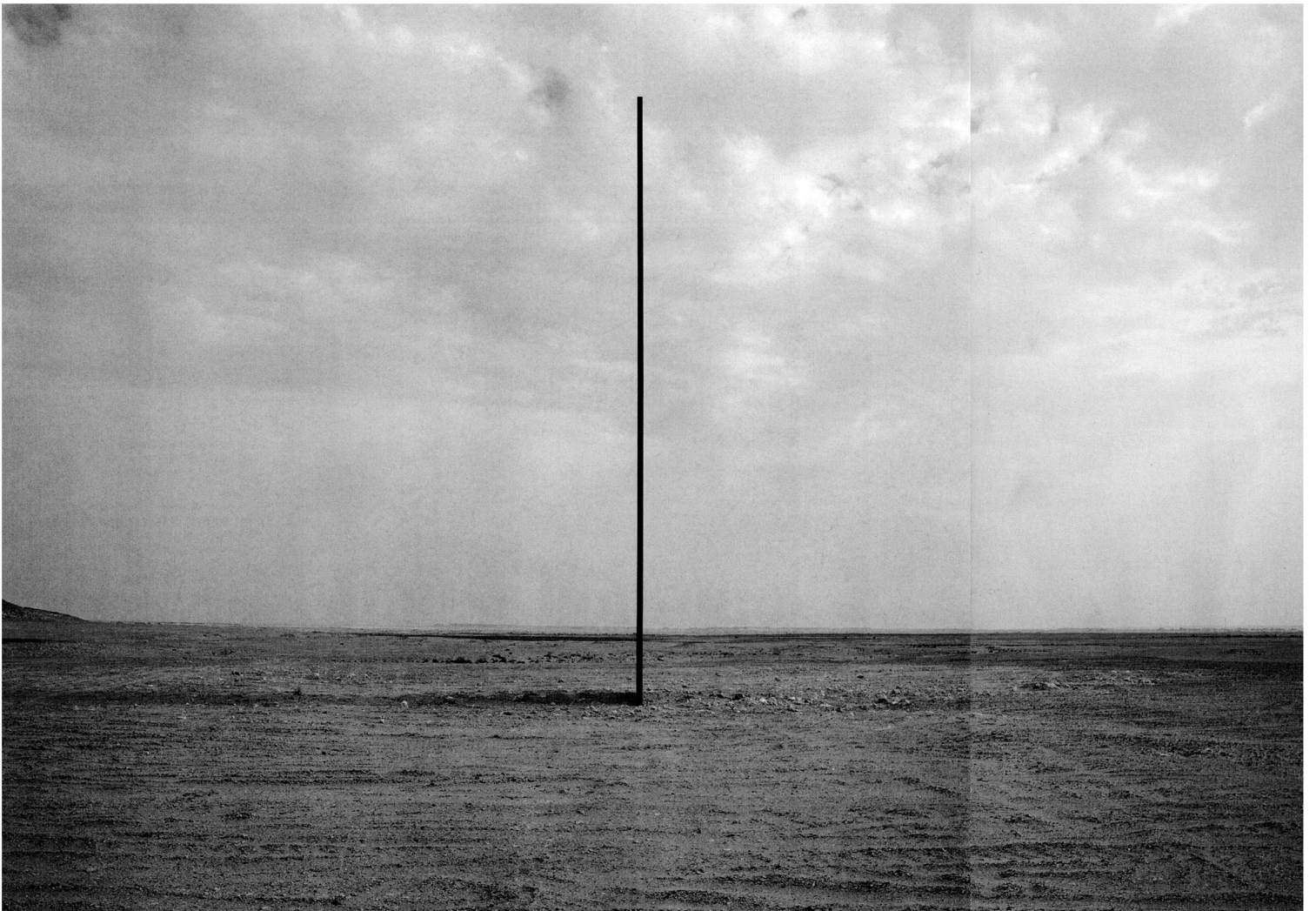


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Richard Serra, *East-West/
West-East*, 2014, weatherproof
steel. Installation view,
Brouq Nature Reserve, Qatar.
Photo: Cristiano Mascaro.

Serra in the Desert

HAL FOSTER

EAST-WEST/WEST-EAST is a new sculpture by Richard Serra commissioned by Sheikha al-Mayassa al-Thani of Qatar; it is located in the Brouq Nature Reserve in the western portion of this tiny state in the Gulf enriched by its holdings of gas and oil. To arrive at the desert site, you drive west from Doha for forty miles (almost the width of the country), passing one construction site after another on a vast freeway, and then, suddenly, the landscape becomes almost lunar in its vacancy. Exiting via Camel Underpass No. 7, you travel seven or eight more miles on a makeshift road until the sculpture appears in the distance. Depending on the time of day and year, you are likely to be alone.

East-West/ West-East consists of four steel plates arrayed vertically at irregular intervals in a straight line about a half mile in length along the compass points of the title. Anchored by supports of steel and

concrete set below the level of the hard sand (it is actually a gritty gypsum), all the plates are thirteen feet wide, but the two outer ones are fifty-five feet high while the two inner are forty-eight feet. These height differences adjust for terrain changes, as the tops of the slabs are calibrated to be exactly even with one another and roughly level with the low plateaus that, formed long ago by the sea, frame the piece to the north and the south. As you walk from east to west and back again (rendering literal the first meaning of the title), you register the line of the plates and sense the evenness of the tops. You also perceive that the middle interval, between the second and third slabs, is greater than the others (the middle section is 450 yards, while the first is 173 and the third 301); this is so because the plates are positioned not with an eye toward even spacing, but at precisely those points in the landscape that allow the tops to be level.

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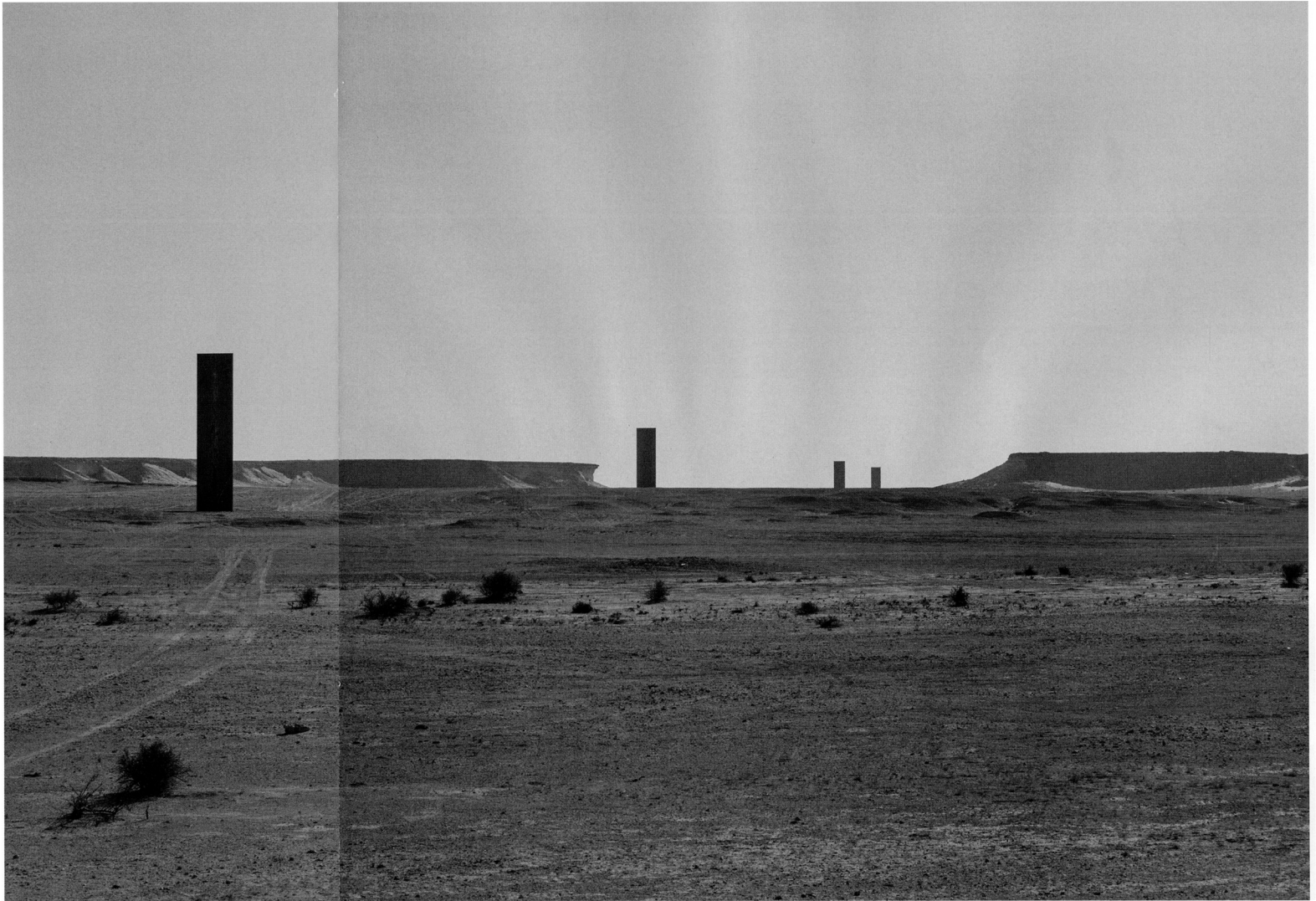
Characteristically, then, Serra offers you different means of measure by which to gauge the physical particularities of the site, especially the subtle shifts in the incline of the desert floor and in the elevation of the nearby plateaus. For example, you realize that the floor rises and falls over the extent of the piece, but not to the point where either outer slab is ever obscured. As you approach the final plate to the west, another plateau appears to the north, with glimpses of the Arabian Sea at various points on the horizon, which reminds you that you are on a little peninsula within the greater peninsula that is Qatar. In this way, *East-West/West-East* ties together two stretches of desert and, in doing so, alerts you to differences between them (especially in configuration and color) that you did not initially register. After the perceptual bombardment of Doha, with its architecture dominated by idiosyncratic shapes and kitschy facades, the sensuous experience prompted by the rigorous abstraction of the sculpture is at once bracing and sensitizing.¹

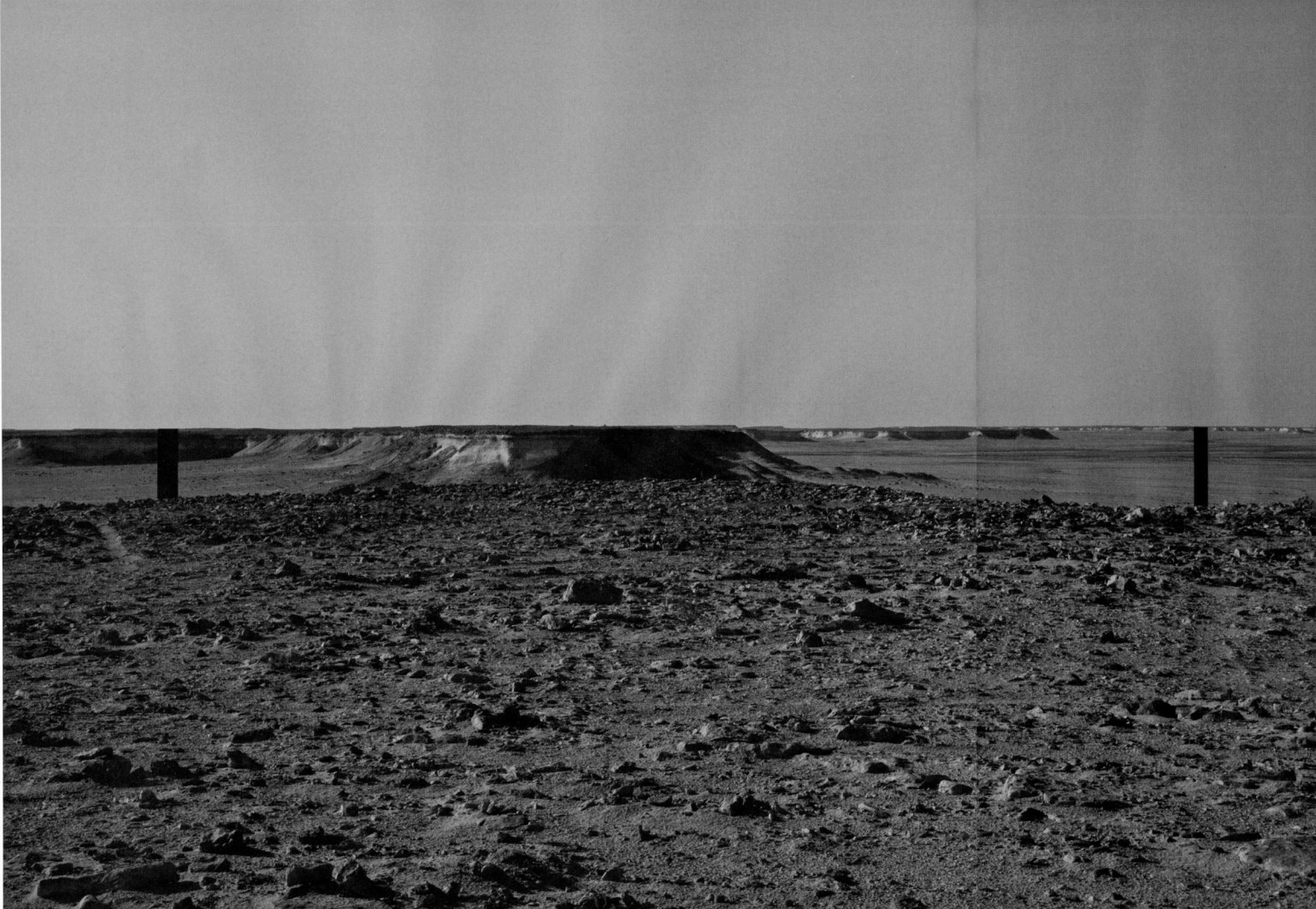
In plan, the four plates divide the desert site into orderly sections, yet everything changes as you walk the piece, for the slabs come in and out of alignment and the scale shifts continually. From a distance, the plates appear as the middle ground between the foreground at your feet and the background of horizon and sky. Given this vast surround, the slabs do not seem monumental (a criticism often voiced by those who know the piece only through photographs), and if you scramble up a plateau to view them, they are not imposing at all (as they are level with you). However, once you are close to a plate, it does appear immense, especially as you cannot help but cast your eyes heavenward up its length. The very character of the slabs seems to alter as you proceed: From afar they are broad planes; as you approach they become massive objects (the two outer plates weigh eighty tons each; the two inner, seventy-five tons); and, finally, as you pass by them they thin to sheer lines (each is only about five and a half inches thick). The last transition is especially compelling, as one moment a slab

dominates the landscape, while the next it is but a fine cut that connects land to sky. Seen from a distance, each plate also suggests the primary sign of a figure against the horizon; taken as a whole, *East-West/West-East* seems to apply the Suprematist geometry of Malevich to topographic space.

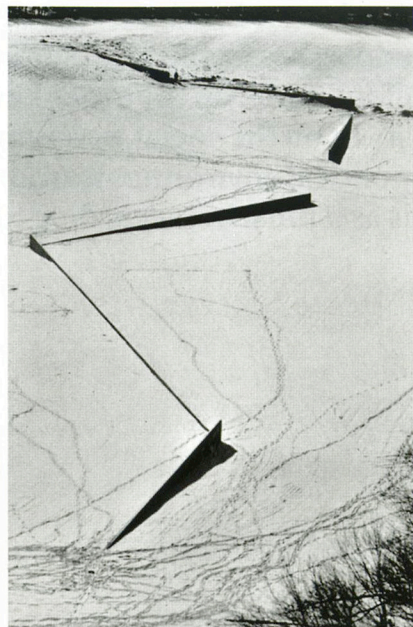
From most perspectives, the plates are pure verticals in a landscape that otherwise lacks them, so they are at once very much of the site and altogether alien to it. The same is true of their color: The dark steel stands out against both the yellow-white of the gypsum and the pale blue of the sky. These colors change with the hour and the season, as does the play of shadows across the piece, which renders *East-West/West-East* not only a plotting of positions but also a measure of these other conditions. The experience afforded by the sculpture is thus elemental: You find yourself in an immense force field of earth and air with hints of water and fire (the wind whistled when I was at the site on a mid-June morning, and it was already 104 degrees).

The experience conjures the great age of Earthworks, and *East-West/West-East* calls two of the most canonical instances to mind. In his mapping of the desert floor with steel plates, Serra evokes the way in which Walter De Maria measures a plot one kilometer long by one mile wide with stainless-steel rods in *The Lightning Field*, 1977, and in his compassing of a stretch of ancient desert sea, Serra summons the way in which Robert Smithson choreographs the geography of the Great Salt Lake in *Spiral Jetty*, 1970. And yet the differences here are as telling as the similarities. Although Serra was present at the beginning of Earthworks, he became suspicious of some manifestations, which he saw as so much drawing on the land, so many images writ superlarge (this could be said of both *The Lightning Field* and *Spiral Jetty*). This concern underlies his insistence that the body of the viewer be activated by each piece, literally motivated by each site, which is evident as early as *Shift*, 1970–72, a zigzag of six concrete lengths that Serra laid down in an uneven field thirty miles north of





Richard Serra, *East-West/ West-East*, 2014, weatherproof steel. Installation view, Brouq Nature Reserve, Qatar. Photo: Cristiano Mascaro.



Richard Serra, *Shift*, 1970-72, concrete. Installation view, King City, Ontario, Canada.

After the perceptual bombardment of Doha, with its architecture dominated by idiosyncratic shapes and kitschy facades, the sensuous experience prompted by the rigorous abstraction of Serra's sculpture is at once bracing and sensitizing.

Toronto. *Shift* is evoked by *East-West/West-East*, as, more immediately, is *Promenade*, 2008, his temporary installation of five vertical fifty-six-foot-high plates in the Grand Palais, which were arrayed on a line down the center of the nave of that industrial basilica in Paris.

East-West/West-East raises questions that it does not answer and perhaps should not answer. Triggered by the title, you might consider other associations of East and West, other connections and disconnections, only, for the most part, to dismiss them as not very relevant. For example, like minarets, the plates might be taken as a summons to converge, and yet they are too abstract to be evocative in this manner, and, again, though there was a ceremonial procession at the opening of the sculpture in April, the surround is void of people. For whom,

then, is the piece made? On-site, it is as unexplained as it is elemental, a little like the monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (or perhaps, in time, like the ruin left by Ozymandias in the Shelley poem, which includes the portentous line "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"). It is not clear how often wealthy Qataris and business expatriates, let alone semi-indentured migrant workers, will visit *East-West/West-East*; on the other hand, the geometry of the forms and the phenomenology of the experience are both apprehensible and open to all, and the road to the site is already well tracked. One likely audience is the art tourist: Although the trip from Europe or Asia, not to mention North America, is neither easy nor cheap (my visit was supported by Qatar Museums, which is headed by the sheikha), these pilgrims will no doubt come to the site over time.

Two factors in the remote reception of *East-West/West-East* are the art-world status of the sheikha (in 2013, *ArtReview* ranked her as the most powerful figure, with one billion dollars annually at her disposal) and the cultural ambitions of the state (on which matters she advises the new emir, her older brother, who is said to be less interested than his father in such things). One can question this use of capital both real and cultural, of course: It is a way to project an identity and to support a regime, and certainly Qatar is involved in a prestige war with the United Arab Emirates, among other neighbors.² But how different is this deployment of soft power from

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Richard Serra, *East-West/West-East*, 2014, weatherproof steel. Installation view, Brouq Nature Reserve, Qatar. Photo: Cristiano Mascaro.

everyday practices in the West? And surely it is not a bad thing if it leads to the creation of institutions such as museums (not to mention universities), which tend to be a progressive force in the region. With the controversial run-up to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar (now in jeopardy), the conditions for foreign laborers and the likelihood of state graft are much in the news. Inadvertently, then, the vast expenditures in pursuit of international status have exposed rifts and inequities in Qatari society—again, not a bad thing. These inquiries are important for us to make, but they can also serve to divert our attention from labor conditions and political corruption at home (and at home abroad: Reports have also appeared about abusive practices on the construction site of a New York University campus elsewhere in the Gulf).

The pertinent question here is this: To what extent can we demand that artists engage such issues in their work? My response, which some will see as a hedge, depends on the distinction between site and context. On the one hand, *East-West/West-East* addresses its physical setting eloquently; on the other hand, it is silent on the social, economic, and political environment around it. This is as it must be, according to Serra. Although he is an originator of site-specific art, he has long claimed a semiautonomy for his sculpture, insisting on his right to develop its formal language internally as well. This position prompts a related question: Can we critique an artist who helped to launch the discourse of site-specificity but has stopped

short of its elaboration in terms of institutional critique and sociological investigation in order to retain the relative independence of his project? To Serra, I would speculate, these latter practices run the risk of sacrificing site to context—that is, of dissolving the intrinsic forms of a given artwork into the extrinsic forces that seem to determine them. Opened up further, the question (which is a fundamental one for art history) becomes: Should we hold any artist to criteria that his practice might prompt but does not choose to follow? An additional merit of *East-West/West-East* is that it invites such reflections as these, which bear on art at all points of the compass. □

HAL FOSTER IS A 2014–15 FELLOW AT THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY'S CULLMAN CENTER FOR SCHOLARS AND WRITERS.

NOTES

1. In his National Museum of Qatar (now under construction), Jean Nouvel might achieve both indulgent shape and Orientalist cliché, dominated as the design is by the image of the sand rose. In his Museum of Islamic Art (2008), I. M. Pei was inspired by the ninth-century mosque Ahmad ibn Tulun in Cairo, and in Serra's tower piece titled 7, 2011, which, positioned on a jetty opposite the Pei building, consists of seven tall plates that form a seven-sided aperture at the top, the artist alludes to a twelfth-century minaret in Ghazni, Afghanistan, that is unusual in its noncylindrical configuration. Such an exchange of sources is serviceable enough: In this way, the Western designers motivate their forms culturally, while the Qatari patrons appear symbolically inclusive, even pan-Islamic. Refreshingly, *East-West/West-East* makes no such direct allusion to Islamic visual culture.

2. However, the *Financial Times* has recently reported substantial cuts in the budget of the Qatar Museums Authority (now rebranded as simply Qatar Museums) for next year. As is well known, the Qataris are deeply invested in the West: For example, the Qatar Investment Authority and its subsidiaries own, in whole or part, the Shard and Harrods in London and Printemps and the Saint-Germain soccer club in Paris, among many other holdings. In this register, as so often in the past, East and West interpenetrate each other fully, which gives additional meaning to the title of the sculpture.

