

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTINFO

"You Have to Make a Choice": A Q&A With Richard Serra on His New Sculptures at Gagosian



Richard Serra says his new sculptures on view at Gagosian present viewers with "an arrested moment where you have to make a choice."

By **Andrew M. Goldstein**

Published: September 28, 2011

NEW YORK— Immediately upon entering the **Gagosian** gallery on 24th Street, one feels the presence of the two sculptures mutely weighing down the space with hundreds of tons of weatherproofed, rust-colored, and oddly soft-to-the-touch steel. Titled "Cycle" and "Junction," the two newest sculptures by **Richard Serra** are also freighted with the artist's customary hard thinking — towering high above the heads of visitors, the works recall his famed "Torqued Ellipses" series but advance their formal lexicon in powerful, if subtle, ways. At the same time they provide the same type of pleasures, allowing those walking through their winding, disorienting corridors to experience something like the thrills and chills of a roller coaster ride mixed with a sense of exotic grandeur, like the sand-blasted Siq that leads to Jordan's ancient city of Petra.

The new works at Gagosian are also vintage Serra in a way recognizable to people thrown for a loop by his recent "Drawings" retrospective at the **Metropolitan Museum of Art**, which is now moving to **SFMOMA** on October 15. Following up an in-depth conversation about that body of work, **ARTINFO** spoke to the artist about his new sculptures, the differences between art and architecture, and the artist who is impressing him today.

Tell me about the pieces in your Gagorian show.

In "Cycle" there are three circular extensions that are connected by a "y" shape. Once you enter, you have to make a decision about which way to go, and once you make that decision it propels you to one of the three exterior circular shapes. Then to understand the piece, you have to reenter it at a different place. And once again you're going to have to make a decision. "Junction," the second piece, is much more recent and functions somewhat similarly, although its circuitry allows for more choices because you have the possibility of four directions of entering and exiting. Without entering and exiting several times you will not experience the entirety of the work.

What I found in my earlier work was that, in most of those pieces, once you entered you were led in a certain direction and then you exited. There were pieces like "Open Ended" where it became confusing and you lost your sense of direction because the path reversed itself and you ended up in a space where you couldn't really reconstruct the plan of the space you had walked through. I've found that there is no limit to the possibilities you can achieve by focusing on the disorientating effect of the circulation. What happens in these pieces is that you reach an interval where you have to make a decision to go right or left, and the interval breaks your cadence — it's more or less an arrested moment where you have to make a choice. And how you perceive the choice, how you walk, how you change your direction has to do with how you perceive where you are. Once you make that choice, the passage will lead you either to the right or the left and either outside of the piece or to another possible way, thereby informing you about the circuitry of the piece. The newer pieces have become more complex in both path and circulation.

It seems these sculptures operate on an axis rather than the circular motion of the "Torqued Ellipse" pieces.

No, neither of these pieces has an axis — there's no directed axis forward or backward. Basically, in "Junction" there are four entrances and exits. Once you enter you have several choices and once you choose one direction it'll jettison you, most likely, to the outside. Then you're going to have to make a decision about whether you'll walk around the piece and enter somewhere else, or enter the other path that is next to the path which you've just exited. It's not a maze, but it's most unlikely that you'll be able to reconstruct its plan once you've exited.

Is this idea of choice something that you've begun to integrate into your work?

What I've gotten more interested in, rather than choice, is the interval of choice. The interval disrupts your thought, where you have to make a decision. And I got interested in that counterpoint because that doesn't happen in architecture. I think the big difference is that architecture really deals with connective tissues, foreseeing where you're directed to go. Sculpture can forgo that. That suspension of time happens at the interval. It's not a joint because it's spatial — it's kind of a break that also connects the piece. In most architecture you're directed here, there, up, down, left, right, either by signage or by the openness of the architecture. In these works, you find yourself in an interior where the inside could also be the outside of the inside you were just in, and then you have to make a decision about whether to go right or left, and as soon as you do that, you find yourself having to make a decision about whether to enter or exit again. These pieces leave you at a moment of loss, in a void where you have to make a decision, a decision that occurs at the interval where you have to make a choice.

Are these meant to be experienced individually or are they meant to accommodate groups of people at a time?

They can accommodate groups of people at a time — the passages never narrow to more than three feet. But I think people will experience them individually. I think that, like most of the pieces, you pretty much experience them alone. That's the way most people experience art. I think entertainment is experienced collectively at times, but art is usually experienced privately and singularly and subjectively.

Gagosian's press release for your new show describes your work as "monumental," which is a word often used in describing your sculptures. What does monumental mean to you?

I think it's a bad word. I think it's a misnomer. If you look at the history of monuments, they deal with a person, place, or event, and these pieces don't monumentalize any of those things. Monumentality always has a literary component, whether it's a figure on a horse or a hero from battle or an event in time. These pieces are large-scale sculpture. Brancusi built a work 100 feet high in 1939 ["Endless Column" in Târgu Jiu, Romania]. A lot of artists have built large works. People have tagged these pieces "monumental" for lack of a better word, but if we called them "large-scale sculpture" that would satisfy me.

This reminds me of your reluctance to have your work associated with the idea of the sublime. But the sheer scale of the sculpture brings in so many alternative connotations.

I think that comes down to individual experience. If someone finds a transcendental value in the work because of their own subjectivity — and that has to do with where people were born, how they were raised, the context they've been exposed to, if not their DNA — and they find ways of reflection that allow them to think such things, fine. But that's not the intention of the work. There were people in past centuries who dealt with that potential, and some of them did excellent work. It's just that I'm more secular than that — I'm not very interested in the notion of the sublime. On the other hand, if people come to this work and that's a quality that they want to ascribe to it because it evokes that feeling for them, I have nothing to say against it. It's fine with me.

You mentioned Brancusi, and you recently had a show at the Foundation Beyeler where your work was shown alongside Brancusi's. Could you talk about the affinity you feel for his work?

When I was a student he was a resource for me, not just the authority of his carving and the simplicity of his work, but the way his work displaced volume with its curvature. At the time I wasn't a sculptor, but when I was on a Yale grant living in Paris I would return to his studio and make drawings again and again. I haven't thought about Brancusi for 30 years, but it was his work that initially triggered my interest in sculpture. The reason to do that show, though, was that I really wanted to do an exhibition at the Beyeler because of the light, and there is a piece called "Fernando Pessoa" that I wanted to show in Europe, because I'd only displayed it in England. There was also an earlier work I wanted to show that hadn't been displayed for 40 years — I wanted to show it in terms of its affinities with Brancusi. But I think the exhibition at the Beyeler, when experienced, was much more about diversity and divergences than about affinities.

Who would you say you look to in sculpture today?

I'm not looking at anyone.

No artist of any time period?

No. I look at a lot of different things within the history of building and the history of tectonics and the history of form. I'm more interested in the metamorphosis of form. Form has no particular specific orientation other than how it evolves.

I've often wondered why it seems that several artists of the past century have been drawn to architecture in their later periods, such as Vito Acconci or Dennis Oppenheim. Younger artists, like Olafur Eliasson and Ai Weiwei, also seem to be increasingly working with making buildings. What do you think it is that attracts artists to architecture?

I think architects deal with utility, connection, function. Sculpture is purposefully useless in terms of utility and function. It's only useful in terms of evoking feeling and sentiment. I think people who move into architecture most likely find sculpture difficult.

Too difficult?

I have no idea why other people do what they do, and I don't know if what you said is a generalization or not — you know, if artists as they evolve move into architecture. I see no need to do that, and I don't understand why one would do it unless one found it difficult to proceed with one's own investigation of sculpture.

When we spoke last you told me about your use models as a starting point in your sculptural process. What's the trajectory of how one of your sculptures is made?

I usually start with the site. Then I try to deal with the circulation of the site and all the conditions that go into the makeup of the site and the boundary of the site, where is the site demarcated. Then I try to deal with the enclosure and where the openings are, how the light comes in. Then I try to deal with how people collect themselves or pass through the site. Then I gather other information from the site, in terms of photographs or video, or I walk the site — often I walk the site for days. Then I go right to model-making, with models at an inch-to-foot ratio, so if the piece is going to be 40 feet long I start with a 40-inch model. I make the models in lead because lead is very malleable and easy to rework continuously. Then from the lead models we usually go to a CAD [computer-aided design] drawing that will give the fabricator a way to understand how plates have to be formed. Then those CAD drawings are assessed by the plant, and they come back and tell us, yes, there's a tendency to for this to tip over, or this piece is definitely functional, and so on. Then we have to readjust our models, and there's a constant back-and-forth between model-making and information exchanged through the computer, what is possible and what's not. And then, after we reach a certain stage, we ask the steel fabricator to make us a steel model that deals with the definitions that have arrived from our model. We assess that, and then we go to the plant and watch the fabrication. That process can take anywhere from a year to two to three.

The computer modeling clearly makes the process of creating a sculpture easier in terms of the logistical aspect. Does it cut back on the time it takes, or on the expense?

There are things I would never be able to figure out in terms of the possibilities of the curvature of the torquing of plates, so they lay out the bending plan for me. We do it by hand; they do it by line bending. We can't program the bending possibilities; they do that. Sometimes we go directly to the computer and make the drawing right in the computer without a model, but that's only happened maybe twice. Usually we start with models.

Have you always used computer modeling to make your large-scale sculptures, spanning from the "Torqued Ellipses" to the present?

No, the "Torqued Ellipses" were started with wooden models, and then we went to the computer. But they initially began with models.

On the subject of technology, you mentioned that you used video in mapping out the space as an early point in making a sculpture.

No, I did that very early on. I don't do it any longer. Usually I just walk and take photographs or I walk with someone else to try to define where the boundaries are. Or I assess the site and see what's possible. We're building a big piece in Qatar right now [commissioned by the Qatar Museum Authority in conjunction with the I.M Pei Islamic Museum]. It probably won't be open until December, but it's been a three-year haul, and I've been there several times and had a lot to do with surveying the site and seeing its possibilities and really figuring out how to extend the site into a complex where it could be a place where people could gather.

To go back to the topic of video, the reason I bring it up is your recent "Drawings" retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art contained a reminder that your early video work is some of the best that has been made.

I don't think that. At one point I made a few videos. But I don't want to mislead you — I don't use video to investigate sites. I've hardly ever done that.

Is video something you feel like you've left behind?

I did it for a very short period of my life as a way of dealing with the extension of my sculpture via my hand. So I used my hand as the tool. But I only did that for a very short period. I made films for maybe seven or eight years too, and then I stopped.

I'm assuming you don't pay attention to current video art, or do you?

Now and then, but not a lot. I've always thought that Nauman was probably the person who broke the most ground in video, and I think right now there's a lot of people who are working within his shadow.

Ryan Trecartin, whose recent show at MoMA PS1 was a critical success, has been hailed as suggesting a new, technology-obsessed way forward for video art.

I saw that on the Internet. I thought it related to an earlier tradition in America. I thought it had a lot to do with early Jack Smith film, I thought it had something to do with Joan Jonas, I thought it had a little bit to do with [Ed] Kienholz, although the technology is newer and Trecartin has a great, great facility. It looks like he's probably breaking more ground than anyone since Matthew Barney. What you never know about unexpected youth is how they're going to rework the historical hand-me-downs. And this work I see as breaking a lot of rules in an interesting way.

A condensed and edited version of this interview appeared in the September 2011 issue of Modern Painters.