

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



How Richard Serra Shaped the Discourse about Public Art in the 20th Century

George Philip Lebourdais



Richard Serra. London Cross, 2014. Gagosian Gallery

One of the most famous sculptors of his generation, Richard Serra is also one of the most important artists of the 20th century. Combining the action of Abstract Expressionism with the raw, procedural grind of Process Art, his sculptures recast Minimalism on a monumental scale. Recognizable for their patina—Serra’s favorite material is rolled Cor-Ten steel with an evenly rusted surface—as much as for their size, sculptures like *Torqued Ellipses* (1996-1997) at the Dia:Beacon count among the previous century’s most iconic artworks.

It’s not surprising that Serra’s massive forms have compelled museums to carve out spaces large enough to accommodate them. Yoshio Taniguchi’s MoMA expansion, completed in 2006, included a high-ceilinged, industrially reinforced second floor that supported a major Serra

exhibition; SFMOMA's brand new Snøhetta redesign features a street-level gallery devoted to Sequence (2006); and the cavernous main gallery of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain, seems as much designed for its eight colossal Serra sculptures as it is inspired by them. And all this despite the fact that Serra—a champion of public and site-specific art—has compared museums to funeral parlors. For an artist who has so tenaciously asked us to reckon with space (and ourselves) through sculpture, however, this recalibration of architecture seems fitting.

Finding his voice with steel

Serra was born in San Francisco to working-class European immigrants. He went to the University of California, Berkeley, to study English literature, working in steel mills to support himself. The experience of this industrial material would have a profound influence on him after he transferred to UC Santa Barbara and began to take art classes.

When Serra arrived at Yale for his BFA and subsequent MFA in 1961, he joined a group that was a veritable who's who of 20th-century art: Philip Guston, Ad Reinhardt, Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella, Chuck Close, and Nancy Graves, who would become his first wife. The community was engrossed in Abstract Expressionism, and Serra's early work reflects this influence. In his words, it was "a cross between Pollock and de Kooning." After Yale fellowships supported influential trips to Paris and Florence, Serra moved to lower Manhattan in 1966, supporting himself through a moving company he started with legendary composer Philip Glass, among other notable artists.

As he began to experiment with different materials, Serra gravitated toward sculpture. He identified Jasper Johns and Jackson Pollock, two very different artists, as his main inspirations. How to reconcile the sculptural aspects of Johns's compositions and the action painting of Pollock? Serra answered by letting material determine form. In his "Splash" series, initiated at Castelli Gallery's warehouse in 1968, Serra threw molten lead at the intersection between wall and floor, where it hardened and was then removed as long, textured sculptures.

In 1966-67, Serra penned a list of transitive verbs—a to-do list of sorts—published in *The New Avant-Garde: Issues for the Art of the Seventies* (1972) by Grégoire Müller. Many of these words describe the dynamics of some of Serra's most important sculptures. *To Lift*, for instance, is the title of a 1967 work, one that manifests the effect of that action on a piece of vulcanized rubber. "To prop" indicates the gesture behind any number of works from that period, from *Prop* (1968) to *1-1-1-1* (1969) to *Melnikov* (1987). Even works with less explicitly action-based titles, like the 2006 masterpiece *Band*, evoke many of the spatial and temporal terms on that list: to bend, to shave, to flow, to suspend, to gather.

The looming gravity of these works is key to appreciating Serra's oeuvre. The artist had a recurring dream as a child—of a mass of great ships floating on the San Francisco Bay. Thus the macho, aggressive feel of sculptures like *Backdoor Pipeline* (2010)—in a style that has been called "he-man Minimalism"—can also be understood as a way to shed or float above the burdens of Modernism. Rather than prompting you to simply observe, Serra makes you constantly renegotiate your relationship to an artwork that requires not only an artist, but also engineers, forgers, construction workers, preparators, curators, and viewers to participate. "How the work alters a given site is the issue," he affirms, "not the persona of the author."

The *Tilted Arc* controversy

Approaching Serra's art according to its relationship to space leads to the most infamous work of his career, and indeed one of the most important debates about public sculpture in 20th-century art history. It surrounds *Tilted Arc* (1981), a 12-foot-tall, 120-foot-long wall of curved steel placed across the plaza of the Jacob K. Javits Federal Building in lower Manhattan.

Commissioned by the U.S. General Services Administration for its Art-in-Architecture program, *Tilted Arc* drew criticism from neighboring government employees as soon as it was installed.

By slicing the space of the plaza in half, *Tilted Arc* served as an obstacle for anyone who wished to traverse it in a straight line. That was Serra's goal. "Step by step, the perception not only of the sculpture but of the entire environment changes," he argued, refusing to sanction numerous employees' requests to have it moved. "To remove the work is to destroy the work." If moved from the place it was made for, then *Tilted Arc* would be nothing more than a hunk of steel, Serra said. As a work conceived as "site-specific," it would cease to be a work of art at all. (Titles of Serra's work have often paid homage to pioneering site-specific earthwork artists like Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer.)

The dispute swelled until 1985, when a public hearing was held to address legal and philosophical challenges to the work. As taxpayers, did members of the public "own" this art, and if so, why shouldn't they get to decide what to do with it? Did the First Amendment right to free speech apply to the creation of art? In the end, although 122 of the 180 people who testified voted to retain the sculpture, a jury from the National Endowment for the Arts voted to remove it. *Tilted Arc* was cut into three pieces and sent to a scrap metal yard.

An important episode in the history of public arts patronage, the controversy also helped Serra define his profession. Defending *Tilted Arc*, he said, "the experience of art itself is a social function." With echoes of Joseph Beuys's expanded concept of art as social sculpture or, more contentiously, Christoph Büchel's recent social practice intervention, *THE MOSQUE* (2015), at the 56th Venice Biennale, Serra's work is now more widely loved. Praise flows for his 20-ton, rolled-metal sheets and slabs as easily from critics and theorists as from even the most skeptical of museum visitors.