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HELEN MOLESWORTH ON RICHARD SERRA AND ANDRÉ CADERE

IT WASN'T TOO LONG AGO that this magazine reviewed Richard Serra's quasi-retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York [Artforum, October 2007]. It was clear that critic David Joselit was less than enthusiastic. For Joselit, the jump from the post-Minimalist prop pieces on the museum's sixth floor to Serra's most recent torqued ellipses on the second meant a calculated leap over the period when Serra's works were considered "controversial and dangerous." Joselit compared this elision with the Bush administration's suppression of the danger and controversy of its ongoing, deeply inequitable, and astoundingly vicious war. Hardly anodyne criticism, and to this reader's ear it rang true, for Serra's recent works had left me phenomenologically cold and politically disengaged. In the face of yet another fun-house experience of wild vertigo, I too found myself longing for the brash and contradiction-laden confrontations with public space emblemized by *Tilted Arc*, 1981, in which the effects of

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disorientation were perceived as invasive and problematic rather than exhilarating and exciting. So I confess my surprise, upon entering the monumental interior courtyard of the Grand Palais in Paris, to find myself deeply moved and awed by *Promenade*, 2008—a sculpture consisting of five individual steel slabs, each approximately sixty feet high and about thirteen feet wide.

Promenade is simply stunning and its strength only gains over time; it enacts a temporal and spatial unfolding of staggering proportions. At first you cannot see all five elements: They are expertly sited such that the revelation of each new monolith is a surprise. The towering height of the pieces is complicated by the relative thinness of the slabs—they are just under six inches thick; moreover, the pieces are ever so slightly akimbo, having been set into the concrete floor at the barely perceptible angle of 1.69 degrees. However, as one walks around

and through the work, the slabs magically appear to "right" themselves, inducing episodic doubt as to whether this seemingly impossible angle is real or illusory. As each new slab emerges and another recedes, one experiences a temporal repetition of perpetual present and fading futurity.

While Serra's ellipses create a centrifugal sensation that suggests the ground might give way beneath one's feet—one feels lost, unable to map the space—*Promenade* is different: The slabs and their arrangement remain legible, even transparent. Viewers will invariably feel small, diminutive beyond measure, but they will still be able to grasp the structure of the situation in which they find themselves. This is partly because, unlike the torqued ellipses, there is a fundamental agreement between plan and elevation. Similarly, the work's linear progression through the Grand Palais's bounded interior is such that, however expansive the spatial logic of the piece might be, one understands its inherent limitations. This rhymes the way in which the plinths' incredibly subtle angle of incidence competes with their emphatic physical entrenchment in the concrete floor. *Promenade* is a study in internal tensions that, while unresolved, are made plain—generating a productive (perhaps even democratic) friction, one that engages our very experience of history and memory.

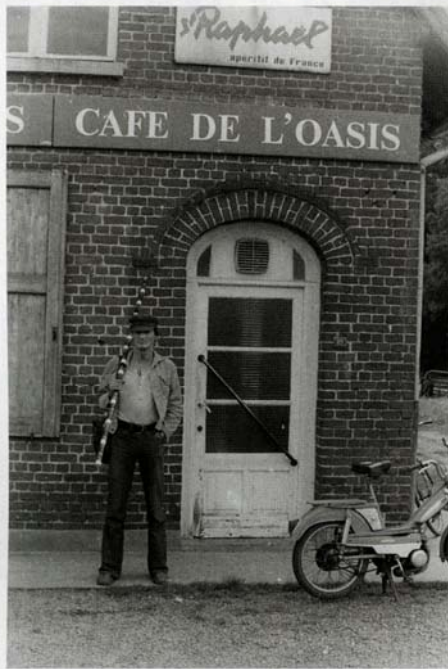
Promenade is as austere as the Grand Palais is over-the-top Belle Époque. Built for the World's Fair of 1900, it is the largest glass-and-ironwork building in the world; it boasts a 9,400-ton steel framework and a whopping 162,000 square feet of glass. Its sheer size and ambition make it a perfect evocation of Walter Benjamin's "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century." It is hard not to see Serra's *Promenade*, with its severe, hard-boiled formalism and its conviction in the ever expansive properties of materials (this feels like the limit test of rolled steel), as the epitome of the brute



Richard Serra, *Promenade*, 2008, weatherproof steel. Installation view, Grand Palais, Paris. Photo: Lorenz Kienzie.

economic and industrial ambitions of the twentieth century: capital, New York. And even though Serra's entire oeuvre is a prolonged (and deeply successful) attack on sculpture's relation to the monument, there is no escaping the way these planar slabs of steel, in both their scale and their doubling and then tripling (and so on), evoke the postmodern ecstasy of simulacrum that was the World Trade Center. Yet counter to the immediate iconicity of the twin towers, *Promenade* is not at all iconic. As such, the work is analogous to the way no single emblematic image or monument of 9/11 has emerged: The event is most often signified by the dual aperture of duration, the unfolding of the events that morning, and absence, the large empty space in the skyline, the endlessly disheartening open vistas down the West Side. So, too, the conflation of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries offered by *Promenade* redoubles this duration and absence—both long centuries, both having ended and left monuments behind—or not, as *Promenade* suggests.

HISTORICALLY, WHEN SERRA used planar forms, he deployed his quintessential gravity-defying mode of sculpture of the late 1960s and early '70s—propping. But in *Promenade*, the individual elements resist gravity not through precarious balance but through their embedded support in concrete (that other archetypal material of the twentieth century). As they soar up to the glass dome of the Grand Palais, they recall the evolution of Serra's gallery-bound prop pieces into outdoor



André Cadere in front of Café de l'Oasis, Kain, Belgium, 1975.

works like *Sight Point (For Leo Castelli)*, 1972–75, or *T.W.U.*, 1980. *Promenade* thus feels like a return to an explicitly pedestrian form of public and site-specific address (which often engendered controversy), as well as to the formal simplicity of easily apprehended geometric shapes. What to make, then, of Serra's turn away from the overwhelmingly popular torqued ellipses?

This question held a curious resonance for me as I walked from the Grand Palais toward the Musée d'Art Moderne to take in the long overdue André Cadere retrospective. Cadere was a Conceptual artist who came to prominence in Paris in the early '70s, his career cut short by his premature death in 1978. His primary métier was to fabricate rods of handpainted wooden dowels that he carried with him on numerous promenades—through city streets and art-world events, particularly gallery openings. The rods were composed according to a numerical and chromatic system that created a changing pattern of colors unique to each rod. Significantly, each rod had a mistake purposely embedded within it, disturbing the systematicity of its production. Cadere left these rods at openings, propped against walls or nestled in corners where they became part of the exhibition, a shift in context for both the art installed on the walls and the rods provisionally leaned against them. Cadere frequently performed these actions as an uninvited par-

ticipant, simultaneously infiltrating and exposing the system of art—proving that no matter how much the art world embraced Conceptual art's democratized “anyone can do it” ethos, that world remained exclusionary. The recent Paris exhibition was punctuated by film loops of Cadere's perambulations through Paris and New York, rod in hand or casually balanced on his shoulder, using art as an excuse to live life attentively, to please pay attention please. His work's inherently modest quality—the humble rod, the unsolicited object—lent pathos to his propping. In Cadere's hands propping took on an ethical dimension; it acknowledged the interdependency of things and people on other things and persons, between object and wall, invited and uninvited. Propping, for Cadere, was less about gravity than about making transparent the terms of a given situation, be it sculpture, an art exhibition, or an art opening.

It is arguable that, besides a genealogy of post-Minimalist sculpture, there would be little to connect Serra and Cadere beyond my serendipitous encounter with their work on the same cold and rainy Paris day. Yet, held together, the monumentality of *Promenade* and the modesty of Cadere's rods furthered my thoughts about the end of the twentieth century. In the days shortly after 9/11, President Bush urged Americans to put aside our grief (indeed, he suggested we go shopping), and even now, with his plummeting ratings and with a majority of Americans opposed to the war, we still follow his prescription. This state-sanctioned repression is the topic of Judith Butler's understated and indispensable volume of essays titled *Precarious Life* (2004). In it, she argues that America's inability to mourn propelled us into our current murderous state. In stark opposition to our “retaliation” for the attacks of 9/11, in which there is an imagined heroic victor, Butler calls for “reimagining the possibility of community on the basis of vulnerability and loss.” To begin with loss (as opposed to prideful patriotism)—particularly the loss of others, the yet untallied loss of civilian life in Afghanistan and Iraq—means that the grief that inevitably accompanies loss might demonstrate our relational ties to others and allow us to think about our “fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility.”

Working through my affective coordinates, I realized that Cadere's simple rods (both proto-institutional-critique and pre-site-specific) offered a humble

question—“Who is included and who is excluded?”—that felt crucial for our prideful times. Similarly, if *Promenade* is indeed a monument to the end of the twentieth century, then its very lack of permanence formally augments its elaboration of loss; it was on view at the Grand Palais for only forty days. Just as its elements slip in and out of view, a fort-da game between temporary revelations and their quickly receding memory, the piece as a whole will become a shadowy figure, an impermanent, unphotographable monument to New York, Capital of the Twentieth Century. The inherent modesty of Cadere's work, the way he transformed the phenomenological gesture of propping into an ethical question, provided the retrospective frame for Serra's new work. That *Promenade* does not simply replay the act of propping, or revisit overtly oppositional and conflicted public space, is an admirable refusal of nostalgia. Nonetheless, *Promenade* does turn away from the carefree physical fun house of the ellipses in favor of a return to the combined modalities of tension and transparency. Its self-consciously limited run connotes humility amid the piece's overwhelming ability to awe. Hence, *Promenade* articulates what a monument for the end of the twentieth century must do: It rejects the heroic and the hubristic by turning to strategies of repetition, transparency, and temporariness.

The sublime modesty of *Promenade* presents us with a study in mutual presence and absence, a profound experience of lost and found. Given that the twentieth century's ultimate loss may well be what Butler calls “the notion of the world itself as a sovereign entitlement of the United States,” *Promenade* proffers a contradictory sense of pathos and cautious possibility. To walk along the Seine, from the Cadere exhibition back toward *Promenade*, was to walk through the city Hitler refused to bomb, to walk from Cadere's account of the provisional nature of art and life toward Serra's temporary elegy to the end of a century. Each experience staked a claim for a world seen through the lens of vulnerability and loss, in which who and what can be included in any given system and who and what can be mourned are always questions worth asking, answers worth struggling over. □

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