts" is its principal orientation to the experience of the beholder, an experience without which, Serra would argue, his sculpture has no content. While the dynamic necessity of hermeneutics lies hidden in our seemingly transparent everyday existence, Serra's work precipitates it. It demands our recognition of both "distanciation" (the inalienable distance between the object and its other) and "appropriation" as the very condition of self-understanding.

This invitation to inspection stands in stark contrast to the contemporary condition of architecture. Both architecture and banal plaza art are able to consistently avoid being questioned at the fundamental level of purpose. It is enough that they assume a role; rarely is that role investigated critically. Buildings, being explicitly functional, are presumed to serve some purpose while plaza art, if not in some way provocative, is accustomed to serving a monumental or ornamental role in subservience to public spaces. In either case, both architecture and public art evade "our investigation and contemplation" through the assumption of function.

...

22 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 25.

Consider the irony of this situation, given the difficult public reception of Serra's (and indeed any provocative artist's) work. Architecture embodies and enforces public values, and yet no matter how bankrupt the values evidenced by the worst speculative construction, building continues unabated by public criticism on these terms. Serra's work, however, does provoke – however one judges it, it demands judgment. While architecture quietly goes about its purposes, avoiding scrutiny, Serra's sculpture refuses to be dismissed without a hearing.

"The work issues a challenge which expects to be met," wrote Gadamer, who named participation as the key activity through which art (which "is more philosophical than history") allows truth to appear. The work, "requires an answer – an answer that can only be given by someone who accepted the challenge. And that answer must be his own, and given actively."[24]

Twain

For Serra, such participation in the work is not only demanded, it is rewarded. In *Twain* (1974-82), the stockade form of the work challenges the viewer to look *into* the work for meaning, a probe which quickly becomes a look *through* when two apertures are aligned. But the sight lines framed by the work don't simply present a view, they link a ground to be looked *across* with a prospect from which to look *out*. The chiasm of vision's reciprocity is enacted through the participant's perambulation. The project initiates a process of its own unraveling, of being questioned through

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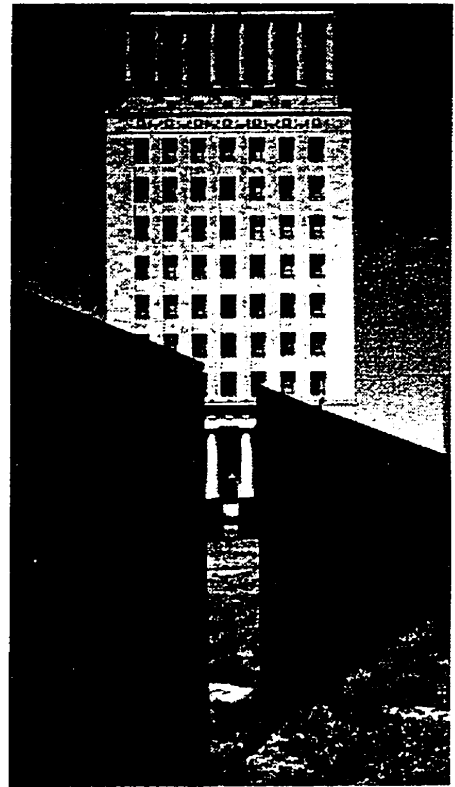
23 Paul Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics" *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 16-17.

perception. The depth of investigation to which Serra's works admit themselves parallels Gadamer's assertion that "reading is not just scrutinizing or taking one word after another, but means above all performing a constant hermeneutic movement guided by the anticipation of the whole, and finally fulfilled by the individual in the realization of the total sense." [25]

Clearly, the engagement of an interested participant is crucial to Serra's sculpture. The work is always built in anticipation of an experiencing subject. What that subject finds is a richness of possible interpretations sprung from the object's obstinate refusal to be named, its refusal to stand *for* something else. Rather, the work stands *between* the participant and site. This stance will be discussed in depth below.

Parallel to his work in the city, Serra has continued to work in galleries. There are advantages to this context, particularly in allowing him to bracket (momentarily) the economic portion of his political concerns and focus on more existential (yet, as we'll see, no less political) questions. Serra's gallery sculptures like *Unequal Elevations* (1975), declare their space to be significantly/qualitatively different from any other. The work asks to be experienced in context, and in doing so reveals the
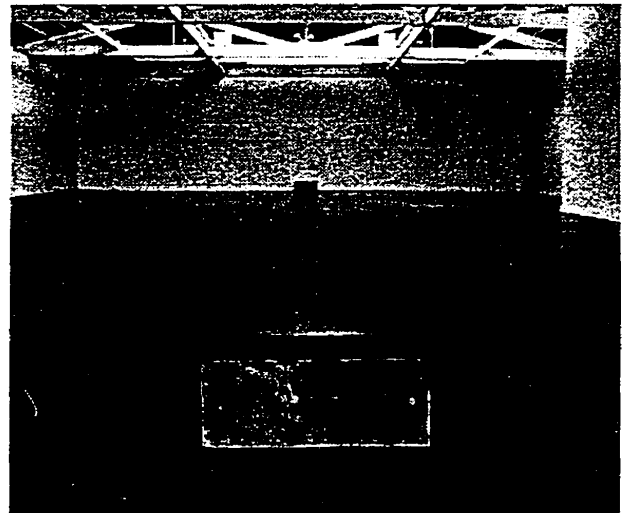
Unequal Elevations

peculiarity of that context. While the surrounding gallery's blank walls pretend to be equivalent, undifferentiated, non-hierarchical, these pieces point to those walls and declare the space between them to be *already* significant. What exists is shown to be inherently different, heterogeneous.

...

24 Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 26.

Against Descartes' interchangeable dimensions Serra opposes an experiential work whose subject negotiates the opacities of depth.

The eye of God of the empiricists and intellectualists (and for that matter, the constructivists) views a transparent world of three equivalent dimensions in which things and people exist. Maurice Merleau-Ponty challenges this homogeneity through depth, "the most 'existential' of all dimensions."[26] Space for him is not an ether in which things bob about, but rather is the power enabling things to be connected. "Thus depth cannot be understood as belonging to the thought of an acosmic subject, but as a possibility of a subject involved in the world."[27] Our involvement is our implantation in the world through our bodies, our "incomprehensible solidarity"[28] with things.

Serra claims nothing so grand as challenging the uniformity of Cartesian space. Yet his gallery works can be read as such, either through Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, or in light of Heidegger's critique in *Art and Space*.[29] Heidegger places the onus of criticism on the artist; given the quantitative homogeneity of space since Descartes and Newton, the artist or architect has to *make*, rather than *find*, site. In examining a given context and seeking to "redefine it in terms of sculpture"[30] Serra has brought true site-specificity back to a number of exterior sites (such as those of *Twain, St. John's Rotary Arc* and *Tilted Arc*) whose innate qualities had been backgrounded by generic planning practices. His site-specificity is predicated on a practice of sculpture inseparable from (and contingent to) each particular site.

I think that sculpture, if it has any potential at all, has the potential to create its own place and space, and to work in contradiction to the spaces and places where it is created in this sense. I am interested in work where

...

25 Ibid., 28.
26 Maurice Merleau-Ponty *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 261.
27 Ibid., 267.
28 Ibid., 172-3.
29 Martin Heidegger, "Art and Space" *Man and World*, IV (1973).

the artist is a maker of 'anti-environment' which takes its own place or

makes its own situation, or divides or declares its own area.[31]

This stance is equally present in Serra's works outdoors and those in the

gallery. Take the example of the significantly-titled *Consequence* (1977). Here,

two forged steel rectangular blocks of identical dimension are placed so that

one is on end in relation to the other.

While museum catalogues only
register this gesture by transposing
dimensions (length becomes width,
width is switched with height) Serra
claims these dimensions to be
qualitatively different. What may
seem like a trivial play of measures
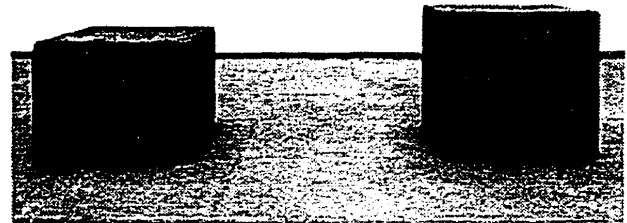
Consequence

reveals the depth of our acceptance of a geometric descriptive system that

defines any understanding of physical relationships, and acts as a model for

our understanding of many social relationships. We return to the question of

depth, and with it the political dimension of Cartesian space: how is our basic

understanding of space constituted, and what are the consequences of this

framework for our choices in inhabiting space?

One consequence of uniform systems of measurement (*every* centimeter

being the same as any other) is that they assist the decontextualization of

sculpture. The forged prisms of *Consequence* have a relationship of mass,

weight and measure – a physical relationship that is modified by their

situation within a specific room. Above all, this relationship is *experiential*,

and cannot be reduced to the terms of descriptive geometry. Yet this reduction

is always made (along with title, author, age, material and ownership,

dimensions are the key statistics of art history) and begins the erosive

...
30 Serra quoted by Eisenman, "Interview by Peter Eisenman", 147.

process of decontextualization: sculpture is rendered in terms other than its own, terms valid to any place (which is to say, no place) and any thing (which is to say, nothing). The problem of universal (and placeless) geometric systems dovetails with political concerns through the question of criteria used in judgment.

Berlin Block for Charlie Chaplin (1977) is in a way an enlarged *Consequence*. Yet here a single six-foot three-inch cube of forged steel is placed in dynamic opposition to Mies van der Rohe's National Gallery in Berlin. The lift of Mies' canopy is countered by the sink of Serra's cube, embedded at a slight angle in the
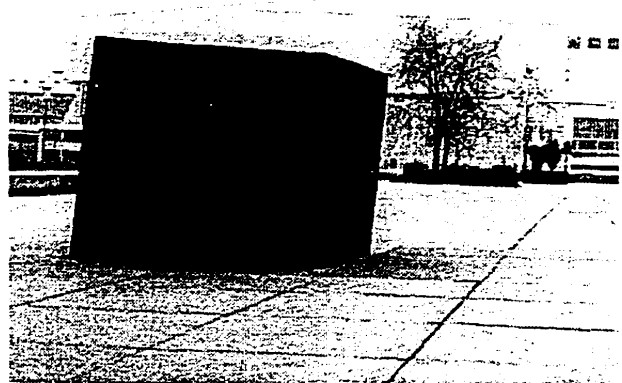
Berlin Block for Charlie Chaplin

Gallery's plinth. The building is joined in a dialog of mass and weight with Serra's cube; the Gallery becomes a second cube in perpetual dialog with its Other. But let us be clear – Serra's act of contradiction is an act born of respect for Mies' project:

> *It is the first important steel and glass structure, classical in every sense...*
> *a square glass box on the deck of a square stone platform, each supported*
> *by steel pylons or columns. I did not want to build a construction on top of*
> *this construction. I wanted to find a way of holding in place the*
> *gravitational load, a force, a mass, contrary to the center of the*
> *architecture, so that it would contradict the architecture.*[32]

Serra has spoken a lot about the weight of this particular cube, whose forging he supervised at the Thyssen steelworks in Germany. Forging is a process of compression under great heat and pressure. A cube of forged steel

...

31 Serra, "Rigging", 100.

will have a weight up to twice that of a cast cube of equal size. And while the outward appearance of two cubes might not change according to manufacture (cast or forged) Serra felt that a specific density was needed to balance the Gallery's mass. In order to achieve sharp, ninety-degree corners (Mies would have demanded no less), Serra had to be lowered into the forging hammer (essentially a huge furnace) wearing an asbestos suit and wielding a pair of calipers.

This vulcan episode illustrates how importantly Serra regards the specificity of material to form. Whereas Rodin (for example) could sculpt essentially the same foot in marble or bronze, Serra has pursued forms specific to each material. What's more, the precision he employs in fabricating steel is allied closely to the exacting construction of his propped works (such as *Strike*)

forging Berlin Block

and the carefully considered experiential relationships of all his installations, particularly the physical relationships between participant and sculpture. The work reveals its layers of precision and asks for consideration in kind. His early works in rubber and lead are exemplary of his concern for the thresholds of stability for each substance in its particular context.

Such a threshold is traced by the stasis of *To Lift* (1967). Serra placed a door-sized sheet of rubber on a wooden floor and raised the center of one side to the point where the material's tendency to collapse under its own weight balanced against its coefficient of friction with the given floor. This question of balance, of the dynamic correlation between potential energy and inertia, is

...

32 Ibid., 99.

present in every work of Serra's, and spirals continuously outward as a "field force"[33] engaging sites and subjects in a situational gravity. It is an equilibrium that speaks of reciprocity.

The economy of means with which Serra achieves this engagement warrants comment. His work presents the ability of a single sheet of rubber, lead or steel to speak meaningfully in its interaction with an interested spectator. Such a minimal vocabulary reveals the
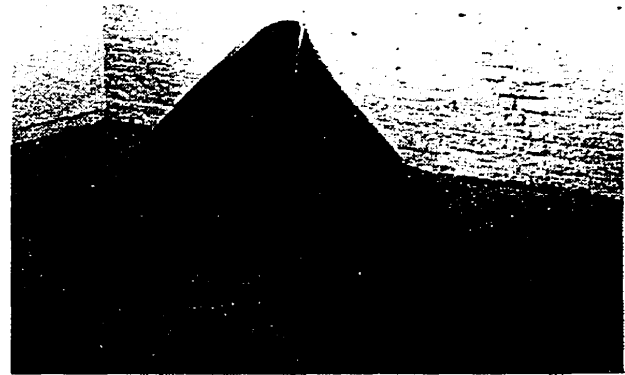
To Lift

importance of every choice in the making – and experiencing – of the work.

There's a difference between walking into a telephone booth and a football stadium. If you take those two extremes and make the idea very subtle, then you can say there's a difference between walking to the left and walking to the right, between the experience of concave and convex, between something leaning right and something leaning left. How do you know that to be a different experience in terms of your daily life? And if it is, is it meaningful?[35]

How *do* we know things – anything – to be meaningful in terms of our daily lives? "If life is not originally meaningful, understanding is forever impossible," Ricoeur tells us at the intersection of the hermeneutic problem and phenomenological method. Like Ricoeur we face "the problem of the relationship between force and meaning, between life as the bearer of meaning and the mind as capable of linking meanings into a coherent

...

33 Serra, "Sight Point '71-'75/Delineator '74-'76" *Richard Serra Writings/Interviews*, 40.
35 Serra quoted by Morgan, "Interview with Robert C. Morgan", 188.

series."[36] Serra provides us a ground from which to ask certain fundamental questions of ourselves. Like the object-less infinitives of the *Verb List*, these transitory works point to our existence and leave us asking ourselves to what end *are* we. And yet this conundrum is posed along with the possibility of an answer. In questioning our own existence in terms of purpose, Serra prompts us to recognize our sitedness in history, our perspective as subjects actively negotiating the world from within, and our responsibilities as we undertake to change that world through the poetic imagination. We uncover interwoven systems that frame our interaction with the world as we take up the task of interpreting the work, and find ourselves pursuing self-understanding.

...

36 Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics", 5-6.

the disquiet Serra

In the disquiet of Serra's work, we experience an object at odds with its site, irreconcilable with the dialectics of exchange through which the metropolis domesticates its products. We find instead a position of resistance staked out by a work unwilling to merely assume its proper place. Just as the object refuses to simply accommodate its context uncritically, we are left asking *how do we participate in the work,* and, by its example, *in the city?*

This act of impropriety begs others. Serra takes a position of resistance with regard to property, and invites us to reconsider our own relationships with the city and its specific codes of conduct. As Serra's work approaches architecture, it offers the possibility of an architecture that raises the question of its own ontology and its affirmative role in the power structures of state and commerce. The work offers its discord as

Clara-Clara

example and beckons political action appropriate to each participant.

The question of the city as the site for critical artistic practice is the pivot for Manfredo Tafuri's consideration of ideology, political thought and capitalist development in *Architecture and Utopia*: "It is not just by chance that the metropolis, the place of absolute alienation, is at the very center of concern of the avant-garde."[37] Neither is it by chance that Serra has pursued urban sites for his sculptural activity. The metropolis is the site and sign of alienation in America, and it is this condition of alienation that is exposed poignantly through Serra's work. The dilemma begins with the origins of the American city, origins that privilege facilitating economic exchange over accommodating public discourse.

...

37 Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, 1.

Eisenman makes this clear, "...urbanism in America, as it has evolved since the middle and late nineteenth century, has not had the same foundations as its European counterpart, primarily because American cities began from a tabula rasa, more often as an economic than a symbolic grid..." [38] The primacy of commercial enterprise in shaping the city thus drives its architecture. "American buildings were not primarily conceived of as spatial icons in the European sense; they were not the envelope or background for public spaces, but an infill in the functional and economic division of land that allowed for efficient movement of goods and people..." [39] Architecture has served, in Eisenman's analysis, to accommodate the exigencies of an economic order as a primary concern.

This economic order represents, above all, the priority of private capital interests over public needs in urban form. Eisenman continues, "Even when American urban space did in certain respects imitate European forms and attitudes, incorporating the outward manifestation of squares, plazas, etc., its architects never conceived of the city or its architecture as the repository of public well-being. The city was always the public sum of private well-being." [40]

While Eisenman traces the difficulties of making a truly public – and political – architecture to the origins of the American city, Tafuri's critique focuses on forces of change in the metropolis. Tafuri holds that North American planning is viewed from the perspective of those forces that change the city morphologically, such as proprietary and economic forces. This critique reveals that market, not architectural, values (and specifically private capital interests) are primarily responsible for transformation at the scale of the city, a process of change from which architecture is excluded.

...

38 Eisenman, *House X*, 152. His discussion of urbanism is in response to Frampton's critique of Hejduk's work in the May, 1975 *A&U*.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.

Architecture, which for Tafuri still represents the space of appearance for an increasingly alienated public, is rendered unable to transform the metropolis:

> *In the American city, absolute liberty is granted to the single architectural fragment, but this fragment is situated in a context that it does not condition formally: the secondary elements of the city are given maximum articulation, while the laws governing the whole are rigidly maintained. Thus urban planning and architecture are finally separated...Unlike what happens in Saint Petersburg or Berlin, architecture is free to explore the most diverse expressions. The urban system assumes only the task of stating the degree to which figurative liberty may be exploited or, better, of guaranteeing, with its own formal rigidity, a stable reference of dimension.[41]*

The stakes for architecture are high. Unable to effect change outside its proprietary domain, the practice risks simply reinforcing an economic order which overlays the city in its dubious hierarchies. Unable to challenge its context, architecture cannot speak critically of the system which grants – and restricts – its powers. Worse still, a polity accustomed to such mute architecture have no basis from which to acquire the ability to read truly critical architecture. Tafuri and Eisenman both yearn for an architecture able to transgress boundary conditions imposed on it from without, and certainly the latter claims this goal for his own work.[42]

...

41 Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, 38-40.
42 Consider Eisenman's lament: "We are doing a building in Cincinnati which I think is a problematic building. Recently there was a show of Robert Maplethorpe's erotic photographs. The people of this good community of Cincinnati were so incensed by this series of photographs that they shut down the exhibition and brought the museum director to trial. It was a prolonged trial and the good citizens were very much engaged by the reality of the photographs.
"I long for the citizens of Cincinnati to be upset by my work. But no so luck, no one really cares; my building is not even problematic for the university president or vice president, who accept its attempt to disconnect, to displace, to dislocate as merely another phenomenon of media." Eisenman, "Architecture in a Mediated Environment" *Architectural Associations | The Idea of the City,* 59.

Yet both Tafuri and Eisenman ultimately point to a sort of impotence on the part of architecture, an inability to affect structural change in the metropolis. Given this context, it is important to note the difference with which Serra's urban work makes itself available to the city, and begins to offer the possibility of a truly critical architecture. As Krauss demonstrates, using the example of *St. John's Rotary Arc* (1980), Serra utilizes a language that steps outside the conventional framing of
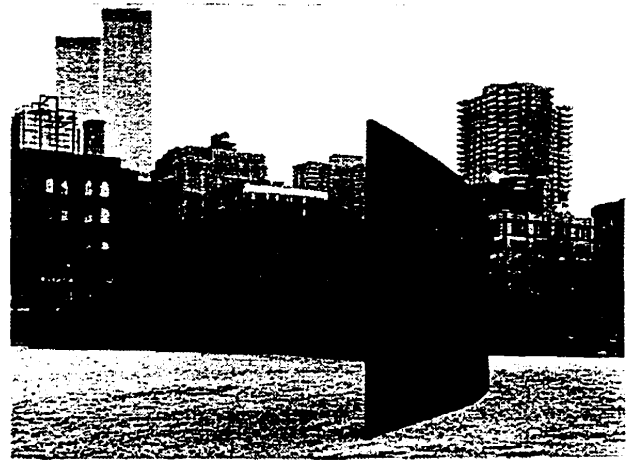
St. John's Rotary Arc

commodification to which urban works are subjected. According to Krauss, borders and boundaries lose their definitive status in the *Arc*: "as one walks around this work, which operates at the scale of the city itself, one is never wholly inside or outside; one is always moving 'toward', reflexively defined as pure destination, as intentional movement."[43] Serra concurs:

> *Where one starts is irrelevant. A curve, having no beginning, no end, no*
>
> *back, no front, no right, no left, denies a starting point, and any hierarchy*
>
> *of views and viewing positions.*[44]
>
> *Its form remains ambiguous, indeterminable, unknowable as an entity.*[45]

A sculpture without an inside or outside won't stay within the carefully bounded (property) lines of the metropolis, nor will it submit itself to conventional inspection as a fully defined – and thus de*limited* – structure. Serra's urban work thus denies totalization; it refutes the property structure of the metropolis and points to this locus of alienation. The experience of

...

43 Krauss, *Richard Serra Sculpture*, 36.
44 Serra, "St. John's Rotary Arc" *Richard Serra Writings/Interviews*, 122.
45 Ibid.

Serra's urban works is one of uncertainty – the steel offers and rescinds a promise of *inside*, it sets aside questions of interior and exterior. The experiencing subject can never fully inhabit the work, nor leave it. Instead, we are always in motion in respect to a work which cannot be totalized, a work which refuses to stay in its proper place. The continuity between interior and exterior enables and mirrors the continuity between sculpture and site; the site-inseparability of Serra's site-specific works prevents the sculpture from becoming a "portable" commodity. Thus Serra's work has no portable, commodifiable, alienable content; the content of the work lies in its experiential relationship to the viewer (defined by participation), and to the site.

> *The content of the drawing installations does not reside in the process of their making... The content resides in the viewer's experience of the space and place as it is redefined through the installation...I am interested in the fact that when you are in a space which has been configured by a drawing, the sensation of time changes.*[46]

Serra actively alters the contexts in which his pieces are sited, engaging adjacent spaces to the point where they become inseparable from his work. His sculptures' context and audience are integral to their content. This operation is reciprocal, as context is redefined in terms of sculpture. By invading the sites' proprietary isolation, Serra removes their portability, making the sites truly site-specific (consider, again, that the sites of *Twain*, *St. John's Rotary Arc* and *Tilted Arc* are essentially undifferentiated from dozens of nearby, equivalent sites). In the specific case of *Tilted Arc* Serra's transgression challenged the propagandistic function of Federal Plaza: by reinterpreting the plaza so that it would become "a function of the sculpture,"

...

46 This statement regards an installation of drawings at the Serpentine Gallery, London. Serra quoted by Lynne Cooke, "Interview by Lynne Cooke" *Richard Serra Writings/Interviews*, 255.

Serra removed the plaza from its affirmative role to the federal building.[47] In stripping portability from these properties, Serra challenges their owners' privileged access to their commodifiable content. It is an extension beyond the proper purvey of sculpture that again disrupts the property structure of the metropolis.

This act of impropriety begs others. Serra's position of resistance with regard to property invites us to reconsider our own relationships with the city and its specific codes of conduct. As Serra's work approaches architecture, it offers the possibility of an architecture that raises the question of its own ontology and its role in the power structures of state and commerce. Yet as we've seen, Serra's critical stance encompasses not just a refutation of property rights, but also a questioning of spatial and experiential habitudes – in essence, a critique of the inherited structures which frame the relationships between social subjects. The phenomenological critique of Cartesian space evidenced in these

Tilted Arc

works challenges the physical milieu whose spatial relationships include social interaction. At each level of our inhabitation in the world, Serra's sculpture initiates our autocriticism: how is the frame of our interactivity constituted, and what are the consequences of our actions?

...

47 Serra quoted by Crimp, "Richard Serra's Urban Sculpture, An interview by Douglas Crimp" *Richard Serra Writings/Interviews*, 127.

It is instructive to note how this ethical imperative in Serra's work is different from that of his friend, James Turrell. Turrell's installations present us with our ability, through vision, to transform the world outside us – our eyes can reshape and recolor the sky, for example. Faced with this possibility,

James Turrell, *Wedgeworks III*

through which we understand analogously our ability to remake our world, we must ask *how is it proper to do so*. In this regard, Serra is not dissimilar when he confronts us with a position at once poetic and political, asking us what are the *consequences* of our actions when building and inhabiting.

Both artists transform their sites through installations whose substance emerges from direct experience with the physical object, an experience that unfolds through time, measured by the participant in respect to her body. Like Turrell, Serra feels that photography and other forms of reproduction are unacceptable in representing sculpture because their vicariousness denies "the real content of the work,"[48] content drawn from a physical relationship with the work. But while Turrell's ethical position can fold back inward through the poetics of "seeing yourself see,"[49] Serra needs to go beyond the mechanics of perception to reveal the existential and political dimensions of situated experience. In describing the difference between his work and Turrell's (as well as Robert Irwin and others), "The way my work differs is that it's not opting for opticality as its content. It has more to do with a field force that's being generated so that the space is discerned physically rather

...

48 Ibid., 129.
49 Turrell interviewed by Ziva Frieman, *Positions in Art*, 10.

than optically."[50] Certainly we can take issue with Serra and say that Turrell's work achieves physicality through direct experience. The point is rather that the political possibilities of Serra's work are inseparable from their physical presence. It is through the experience of the work — *with* the work — that the participant can define for himself levels of meaning and possibilities for action.

Against a tradition of art driven by the internal necessities of mimesis and metaphor — reflecting the outside world *into* the work — Serra opposes an art whose content resides in its *interaction with* the external world. It is a situated art, one specific to its context and transformed continuously through the participation of a questioning public. In its orientation to an exterior with which it is critically engaged, the all-but-architecture of Richard Serra stakes its claim to the inherently political and poetic roles abandoned by architecture.

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50 Serra, "Sight Point '71-'75/Delineator '74-'76", 40. For his part Turrell has said, "If you want large, rusted steel, I am not your man." Interview by Ziva Frieman, *Positions in Art*. 22.

The work is implicit and clear, awkward; it is articulated inside and out;

it is continuous and defined; it is round and square, planar and

volumetric. Various levels of meanings and tensions are explicit, in

context.[51]

poetry without metaphor

Over and again I've reiterated Serra's denial of specific metaphorical

content in his work. He would rather say that the experience of the work in

relationship to an active participant is
the source of its meaning. But denying
metaphorical content is a difficult task.
Ricoeur would agree that, in the
experiential relationship of participant
and work, "the subject is the bearer of
meaning," but do we dispute his
assertion that the work is always within
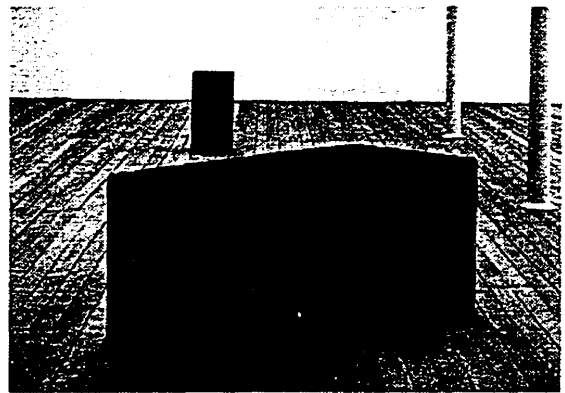
Pasolini

the structure of signification, and that since "language consists in saying

something about something" Serra must be operating metaphorically when

speaking through a sculptural language?[52] Can we reasonably call Serra's

(signification-free) practice a poetic one when Paz instructs us that, "poetry is

one of the manifestations of analogy; rhymes and alliterations, metaphors

and metonymies are modes of operation in analogical thought"?[53]

So we return to Serra's claim that his work stands without something –

metaphor – intervening between the participant and the sculpture. Rather,

the work intervenes between beholder and site. Serra demands that we not

reduce his work to a single recognizable meaning, instead allowing a surplus

...

51 Serra, "Rigging", 101. This specific quote is part of Serra's description of *Terminal.*
52 Ricoeur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology" *The Conflict of Interpretations,* 250-1.

of meaning to surface slowly before our active inspection *because of* the absence of immediate signification. Ricoeur says of this possibility, "there is interpretation wherever there is multiple meaning, and it is in interpretation that the plurality of meanings is made manifest."[54]

Serra's minimalism allows a plurality of interpretations to well up from density and restraint. He cites the work of Le Corbusier and Barnett Newman who both distill, rather than reduce, in order to achieve a synthesis of different levels of meaning.[55] The example of Newman is particularly apt, where minimal articulation defers attention from the internal conditions of the work itself to the relationships between work, site and participant.

In Newman content is inseparable from your sense of place and time. Without your experience there is no content in a Newman painting. When you reflect upon a Newman, you recall your experience, you don't recall the picture.[56]

We would do well in this matter to return to Merleau-Ponty. Serra's minimalism stakes its depth of meaning on its experientiality in situations. Situated experience allows diversity in interpretation, as Merleau-Ponty demonstrated in the context of non-figural painting, "There are, in the flesh of contingency, a structure of the event and a virtue peculiar to the scenario. These do not prevent the plurality of interpretations but in fact are the deepest reasons for this plurality. They make the event into a durable theme of historical life and have a right to philosophical status."[57]

This philosophical status comes when the "structure of the event" no longer simply presents us with the contents of human experience, but begins

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53 Paz, *Children of the Mire*, 56.
54 Ricoeur "Existence and Hermeneutics", 13.
55 Serra quoted by Nicholas Serota and David Sylvester, *Weight and Measure 1992* (exhibition catalogue), 23.
56 Ibid., 24.
57 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind" *The Primacy of Perception*, 178-9.

to teach us something concerning the structure of consciousness itself.[58] The event (whether a situated object like Serra's sculpture or a historical episode) carries latent within it the possibility of its future reinterpretation. "As for the history of art works... the sense we give to them later on has issued from them."[59] Merleau-Ponty continues:

> *It is the work itself that has opened the field from which it appears in another light. It changes itself and becomes what follows; the interminable reinterpretations to which it is legitimately susceptible change it only in itself. And if the historian unearths beneath its manifest content the surplus and thickness of meaning, the texture which held the promise of a long history, this active manner of being, then, this possibility he unveils in the work, this monogram he finds there – all are grounds for a philosophical meditation.*[60]

Serra's explicit insistence on the primacy of experience in sculpture is of paramount importance here. Experience generates meaning through the active probing of the participant, a probing which he fears is prejudiced by literary description. Serra thus remains hesitant about defining his work.

> *If I define a work and sum it up within the boundary of a definition, given my intentions, that seems to be a limitation on me and an imposition on other people of how to think about the work... it has absolutely nothing to do with my activity or art. I think the significance of the work is in its effort, not in its intentions. And that effort is a state of mind, an activity, an interaction with the world.*[61]

Neither participant nor sculptor should be limited by the latter's stated intent.

···

58 Merleau-Ponty *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 291.
59 Merleau-Ponty "Eye and Mind", 178-9.
60 Ibid.
61 Serra, "Document: Spin Out '72-'73" *Richard Serra Writings/Interviews*, 15.

I think an artwork is not merely correctly predicting all the relations you

can measure...

Some people think it is, so they set up a construct and tell people their

intentions, and then the construct verifies the intentions... and what that

does, those kinds of intentions, is to preclude people from experiencing the

work. And right now my pieces are mostly involved with walking and

looking. But I can't tell someone how to walk and look.[62]

It is for these reasons that Serra, while describing his work as meaningful,
denies that metaphor acts between the work and the participant. Perhaps his
understanding of metaphor is restrictive, for those who view metaphor as the
very vehicle of polysemy, yet he rightly states:

I am somewhat apprehensive about the possibility that viewers might

attach a metaphorical or imagistic reading... which would circumvent any

reading of the piece in context. There are certain misreadings of abstract

works that seem to preclude any comprehensive understanding. Imagistic

and metaphorical associations lead by definition to the dismissal of

abstraction by making it needlessly referential. It's a way of domesticising

it, of trying to integrate it into a vocabulary that has been canonized by

tradition.[63]

Rather, for Serra the work intervenes between the participant and the city,
at once transforming the site and making what was already there manifest
for the first time. The work is always in context. Regarding *St. John's Rotary
Arc*: "I think you read the site via the sculpture, although the sculpture in no
way depicts or illustrates the site."[64] Again, "The Arc does not represent the
context, but redefines its content."[65] And again, "The pedestrian acknowledges
the entire contextual field and sees the *Arc* within this diversity. The work

...

62 Ibid., 16-17.
63 Serra quoted by Serota and Sylvester, *Weight and Measure 1992*, 19.
64 Serra quoted by Crimp, "Richard Serra's Urban Sculpture, An interview by Douglas Crimp", 136.

focuses attention and reorients the perception of the site: in its placement and sweep, the *Arc* sums up the circularity of the Rotary. In its length and height, it establishes a measure."[66] The content of the work is inseparable from a context which it has already fundamentally altered.

The desire to bracket-out conventional aspects of art practice that would distract from the content of the work (the desire which first opened him to site-specificity) also drives Serra to set aside the visible (what he would call "gestural") hand of the artist. His emphasis on foregrounding rigging and other aspects of construction processes as primary activities of sculpture is an attempt to set aside the aestheticizing (and therefore de-contextualizing) values of taste, which depend upon a specialized knowledge of artistic techniques. In place
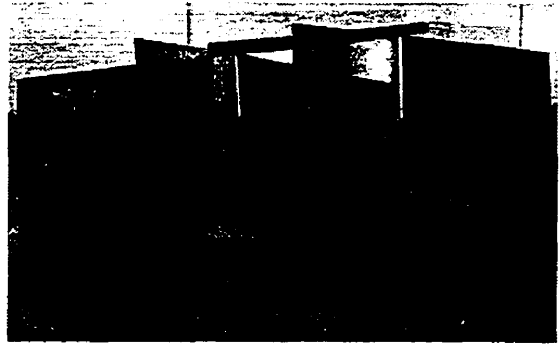
2-2-1: To Dickie and Tina

of the art expert's specialized knowledge, rigging presents the making of art as a process close to the daily labor (and therefore experience and ability) of the general public.

Losing the gestural hand of the author is thus a gesture toward universal accessibility to (or capability for) poetic expression. While some public art may strive toward an accessibility to a public by presenting a readily legible message, Serra's sculptures declare that handicraft (such as skill with the chisel or palette knife) is not a prerequisite to poetic expression. The ability of any citizen to bring forth into appearance a work of art is implicit in Serra's plates; it's the thought that counts.

And it is the thought which is demanded. Serra's work, which refuses to simply accommodate its context, invites us to participate critically, both in

...

65 Serra, "St. John's Rotary Arc" *Richard Serra Writings/Interviews*, 120.

the work itself and in the city. We recognize in Serra's work our own ability to transform the metropolis, and in that ability we find a responsibility – to judge, and to be judicious.

Hence we see that this setting aside of the gestural hand of the author is not the same as abdicating authority. Instead, this very deliberate work achieves two things: the sculpture approximates architecture through an analogous process of construction, and (as we've seen) the poetic potential of sculpture is shown to reside elsewhere than in skillful handicraft.

The analogous relationship to architecture is key to Serra's critique of that practice. In concert with the similarity of site, material and scale, Serra's processes (such as contracting with steel mills and riggers) announce this work to be all-but architecture, lacking only utility, by conventional definition. "I don't think [the sculptures] ever become architecture because they have no architectural purpose. By definition, architecture has a utilitarian function; sculpture does not. On the other hand, works may function as critique of architecture, they can point to its deficiency due to the fact that they are built in a similar scale."[67] He manifests the collaboration of workers in his sculpture, points to the condition of labor, and refutes the patronizing (and cynical) mystique of the craftsman.

> *When sculpture enters the realm of the non-institution, when it leaves the*
>
> *gallery or museum to occupy the same space and place as architecture,*
>
> *when it redefines space and place in terms of sculptural necessities,*
>
> *architects become annoyed. Not only is their concept of space being*
>
> *changed, but for the most part it is being criticized. The criticism can come*
>
> *into effect only when architectural scale, methods, materials, and*
>
> *procedures are being used. Comparisons are provoked. Every language*
>
> ...

66 Ibid., 122.
67 Serra quoted by Alfred Pacquement, "Interview by Alfred Pacquement" *Richard Serra Writings/Interviews*, 162.

has a structure about which nothing critical in that language can be said.
To criticize a language, there must be a second language dealing with the
structure of the first but possessing a new structure.[68]

And so not only does Serra criticize architecture by making something just shy of it, he does so in a way that announces the ability of any citizen to participate poetically and critically in the polis through an architectural action. Serra's act reveals architecture's lack. The tragic role of architecture as a place of orientation and the political role of architecture as vehicle for resistance are now shown to be activities of a poetically engaged polity. The act of architecture is henceforth a political act.

But we find ourselves again talking about politics instead of poetics. I promised at the outset of this chapter to focus on precisely how Serra can claim not to represent, not to make metaphors, not to create something which stands for something else, and still operate poetically. Yet Serra himself would seem to contradict his claim; he has repeatedly said that his sculpture is critical, and that it utilizes a "second language" to be so – surely this implies some form of signification.

Serra's animosity toward metaphor stems from his belief in the primacy of experience. Experience is itself meaningful, and, for Serra, cannot be represented, "you can't have an experience of space outside of the place and space that you're in. Any linguistic mapping or reconstruction by analogy, or by any verbalization or interpretation or explanation... is a linguistic debasement, in a sense, because it isn't even true in a parallel way."[69] Is it possible to speak poetically when one refuses to speak aloud?

Paz may offer an answer to this impasse. The analogical structure of the world underlies the poetic imagination and allows the resolution of

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68 Richard Serra quoted by Peter Eisenman in *Richard Serra Writings/Interviews* "Interview by Peter Eisenman", 146.
69 Serra, "Sight Point '71-'75/Delineator '74-'76", 36.

contradictions through correspondences. We bridge the gaps of difference to bring near that which is distant, to make familiar (literally, to understand on our own terms) what has been incomprehensible. Paz wrote, "If analogy turns the universe into a poem, a text made up of oppositions which become resolved in correspondences, it also makes the poem a universe. Thus we can *read* the universe, we can *live* the poem. In the first case poetry is knowledge; in the second it is action." This act of seeing the universe as a poem enables us to recognize ourselves in a world which has always been impenetrably *other*. And it is here that we can understand the similarity of Serra's work to what we conventionally know to be poetic.

Serra's situated sculpture, as we've seen, creates a site for self-questioning, where participating subjects can recognize themselves in a world they actively transform. "The poet speaks," says Paz, "and as he speaks, he makes. This making is above all a making of himself: poetry is not only self-knowledge but self-creation." As we've seen, Serra's projects invite an active poetic response on the part of the public. The poetic content of the work, we could say, emerges when that public responds: questioning, negotiating, judging. Serra's work does not represent its audience, it beckons it. What we find in the work is a richness of meaning proportional to our active engagement, a poetry not of reference through metaphor, but of discovery through situation.

Everything we choose in life for its lightness soon reveals its unbearable
weight. We face the fear of unbearable weight: the weight of repression, the
weight of constriction, the weight of government, the weight of tolerance,
the weight of resolution, the weight of responsibility, the weight of
destruction, the weight of suicide, the weight of history which dissolves
weight and erodes meaning to a calculated construction of palpable
lightness. The residue of history: the printed page, the flicker of the image,
always fragmentary, always saying something less than the weight of
experience.[70]

the weight of history: Serra and his contemporaries

I think it is worthwhile to step back momentarily and consider Serra's
origins as an artist in order to better understand the political imperative to
his work. However, I am somewhat hesitant to describe the context of Serra's
contemporaries and influences. The historicist need to rationalize any work
within linear progressions and arboreal hierarchies represents precisely the
structures Serra has challenged for thirty years. To present him somehow as a
product of his time is to miss the point entirely. Rather, I would like to show
that from a context where the political possibilities of art were the explicit
focus of debate, perhaps only Serra has managed to extend that debate into a
public realm beyond the accepted (and therefore dismissable) institutions of
art.

To further indemnify myself, I call to witness the example of Krauss's
comparison of Serra and Alberto Giacometti, examined through the vehicle of
Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*:

This is not to say that Shift *has Merleau-Ponty's text as anything like a*
specific 'source' or direct influence. Rather, almost ten years of general

...

70 Richard Serra, "Weight" *Richard Serra Writings/Interviews*, 185.

absorption of these ideas developed an American context in which

sculpture lived in a play of perspectives, as in the minimalist work of

Donald Judd or Robert Morris, where abstract geometries are constantly

submitted to the definition of a sited vision. And in this context a work

formed by the mutually established 'horizons' of two people at a distance

made a certain kind of intuitive sense. [71]

It is not important here to see Serra and his immediate predecessors in some sort of causal or filial relationship of influences, but rather that an atmosphere which developed (particularly in New York) supported the political aspects of Serra's practice.

One of my earliest recollections is that of driving with my father, as the

sun was coming up, across the Golden Gate Bridge. We were going to

Marine Shipyard, where my father worked as a pipefitter, to watch the

launching of a ship.

From its stasis as a great weight perched and balanced the ship, which "to a four-year-old was as large as a skyscraper on its side" slid out into the bay, found its level and became buoyant – "free, afloat, and adrift."

My awe and wonder of that moment remained. All the raw material that I

needed is contained in the reserve of this memory which has become a

recurring dream. [72]

The experience of industrial labor is significant to Serra's ethical/political interest, as well as to the development of his sculptural vocabulary. Like his contemporaries (Morris, Smithson and Andre) he apprenticed in American industry. The condition of labor – as he experienced firsthand and through his

...

71 Krauss, "Richard Serra: a Translation" *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 267.
72 Serra, "Weight", 183-4. While Serra might be first in line to refute the Abstract Expressionist notion of the artist's life as oeuvre (and individual works as autobiographies), he reflects on the interrelationship of his personal and artistic histories in this brief, beautiful essay. "Weight is a value for me, not that it is any more compelling than lightness, but I simply know more about weight than lightness and therefore I have more to say about it..."

father — has always been close to his artistic imaginary. Eisenstein's and Vertov's films had a powerful effect on him, as well as on other artists of his generation who had worked in the industrial centers of postwar, post-depression America (he and Philip Glass -

possibly Robert Morris - in steel mills, Carl Andre on the railroad). The Soviet avant garde depicted an industrial experience close to that of Serra's own youth.[73]

Serra's concern for the condition of labor and the working class found affinities in art practices which, in the late 1960's, were leaning toward interaction with a larger public, outside the traditional institutions of art. This change was not unanimous — those who sought to engage the public (often by fusing sculpture with the performing arts) met strong resistance from many established art critics under the

Skullcracker Series: Stacked Slabs

sway of Clement Greenberg's formalism. Consider a seminal source in the debate over minimal art in the late 1960's, Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood":

> *the beholder knows himself to stand in an indeterminate, open-ended —*
> *and unexacting — relation as subject to the impassive object on the wall or*
> *floor. In fact, being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another*
> *person; the experience of coming upon literalist objects unexpectedly — for*
> *example, in somewhat darkened rooms — can be strongly, if momentarily,*
> *disquieting in just this way.[74]*

...

73 Annette Michelson, "The Films of Richard Serra: An interview by Annette Michelson" *Richard Serra Writings/Interviews*, 66.
74 Fried, "Art and Objecthood", 128.

These words, which could so easily describe Serra's work, are in fact part of Fried's condemnation of Robert Morris, Donald Judd, Tony Smith, and other important sculptors operating during Serra's formative years. "Literalist" is Fried's pejorative term for art which actively engaged the experiencing subject. Engagement, for Fried, is an imposition...

> ... *literalist works of art must somehow* confront *the beholder – they must, one might almost say, be placed not just in his space but in his* way.[75]

Ironically, the very condition of engagement/confrontation which so troubles Fried – the condition where, he cries, the fine arts degenerate into "theater" – is precisely the quality which allows Serra, like Morris and Judd, to conceive his work in relation to a public.

> *Literalist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work. Morris makes this explicit. Whereas in previous art 'what is to be had from the work is located strictly within [it],' the experience of literalist art is of an object* in a situation – *one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder.*[76]
>
> *Someone has merely to enter the room in which a literalist work has been placed to* become *that beholder, that audience of one – almost as though the work in question has been* waiting for him. *And inasmuch as literalist work* depends on *the beholder, is* incomplete *without him, it* has been *waiting for him. And once he is in the room the work refuses, obstinately, to let him alone – which is to say, it refuses to stop confronting him,*
>
> ...

75 Ibid., 127.
76 Ibid., 125. Fried's mention of "previous art" in relation to Morris's statement here really refers to 19th century art, where art's portability necessitated an experience "located strictly within [it]". This has to do with the nascent gallery economy and the inherent sitelessness of its studio-gallery-bourgeois interior-museum commerce. For his part, Serra refers to the historical situation preceding the 19th century, "I think my own work relates to an earlier period in which sculptors understood the public spaces for which they were building." Richard Serra quoted by Douglas Crimp in *Richard Serra Writings/Interviews*, "Richard Serra's Urban Sculpture, An interview by Douglas Crimp", p.136.

distancing him, isolating him. (Such isolation is not solitude any more

than such confrontation is communion.)[77]

For Fried, "the concepts of quality and value – and to the extent that these
are central to art, the concept of art itself – are meaningful, or wholly
meaningful, only *within* the individual arts. What lies *between* the arts is
theater."[78] Serra dissents; art *must* engage the other to be meaningful. We
must see this condition of engagement not as a dogged imposition, but as the
gesture through which Serra's work operates as a critique. The political realm
resides in *situations* – the relationships between subjects, things, and actions
in the context of a society – and it is in situations that Serra's all-but-
architecture declares its stakes.

When he wasn't working in steel mills or factories, Serra pursued a studio
fine arts education. After taking an undergraduate degree at Berkeley, he
studied painting at Yale, where he was teaching assistant to Josef Albers in
the Bauhaus master's color course. In fact, he proofed the color plates for
Albers' book, *The Interaction of Color*. But it would be in Paris, in 1964-65,
that his future work would start to take form.

There he discovered the work of Brancusi in the sculptor's reconstructed
studio at the Musée National d'Art Moderne. It was during this period that he
met Philip Glass, with whom he passionately discussed (night after night)
current developments in the arts, and with whom he stalked Alberto
Giacometti in a Montparnasse restaurant. A year later, living in Florence on a
Fullbright Grant, he ceased painting – which had become for him a
mechanical process using paint simply as a material, one among many – and
began to pursue sculpture.

...

77 Ibid., 140.
78 Ibid., 142.

On his return to the United States he moved to New York City and continued to acquaint himself with "artists in the same straits" who were challenging the very conventions Fried was trying so desperately to protect. Serra at one point supported himself by moving furniture with composer Steve Reich (the two shared many affinities in their respective work), filmmaker Robert Fiore (who would shoot Serra's first five films) and Glass. Serra collaborated with Glass on a sound installation, *Word Locution Project* in 1969. That year Glass also assisted

One Ton Prop (House of Cards)

Serra on several key early sculptures, including *One Ton Prop* and *Splash Piece: Casting*. The latter was executed in Jasper Johns' loft, and can be read as an intersection of Serra's, Glass' and Johns' concerns – among them pictoriality, seriality, technology and industrial processes.
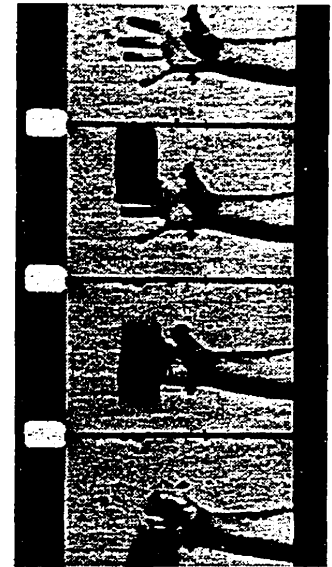
> ...*When I arrived in New York the critic-gallery-museum system was*
> *completely closed to me. My work was not directed toward the reigning*
> *authoritative, pedagogic, dogmatic, and powerful institutions anyway. I*
> *had a private need to keep my creative insistence open and found*
> *sympathy and encouragement from other artists in the same straits,*
> *namely Bob Smithson, Eva Hesse, Bruce Nauman, Michael Heizer, Phil*
> *Glass, Joan Jonas, Michael Snow. What was interesting about this group*
> *of people was that we did not have any shared stylistic premises, but what*
> *was also true was that everybody was investigating the logic of material*
> *and its potential for personal extension – be it sound, lead, film, body,*
> *whatever.*[79]

...

79 Serra quoted by Bernard Lamarche-Vadel, "Interview by Bernard Lamarche-Vadel" *Richard Serra*

A similar convergence of interests gave rise to Serra's collaborations with Joan Jonas, collaborations that took the form of film, video, performance and sculpture. Jonas joined Serra on his 1970 trip to Japan, where he was deeply moved by Kyoto's Zen gardens. On their return, she was instrumental in the realization of *Shift*, with its mutual body relationships. This orientation toward performance speaks again of a desire for art to engage an audience, but it also reveals an openness to analogous investigations in a variety of media.

One medium Serra found very useful was film, which he studied intensely in the archives and repertory theaters available in New York. He made 15 films (most were three to five minutes in length) and six videos between 1968 and 1979. Serra's cinematic impulse came when he and Glass were standing up *One Ton Prop* in his loft. Someone approached him about filming this process, but Serra thought this "couldn't be anything other than an illustration or depiction." He decided that an analogy in film would involve lead (the material of the *Prop*) but could use just his hand. Thus came *Hand Catching Lead*. This three-and-a-half minute film frames a single hand attempting to catch a piece of lead dropped from above, from somewhere out

Hand Catching Lead

of view. Usually missing its prey, the hand sometimes succeeds but then proceeds to drop the piece. More than anything else, the film reflects the seriality and transitivity of the *Verb List*. To drop... to grasp... to discard...

Hand Catching Lead shows the influence of Yvonne Rainer's *Hand Movie*, an influence that extends beyond the literal to example how artists in various media (in Rainer's case dance) turned to film as a way to work through a

...

Writings/Interviews, 112.

range of concerns in the 1960's. Serra's films and their relationship to his sculptural practice are the subject of Annette Michelson's 1979 interview. Michelson claims that the late 1960's "was a time of... partial coalescence," that work like Serra's, Glass's, Reich's and Snow's existed in a relationship between pictorial, sculptural and filmic "enterprise": "It was a time of considerable interaction."[80] Wary of this talk of influences, Serra responded, "It is easy to deduce certain influences and to make assumptions about why people formulate a particular language at a particular time, but I think that kind of reasoning can only be taken so far."[81] Yet as we've seen Serra does talk about the way his contemporaries' explorations in performing arts dovetailed with his activities as a sculptor.

Serra is open in his admiration of artists – sculptors and otherwise – and has acknowledged a number in the naming of his sculptures, including, Charlie Chaplin, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Michael Heizer, Janis Joplin, Philip Glass and Mies van der Rohe (honored twice).[82] Yet of all the artists and writers who've left their marks on Serra, perhaps none did so quite as profoundly as Robert Smithson. It was with Smithson that Serra would spend countless nights at Max's Kansas City (a New York bar) engaged in heated discourse. It was Smithson (and his wife, Nancy Holt) whom Serra visited in Utah en route from Kyoto, in order to help lay out the

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80 Michelson, "The Films of Richard Serra: An interview by Annette Michelson", 63-4.
81 Ibid., 63-4.
82 Another note about names: Serra uses the device of the name as a complex tool often enough that we should be on guard for the full meaning-laden depth of his double entendres. I have not researched this aspect of his practice and so offer only this footnote. Two works in particular deserve consideration. The first, *Shift* may refer partially to Roman Jakobson's concept of the shifter, a grammatical device (such as a personal pronoun) which changes significance with context. Think of the changing significance of the word "you" in a dialog, and then think of the reciprocity of vision (I see, I am seen) expressed in *Shift*. The concept of the shifter is discussed in relation to the art of this period in Krauss's essay "Notes on the Index: Part 1" *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 197. For more on the shifter as understood by Serra's contemporary Robert Morris, see Berger, *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960's*, 38. The other work, *Strike*, may refer to Eisenstein's film of the same name. The relationship of this work to the condition of labor through metonymy is mentioned parenthetically by Crimp, "Serra's Public Sculpture: Redefining Site Specificity", 44-5.

Spiral Jetty. And it was Smithson's last project, *Amarillo Ramp*, that Serra helped Holt and Tony Shafrazi complete after Smithson's death.

> *Early on Smithson and I became close friends and our dialogue was in*
> *part a response to Andre, LeWitt and Flavin, who we felt were purporting*
> *to represent in their work and theory a system of construction that was not*
> *only definitive but closed. There was a presumption of didacticism, of*
> *authority. We felt that it left no room for doubt, no room for anxiety, no*
> *room for anything that would not substantiate a general proposition. We*
> *thought that closed systems were doomed to fail. Smithson and I shared a*
> *general empathy, he for my splashed lead pieces and the notion of collapse*
> *in the early lead props and I for his notion of site and entropy – sticking a*
> *rock in the mud and letting it sink...*[83]

I've already written that, in no uncertain terms, Serra rejected Smithson's continued desire to work in the desert and return to the city with photographic evidence of his projects. Yet at the same time, the two artists shared a number of key interests. The limit condition of technology – a determinism without a metaphysic – obsessed Smithson, whose interest in entropy formed a critique of technology from a vantage of geography.

Serra's desire to be a "maker of anti-environment" parallels Smithson's production of nonsites, places brought into an artistic discourse through a studied process of selection and embodiment. But whereas Serra's intent is for sculpture to declare its own space in the city, freeing its site from the dialectics of exchange and proprietary subservience, Smithson's wager is nothing less than an assault on the ruthless and self-perpetuating logic of technological determinism. While Serra might quietly mark off a space of "hiding places"[84] in opposition to Cartesian space, Smithson undermined

...

83 Serra quoted by Lamarche-Vadel, "Interview by Bernard Lamarche-Vadel", 112.
84 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", 173. In describing Cartesian space Merleau-Ponty wrote, "It is this identity of Being, or this space without hiding places which in each of its points is only what it

whole systems of western thought with zeal. Against the myth of progress Smithson opposed the ironic, irreversible decay of entropy. Of particular concern to architects might be his critique of the rationalizing drive toward geometry and objectification:

> The rationality of a grid on a map sinks into what it is supposed to define. Logical purity suddenly finds itself in a bog, and welcomes the unexpected event. The 'curved' reality of sense perception operates in and out of the 'straight' abstractions of the mind. The flowing mass of rock and earth of the Spiral Jetty could be trapped by a grid of segments, but the segments would exist only in the mind or on paper. Of course, it is also possible to translate the mental spiral into a three-dimensional succession of measured lengths that would involve areas, volumes, masses, moments, pressures, forces, stresses, and strains; but in the Spiral Jetty the surd takes over and leads one into a world that cannot be expressed by number or rationality. Ambiguities are admitted rather than rejected, contradictions are increased rather than decreased – the alogos undermines the logos. Purity is put in jeopardy. I took my chances on a perilous path, along which my steps zigzagged, resembling a spiral lightning bolt...The dizzying spiral yearns for the assurance of geometry. One wants to retreat into the cool rooms of reason.[85]
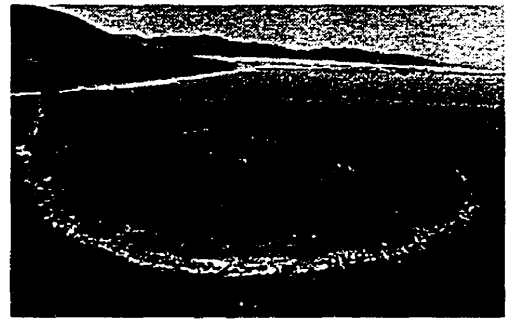
Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*

But there would be no such retreat for Smithson, who would continue to work in increasingly remote or marginalized locations. His work's complexity

...

is, neither more nor less... *Space* remains absolutely in itself, everywhere equal to itself, homogenous; its dimensions, for example, are interchangeable."
85 Robert Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty" *The Collected Writings of Robert Smithson*, 147-8.

deserves more than the quick gloss I can afford here, particularly in the way he brought his landscape concerns into the gallery through analogous constructions, and in his Romantic obsession with the limits of reason. What is important here are both Smithson's interest in an art of physical engagement and his understanding of such an art in a historical context, two concerns he shared with Serra. Smithson cited Cézanne, whom he felt engaged the landscape directly (perhaps in response to the development of photography), yet later had his work retroactively stripped of such content to historically justify cubism. For Smithson, the need to engage was clear.

> *we now have to reintroduce a kind of physicality; the actual place rather*
>
> *than the tendency to decoration which is a studio thing, because the*
>
> *Cubists brought Cézanne back into the studio.*[86]

Moreover, Smithson sought to combat the rationalizing bent of technologies that – even within the arts – buried metaphysics under a tarmac of immanence. He repeatedly used the device of mirrors to poke holes in the totalizing framework of photography and gallery-oriented sculpture. The infinite, or at least the possibility of infinity, confronted an audience he felt needed liberating from more comfortable representational media.

> *Photography squares everything. Every kind of random view is caught in*
>
> *a rectangular format so that the romantic idea of going to the beyond, of*
>
> *the infinite is checked by this so that things become measured.*[87]

Whatever we may speculate of the relationship between Smithson and Serra, it is clear that each enjoyed intellectual growth spurred by their shared affinities and sustained dialog. Serra and Smithson both understood the poetic potential of participatory, site-specific art. Serra has never quite abandoned the exurban context; he has installed permanent landscape works in New York State, Switzerland, Italy and Iceland. Despite the sharp

...

86 Smithson, "Fragments of a Conversation" *The Collected Writings of Robert Smithson*, 188.

differences in their intentions and methods, Smithson and Serra shared a "general empathy" that homologously links their critical stances. Serra reflected on this link in a 1980 interview:

> *Smithson's interest in entropy was an attempt to articulate a universal consciousness, whereas my concerns were literal and pragmatic. My prop pieces are predicated on balance and equilibrium (no permanent joints). The form of the work in its precariousness denies the notion of a transportable object, subverting the self-referential, self-righteous notion of authority and permanence of objects. The transitory existence of the props gives them references other than literalness, which Smithson and I related to in a perverse manner. We got a great deal of satisfaction out of that perversity.*[88]

*Spin Out: for Bob Smithson*

···

87 Ibid.
88 Serra quoted by Lamarche-Vadel, "Interview by Bernard Lamarche-Vadel", 114.

I do not believe that there was ever a question of being abstract or representational. It is really a matter of ending this silence and solitude, of breathing and stretching one's arms again.[89]

some questions in the form of a conclusion

From the beginning of this study I've maintained that Serra's powerful ethical drive stems from his decision as a sculptor to operate in the public realm and to engage the public directly. I've based my arguments on the belief that from the participation of an interested subject in Serra's sculpture (a participation that is explicitly requested) emerges a poetic imagination capable of critical vision and appropriate action. Yet it would be somewhat delusional to identify (and glorify) this aspect of Serra's practice without acknowledging that, whatever his intent, his work is most widely known for the controversy that has so often embroiled it.

In the introduction I declared my intent to avoid recounting the most divisive episodes, those surrounding *Twain*, *Terminal*, and above all *Titled Arc*. This is partly because I have nothing to add to the accounts that have been written about these events, and partly because I don't feel that these controversies represent the kind of political action that Serra's work provokes: a critical consciousness and ethical resolve on

*Open Field
Vertical/Horizontal
Elevations: For Brueghel
and Martin Schwinder*

the part of the beholder. If anything, these controversies reveal the ability for a public's alienation to be manipulated cynically in order to consolidate bureaucratic power.[90] But it is not that easy to dismiss the resistance Serra
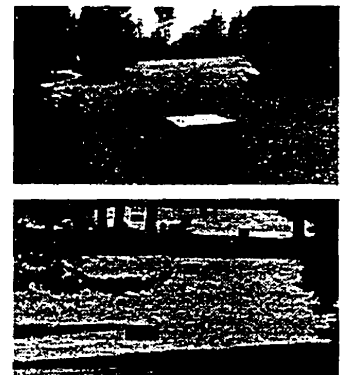
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89 Mark Rothko "The Romantics Were Prompted" in Herschel Chipp, ed. *Documents and Theories of Modern Art*, 549.
90 Again, Crimp offers insight into this issue. Crimp "Serra's Public Sculpture: Redefining Site

has faced; it is even harder to reconcile the great success he's found in other quarters, particularly in Germany (*Terminal* notwithstanding). In fact, across Germany – as in Barcelona, Rotterdam, London and Reykjavik – Serra has enjoyed public respect unimaginable in America in the wake of *Tilted Arc*'s destruction.

So perhaps it is worthwhile to note the state of public art debate after *Tilted Arc*, which, along with the controversies over Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs and Maya Lin's Vietnam memorial, defined the fight over public art during a period of ascendant conservative political power.[91] In order to reconcile the fierce ideological oppositions evidenced by these debates, recent criticism has focused on redefining a role for art that parallels an American ethic of participatory democracy. Critics such as John Beardsley have espoused a "new" publicness in art practice that features cultural relevance in a plurality, community participation, and consensus. Yet how egalitarian can consensus be in a society so oriented toward, and influenced by, mass media? Erica Doss, wary of the ability to manipulate consent, wrote recently of the *Tilted Arc* debacle, "If Serra reneged on populist discourse, the GSA seized on it by using the democratic procedures of petitions and hearings... Public anger about 'ugly' abstract art was orchestrated to reinforce the GSA's claim on Foley Square; both the artist and the public were discounted in favor of state assumptions of a superior social vision."[92] Doss's critique, however, reveals a widespread failure by contemporary critics to understand the paradigmatic importance of Serra's orientation to a public which he strives to engage:

...

Specificity".
91 This term comprises roughly the period from 1980 to the present. The list of prominent conservative figures who've played major roles in these three affairs includes H. Ross Perot, Patrick Buchanan, Jesse Helms and Rudolph Giuliani.
92 Erika Doss, *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs*, 33. The GSA (General Services Administration) is the federal government's agency responsible for commissioning public art and maintaining federal property. Foley Square is the site of New York's federal building.

...Serra's countercultural aesthetics were not translated in ways that made sense to Federal Plaza employees, who saw his attempt at consciousness-raising only as another example of 'ugly' public art.

Like those of many public artists, Serra's primary interests lie in the site-specific orientation of his sculpture. He spent months assessing Foley Square's physical character and determining an appropriate artwork for this space; one of his main arguments against Tilted Arc's *removal was that it was generated for Federal Plaza, and nowhere else... Thus insisting on* Tilted Arc's *site-specific sanctity as an aesthetic object and ideological tool, Serra ignored the more complicated issue of discourse between public art and the public, and how that discourse shapes democratic expression in the public sphere.*[93]

Mistaking Serra's work for an "aesthetic object" or "ideological tool" reduces it to something it is not. The year he installed *Tilted Arc* Serra wrote, "There seems to be in this country right now, especially in sculpture, a tendency to make work which attends to architecture... I am interested in sculpture which is nonutilitarian, nonfunctional... any use is a misuse."[94] The question of Serra's work has never been one of public "discourse" that "shapes democratic expression" — his sculpture does not comprise a primer on civic behavior. Worse still, Doss ultimately mistakes populism for the public, and begs the question whether the work must please a majority of the public to be "considerate" of that public. Perhaps we should rather ask at what point must the artist take an unpopular stand in order to lead by example.

But even this last thought, the artist as agitator, robs art of its greatest asset: nonfunctionality. The dilemma facing Serra may well be that as soon as art does step forward from the shadows of accommodation and commodification it faces the question, *what does it mean?* In front of Serra's

93 Ibid., 32-33

sculpture, the expectation of the work saying something cannot be met. The work must be probed for meaning which is always relative to the person probing.

any use is a misuse... Perhaps the most damning words against my proposed thesis are Serra's. After all, is it fair to claim for him a political stance, one with deliberate analytical and operative strategies, when he vigorously defends the very uselessness of his work? The answer may begin by understanding the divergence of *meaning* and *use* in Serra's parlance, as when he says (of *Sight Point*) that, "it alludes to many levels of meaningfulness or uselessness simultaneously."[95] Maybe we should step back for a moment, and again ask what it is that Serra does.

Above all else, Serra makes space. He declares for sculpture its own space and syntax, and acts in contradiction to the architectural space in which he chooses to operate. He makes places of orientation that are simultaneously places of resistance. This is most certainly a political act when the work exposes the structures that frame our intersubjectivity and acts as an example of dissent to the habitual acceptance of these structures. That Serra understands the political implications of his, or any, work is clear:

> *Art is always ideological, whether it carries an overt political message or is*
>
> *art for art's sake and based on an attitude of indifference. Art always,*
>
> *either explicitly or implicitly, manifests a value judgment about the larger*
>
> *sociological context of which it is part. Art supports or neglects, embraces*
>
> *or rejects class interests. Tatlin's* Monument to the Third International *is*
>
> *no more ideological than a black painting by Ad Reinhardt. Ideological*

...

94 Serra, "Rigging", 100.
95 Serra, "Sight Point '71-'75/Delineator '74-'76", 37.

expression does not limit itself to an affirmation of power or political bias.[96]

But while Serra's work may express ideology, it does not *profess*; rather, it's situation prompts and enables a critical vantage and political action on the part of an active participant. The work's stance is not one of political billboard: it is a vehicle for self-awareness and poetic expression through participation. And, as Serra makes clear, the work is not architecture. It may instead be an example of what architecture once was and can again become.

By appropriating the space, scale, matter and technique of architecture, Serra reveals the possibilities that architecture leaves unfulfilled. Serra's all-but-architecture operates as a place of orientation, the site where we can recognize ourselves in the world and resolve our roles and choices of action. His work offers a ground from which we can clarify the ethical basis of our sociability, our responsibility in the *polis*, our essential politicality. Serra uncovers the original function of architecture – its political function.

Against a tradition of art driven by the internal necessities of mimesis and metaphor – reflecting the outside world *into* the work – Serra opposes an art whose content resides in its *interaction with* the external world. It is a situated art, one specific to its context and transformed continuously through the participation of a questioning public. In its orientation to an exterior with which it is critically engaged, the all-but-architecture of Richard Serra stakes its claim to the inherently political and poetic roles abandoned by architecture.

...

96 Serra quoted by Peter Eisenman, "Interview by Peter Eisenman", 154

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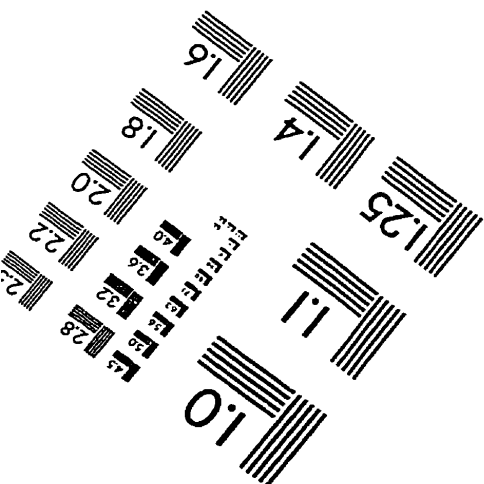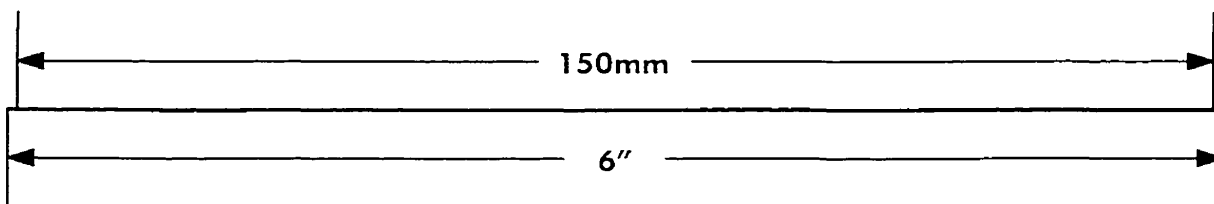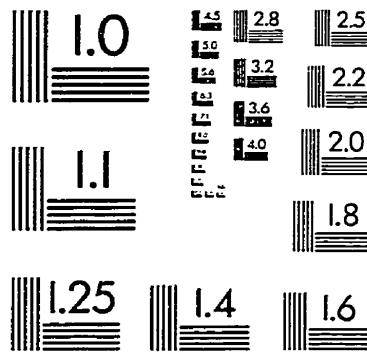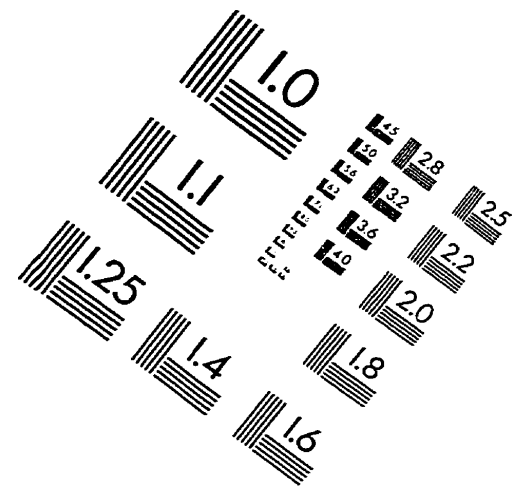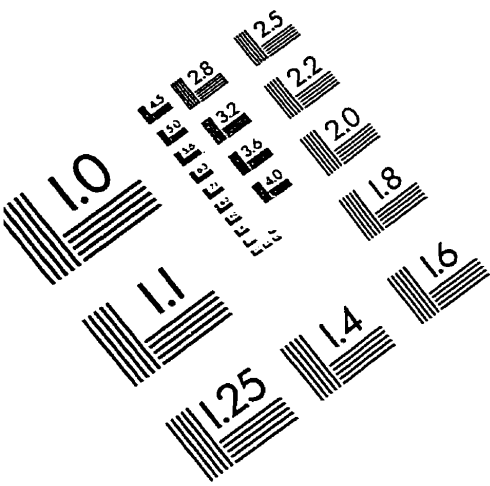
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