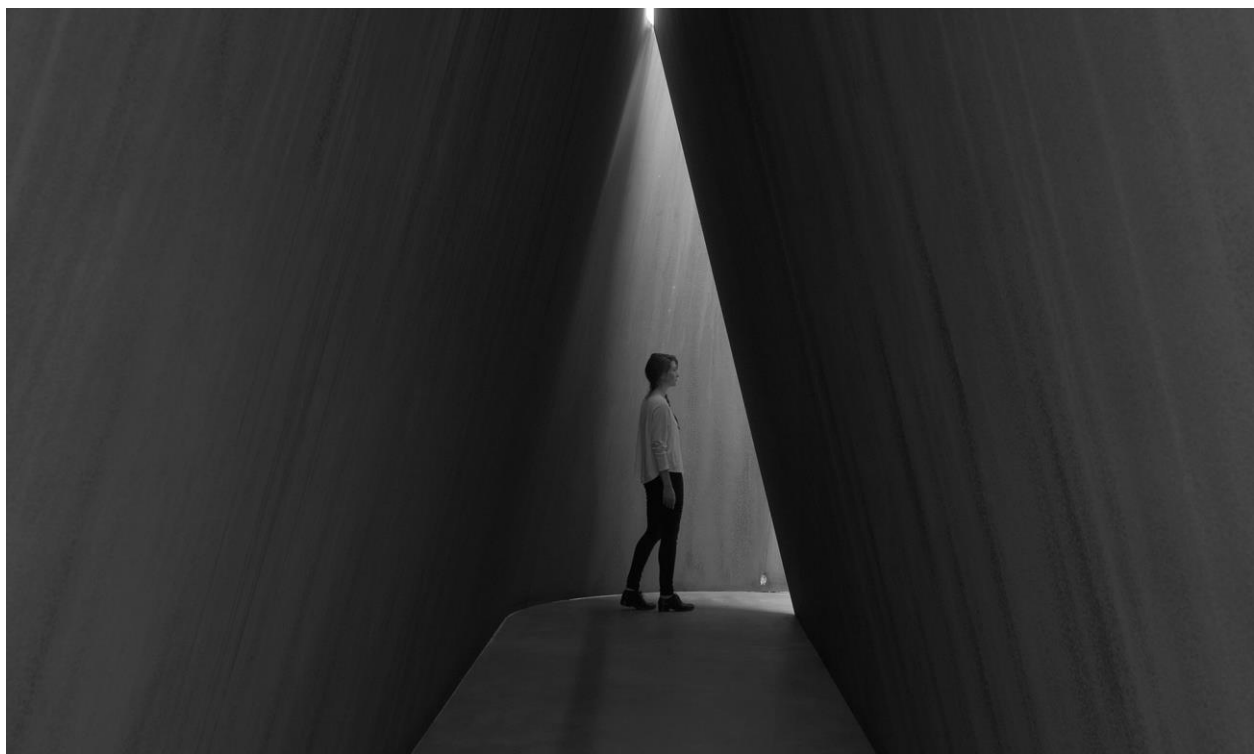


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Richard Serra and Michael Craig-Martin's 50-year conversation about art
The two artists – who trained together in the early 60s – discuss understanding the world through mass, weight and gravity

Michael Craig-Martin & Richard Serra



*The piece implicates you in time and space' ... a detail of NJ-2 by Richard Serra. © Richard Serra. Courtesy Gagosian.
Photograph by Mike Bruce*

Michael Craig-Martin: I saw the current show at Gagosian in New York, the double gallery show. And to be honest, Richard, I've seen an amazing number of your shows. I've probably seen more of your shows than anybody else. I saw the show in the Castelli Warehouse in New York. It was with the lead pieces.

Richard Serra: You saw that?

MCM: I saw that show in 1969.

RS: Those are the beginnings.

MCM: Well, the only way I know how to do this, Richard, is by asking you things that genuinely interest me. And one of them is when we first knew each other. We've known each other for a very long time.

RS: Probably 35, 40 years.

MCM: More, since 1961. We had both arrived as students at the Yale School of Art. You were starting your postgraduate MFA course, while I was a very green and naive undergraduate. Because there were less than half a dozen undergraduates, they had no course for us, so we were simply thrown in among you graduate students to sink or swim. So we shared the same studios, the same courses and the same teachers, and that's how we got to know each other. And, of course, your commitment was so total and so passionate. I'd never experienced anything like that with anybody.

RS: Yale was a very competitive place. It wasn't until I left that I realised what an extraordinary time it had been and what extraordinary people had been there. If you think about it, Brice Marden, Chuck Close and myself all ended up having shows at the Museum of Modern Art, and that's out of one class.

MCM: That is so rare. And there were so many other interesting people there at the time.

RS: I lived with architects, and one of them was Robert Stern. So I was right inside the milieu of Paul Rudolph and all the visiting architectural critics.

MCM: There is an interesting connection in your work to architecture, to its scale, and you have used your work as a kind of architecture. Do you think of yourself as a modernist?

RS: No, not at all.

MCM: A postmodernist?

RS: No. I have very little to do with postmodernism, in that I don't appropriate images. Basically I'm involved with the evolution of form.

MCM: I never saw you as a postmodernist, but I wondered, because we came in at both the highpoint and the tail end of modernism ...

RS: I think I'm a transitional figure. If anything, I would call myself a post-structuralist, not a postmodernist. I'm involved with evolution of form, the connection where space and matter meet. One of the things that form constantly has to do is reach a point where it pushes back against content. The course at Yale that influenced me the most was the design course. Did you take the design course?

MCM: Yes, of course, and that's exactly what I was going to ask you about. And it was very funny, because it was called Basic Design, and it had absolutely nothing to do with design except design in terms of natural design, the design of seashells and leaves. It had nothing to do with the design of shoes.

RS: No, they would give you a problem—they would give you a cork and a bottle of poster paint, and you would make a dot, and then you would see what would happen with that dot problem.

MCM: I've always wanted to ask you about that, because the idea of the course was that you found the form through an examination of the materials; that the material would give you a form, if you allowed it, instead of you imposing an idea on it. And I see that as the basis of your work.

RS: Yes, matter informs form. That is the basis of my work: it always has been. Form is something that metamorphoses into other forms. It has its own internal logic that can be dispelled and migrate into other forms.

MCM: I think it's to do with that sense of materiality, which has always been central. And physicality, the nature of physical experience. I always think, when I'm looking at your works, they're about looking, but they're also about thinking, and they're also about the body.

RS: I think the rhythm of your body deals with time in relation to space, and how you know what's happening, where you are in the moment, what's in front of you and what's behind you. Take *NJ-2* in this new show: you have to circumnavigate a path, the piece implicates you in its space. As the piece changes, you have to change, and either hasten your stride or turn in ways you hadn't anticipated. You actually lose your sense of direction, so you don't know whether you're going north or south. Time enters into the equation of your bodily rhythm as you move through the work. It alters the time of your experience.

MCM: When I'm looking at your work, I'm always so conscious of my own presence in it, my own movement. As you say, you cannot look at your work without becoming implicated. In terms of the sculpture experience you're talking about, are there many other artists who you think address this in the same way as you, or in a way that's related?

RS: I don't think anyone does. I don't think anyone's involved, in the same way that I am, with the subject-object shift and the interior unknowingness of where you are in relationship to space and time. Maybe there are artists that you can bring up that I'll agree with, but, offhand, I can't think of anyone.

Nor do I think anybody's going to pick up on this concern, because most artists are now involved with the internet and the image. The fixation on image explains the lack of physicality. Attention is solely focused on how works are proliferated over the net, so image is taking precedence over any relation to either psychology or physicality, or touch or sensuality. Or tectonics.

MCM: And work creates new work, doesn't it?

RS: Yeah, work comes out of work. It doesn't come out of anything else. It doesn't come out of drinking coffee.

MCM: And it doesn't come out of sitting around waiting for inspiration. Say something about the nature of gravity, which has played such an enormous part in your work.

RS: I think the way that we understand the world is through weight and gravity. All our gestures, all our movements, the rhythm of our body, every time we turn, every time we take a step, every

time we move, the gravitational load impinges on us. Maybe in another 50 or 60 years, as we get off the planet, that won't be the case, but right now our very existence has to do with weight. It is a defining factor in how we know our bodily movement throughout space and time. And no one pays attention to that. Italo Calvino would tell you just the opposite, that lightness is what activates reality. And lightness does seem to be the way the evolution of the planet is going in terms of microchips or whatever. But in terms of understanding your presence on the earth, we're all bound by weight and gravity.

MCM: Some of the work that you've done involved incredible concentrations of material: particularly *Rotate* and the other new works, which are incredibly dense. It reminds me of the work that was at the Tate in the 1990s.

RS: *Rotate* may be the most significant piece in the show. What's interesting about it is that the two blocks are contained within themselves, and they also contain the room. So they collect the room and activate one another.

MCM: Do you have a sense that when there is that level of density and actual physical weight, that it acts on the viewer in a different way than the same thing would if it were hollow?

RS: I think things that are hollow are basically anthropomorphic. You read them as other bodies in relationship to your body. If something has density and weight, you read it as ballast, as a gravitational load, as stasis. So it has a very different psychological effect.

MCM: Do you think it has an actual physical effect too? That you have a sense of being in the room with something that's got that kind of unbelievable mass?

RS: Yes, without a doubt, yes. And I don't think that anybody else is involved with the concentration of mass and weight in the way that I am. It's something that I started with *House of Cards*, which weighed exactly one ton. Weight has remained my primary concern. It's one of the primary sources of what I do. Although if you take a piece like *NJ-2*, one of the things that's interesting about it is you don't sense the weight. You don't sense the weight at all, and the piece propels you through it. You have to keep up with the speed of the piece. *NJ-1* and *NJ-2* are faster than most of the *Torqued Ellipses*, because there's no torque in those pieces. It's just straight planes, flat planes.

• Richard Serra: *NJ-2*; *Rounds: Equal Weight, Unequal Measure*; *Rotate* is at Gagosian Britannia Street, London, until 25 February. Richard Serra: *Drawings* is at Gagosian Davies Street, London, until 17 December.