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Richard Serra: Memory, Time, and the Value of Inquiry



© Richard Serra and Gagosian Gallery, New York
Richard Serra's massive sculpture "Cycle," 2011, will debut at Gagosian in September.

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Richard Serra frequently refers to memory and time as important aspects of his work. For Serra both are critical to the experience of his sculpture and to conceiving new work, particularly his more recent, large-scale examples. Serra privileges the ways in which his sculpture cues memory perception. The notions of both memory and time make Serra's work "experiential," a label often applied to his sculpture. Conveniently, both memory and time also relate to the availability of Serra's work in two museum shows and one gallery exhibition that will be on view concurrently this fall in the U.S. and Europe. From September until December, viewers will have the opportunity to see three shows, each focused on a different period and medium and each framing his diverse output within a distinct context. Taken together, the museum exhibitions allow us to reconsider our memories of Serra's oeuvre over time and to consider how the past work relates to the new work that will be at Gagosian in New York.

Although Serra is a highly celebrated artist, written about extensively and widely collected both privately and publicly throughout the world, this viewing opportunity should not be treated lightly. In perusing chronologies of Serra exhibitions, one realizes that the public has rarely been afforded such a wide range of his work simultaneously. As a result, it seems crucial to assess this moment and determine its historical value, particularly when considering the work of an artist who is well known and presumably well

understood. What is the contextual value of having so much of Serra's work available at one time? Since the mid 1960s Serra has invented tirelessly and stands as a unique example of an artist constantly expanding his vocabulary and output. He has never been complacent, continuing to build imaginatively on what he calls his "existing alphabet" through both his sculpture and his drawing practice. As a result we presume to know Serra's work well or, one might argue, think we do.



Photo by Keziban Barry
American minimalist sculptor Richard Serra at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

"Constantin Brancusi and Richard Serra" opens at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, in Spain, in October. Although the show is not intended to highlight the abundant similarities between the artists, certain affinities inevitably surface when the work of two key figures from the history of sculpture are seen together. In many respects the two bodies of work diverge: Most basically Brancusi forever remains indebted to a figurative realm while Serra has produced abstract and experiential work. But beyond this are possible affinities. Foremost (and perhaps most evident) among them, according to the show's curator, is an engagement with surrounding space, establishing a spatial encounter for the viewer. In addition to this shared engagement, other connections, and perhaps questions, are revealed.

In considering the latest work by Brancusi in the show, "King of Kings," circa 1938, and the earliest work by Serra, "Belts," 1966–67, one notes that Serra's abstract use of vulcanized rubber in an experimental, processlike format still engaged with drawing seems almost a logical next step following Brancusi's hand-tooled abstract column, reminiscent of his elaborate bases. Or in comparing "King of Kings" to Serra's "Verb List," 1967–68, included perhaps not coincidentally on an adjacent page of the catalogue, it becomes clear that Serra embarks on a series of experiments (to roll, to crease, to fold), while Brancusi has created an abstract object archiving his recurring forms. What I am suggesting, then, in the spirit of the catalogue's subtitle, "A Handbook of Possibilities," is not the specific strength of any particular comparisons but the possibility of seeing Serra's work anew in light of Brancusi's examples. What prompted Serra to so fully disengage with figuration and push abstraction toward the experiential? And why did Serra abandon the pedestal so ardently? Through the show, it becomes possible to imagine the young Serra strongly affected by the overbearing presence of Brancusi's bases.

Serra has often spoken about his work coming out of work, a sentiment that will likely be evident to viewers of his new pieces at Gagosian Gallery in New York this September. The show will debut two sculptures, "Junction" and "Cycle," both from 2011. According to the artist, these will be more complicated, and decidedly more disorienting, than such earlier (and related) large-scale examples as the 2006 "Band" and "Sequence" or "Open Ended," 2007–08. Both "Junction" and "Cycle" include an interior "interval" where viewers will be momentarily halted as they are forced to make a directional decision along an interior path. This active decision and the heightened engagement it triggers situate viewers acutely within the moment, allowing for an almost existential experience of the work. This phenomenon is not a new preoccupation for Serra but one that is critical throughout his practice and that will now play out

more explicitly. Through this newly introduced interval, viewers will be afforded a choice, allowing for and leading to certain future experiences and memory; these works do not present the prescribed linear path, for example, of earlier Serra sculptures such as "Sequence."

In a recent interview on the occasion of the show "Richard Serra Drawing: A Retrospective," previously on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and opening at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art this October, Serra discusses a series titled "Drawings after Circuit": "Although these drawings had never been shown before, they represent the sort of drawing that remains my daily practice as far as hand-eye coordination is concerned. I make notations of what I see in everyday surroundings in a notebook that I carry with me everywhere I go." Similarly, the drawings show provides visitors with access to Serra's personal notebooks, which he has never before publicly exhibited and which have remained largely unknown. Through them we are able to better understand how the very practice of drawing has functioned as an essential creative catalyst for the artist. In addition to being the first full-scale retrospective of Serra's drawings, the exhibition thus provides a window into this arguably lesser-known body of work and demonstrates how it complements the better-known sculpture. Perhaps more than any Serra exhibition in recent memory, this breaks new ground in enabling viewers to understand the artist most completely.

In the same interview, Serra was praised for his ability to "value inquiry," something that has without question fueled his prolific output. And Serra seems also to engender this inquisitive impulse in us, his audience, particularly when we consider these three exhibitions together. In each instance we are aware of different influences — aspects of the artist's history that have played a crucial role in the evolution of the work he is making today. In "Brancusi/Serra" the juxtaposition of his work with that of his predecessor raises questions about what inspired the young artist when he visited Brancusi's studio in the 1960s. At the drawings show, we are made keenly aware of the effect that this practice, although perhaps at times overshadowed by the sculpture, has had on his oeuvre as a whole; Serra's personal notebooks remind us of his daily notations and how what he sees becomes what he creates. And lastly the sculptures at Gagosian bring us to the current phase of the artist's development, demonstrating the ways in which new work has developed directly out of existing work. The three exhibitions, utilizing very different means, allow us to see the "handbook of possibilities" that has ultimately shaped Serra. They provide us with a rare chance to understand him more fully and to allow us to imagine what will come next.