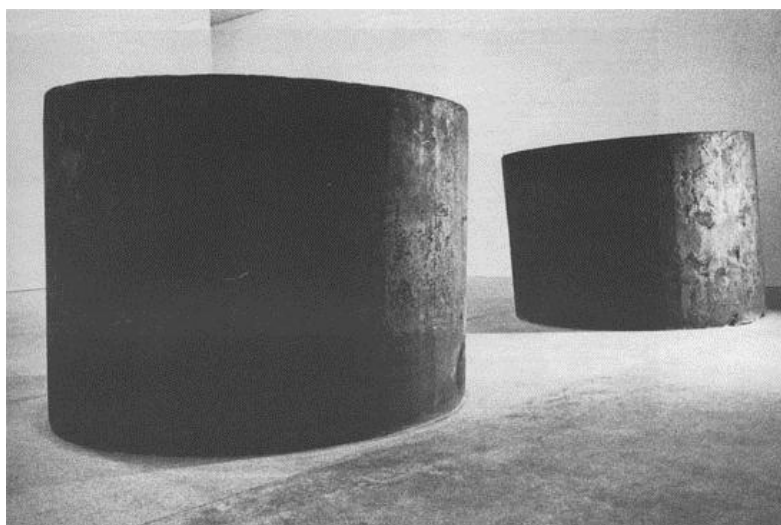


GAGOSIAN GALLERY



**Richard Serra**

David Seidner



Richard Serra, *Two Forged Rounds for Buster Keaton*, 1991, forged steel (two rounds), each: 64x88 ½".  
Installed Gagosian Gallery, New York 1991. Collection: Robert and Jane Meyerhoff, Phoenix, MD. Photo: Huger Foote.

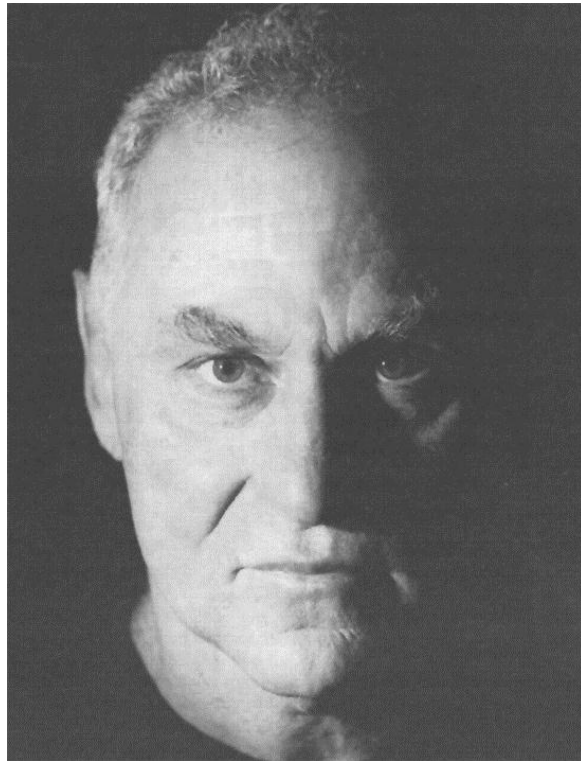
It is revealing that one of Richard Serra's earliest memories, as a boy in San Francisco, is of driving over the Golden Gate Bridge to a shipyard where his father was a pipe-fitter. There they found a tanker, in way, being readied for a launch which seemed, to his four year old mind, "As big as a skyscraper on its side." As the cables were released and the ship ripped through the scaffolding on its way to sea, the boy watched, transfixed. Suddenly this dead weight became a graceful, buoyant mass of steel. Serra says of the moment: "All the raw material that I needed is contained in the reserve of this memory which has become a reoccurring dream."

The year, 1943. Cut to 1992, New York. Interior. An all white loft, top floor, sky-lit with sparse pieces of mission furniture. A few of the artist's drawings propped up on the back of a worn leather sofa. Extremely articulate, Serra talks about his sculptural concerns: "I think I've chosen particular aspects in the making of sculpture that locate content in various areas: Balance happens to be one to them. Mass happens to be one of them...weight...placement...context.... But to say that those have particular metaphors in terms of my work in a larger aspect would just be untrue."

If truth be told, there is no metaphor, and Richard Serra needs no introduction. This fiery, fifty-three-year old modern master has permanent installations in fourteen countries and his work figures in collections of contemporary art in most major museums. In 1983 and 1986, his work was the subject of comprehensive retrospectives at the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, respectively. He has been decorated by the French government and been awarded many honors. The definition of modern sculpture which began with Rodin and continued through Picasso and Brancusi, has been extended through Serra's installations and interventions

If there is any romance to be found in the work, it's not from the cliché of the sculptor toiling alone in his studio, but from sheer audacity of the aggressive forms in landscapes and interiors, the rusting steel, the beauty of thrust and weight.

Last year, he completed "Afangar," an installation of stone plinths extracted from the side of a mountain, erected on an island in Iceland where there is nothing else, recalling images of Easter Island...one man's own Stonehenge...an ambitious project, mammoth in scale, and no small feat.



Richard Serra.

**David Seidner** I noticed on your work table several books of late Cézanne. In your work, his shifting perspective is taken on by the viewer in regards to the experience. Did the anamorphic projection in Cézanne's late work influence you?

**Richard Serra** You're extracting a whole scenario from the fact that there are three Cézanne books on the work table. The reason they're there has nothing to do with my work; it has to do with Barnett Newman's work as I've been asked to

participate in a symposium at Harvard on Newman. I think Newman's final break up of the picture plane relates, primarily, to drawing. His vertical division into components and the bilateral symmetry of his paintings comes right out of his '46 and '47 drawings. If you look at those drawings carefully, you come to the conclusion that the way they make a volume out of the negative is directly attributable to Cézanne. So I was looking at Cézanne to see if this insight I had into Newman was true and I think it is. The second part of your question is based on the assumption that the development of art unfolds in a linear sequence. It doesn't happen that way.

**DS** In Cézanne's late pictures there is no frontality. And in your work there is no preferred viewpoint. One is forced to look at it from different places. What I'm doing is equating two very different processes: one comes from the artist seeing and one comes from the viewer seeing.

**RS** To relate my work, which is three dimensional, to the problems inherent in the flat picture plane constrains how one would understand the real problem of three dimensions which is probably better served by using analogies from things that actually exist in space—whether it's from pots to architecture, or from a sow's ear to a silk purse, doesn't matter. Sculpture is not the handmaiden to the theorems and axioms of painting. Sculpture has it's own space which exists in time and which is very different from the flat picture plane.

**DS** That's not to say that is doesn't figure in a continuum of art history. You had Cycladic sculpture before you had wall painting.

**RS** No, no, no. They were way down in the caves of Lascaux before they were hammering away on the Cycladic Islands. But there must be a way of talking about painting and sculpture without relying on a model that goes back to the origins. Those analyses never seem to take into consideration how artists develop.

**DS** That's because they're not written by artists.

**RS** I don't think that's the problem. I often find that historians who only seek the solemnity of the Ivy Halls and stop partaking in the everyday world, don't understand the art of their time.

**DS** Do you take responsibility for how other people see your work?

**RS** That's impossible. If am lucky, someone comes to the work with a greater intelligence and sees relationships that I hadn't seen. Usually, what I find, is the opposite—that people don't take enough time to give the work the benefit of the doubt, because they come to it with a lot of preconceptions.

**DS** In your mind, is there ever an ideal viewpoint for your work?

**RS** Certainly not for any of the pieces that deal with the landscape or urban sites. If we talk about works which deal with interior spaces, that either locate an aspect of the architecture or create a volume, or distort the space, or bring another

meaningfulness to the relation of wall, to floor, to ceiling . . . Then it can arise that the work itself directs the viewer to see the space in one way. A simple example would be a Prop piece in a corner. But if you're talking about pieces which divide the space, or hold the field of the space, or psychologically activate the space, or make you walk into, through, or around the space, or compress and extend the space, or deal with different densities or weights, then the options of understanding the work are open ended. The character of the space often comes into play, whether the space is open at both ends or has side aisles, the height of the ceiling, where the entrances and exits are, the physical materiality of the space, how people move through it, whatever.

**DS** With the installations of huge steel plates in rooms, there's almost no place to go, no way to view them in the conventional sense. Is the experience, in your mind, more important than the viewing? Does the content of the piece come from the relationship of the viewer to the piece?

**RS** I got stuck in the question when you said that there's no place to go and if by that you mean that the entire space is the piece, then that's the intention. You're not asked to look at them like you look at an object on a table. You are inside of them.

**DS** That's why I'm asking if the experience is more important than the viewing.

**RS** I don't think you can separate it. It's like saying, because I'm not seeing these in a conventional way, therefore, the experience is something other than "seeing." What is it you think you're not seeing?

**DS** I'm not seeing it from a distance, the way I conventionally see sculpture.

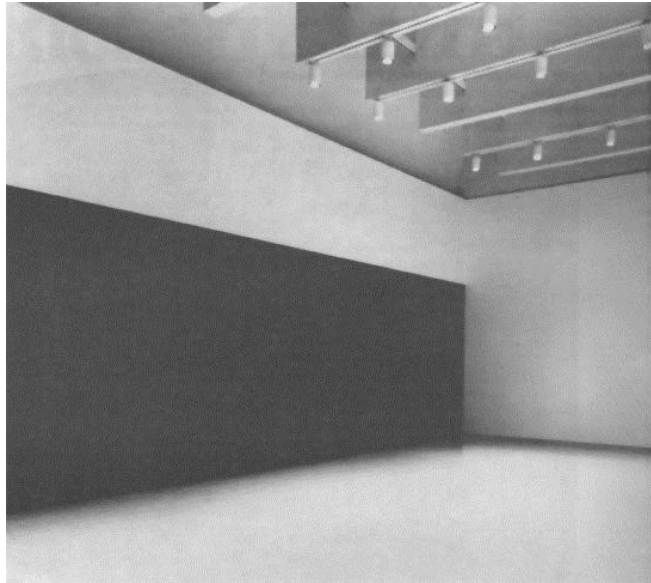
**RS** You have to say why it's not a perceptual experience . . .

**DS** It's a complete perceptual experience, I have experienced them; I enjoy experiencing them. Do you think the content in your work comes from the relationship of the viewer to the piece?

**RS** I don't know where else it would come from. Where else would content come from if not from the experience of perceiving the work.

**DS** From references. When you look at a portrait of a woman by Manet, or a fleshy woman by Courbet, you do have an experience, but there also can be a number of conditions set up in your mind.

**RS** Well, if you ask me, do the works fall into an obvious historical readout, I hope not—if they do, then they're probably not worth much—then they really become a footnote in the sequence of history.



Richard Serra, Judith Holofernes, 1991, paintstick on linen, (two panels), each: 132 x 504".  
Installed Carnegie International, October 1991. Photo by Richard Stoner.

**DS** What about the idea of the vertical sculptures framing the sky when you walk into them? Is that a conscious idea with a spiritual equivalent?

**RS** It's not a spiritual equivalent. If the vertical pieces were closed, you would walk into a totally contained space which would beg the reference to architecture. The structure of the vertical pieces implies that they are open. Framing the sky is the result of leaning and overlapping plates.

**DS** So it's not a conscious poetic metaphor? Like Gothic spires?

**RS** I've always thought that Gothic has something to do with ethereal surrealism . . .

**DS** You mean the idea of polyphony?

**RS** It's not something I'm involved with. I've chosen particular aspects in the making of sculpture that locate content in various areas: balance happens to be one of them. Mass . . . Weight . . . Placement in relation to context. . . . But to say that those carry any particular metaphorical meaning is just untrue. However, I can't deny other people's readings.

**DS** In your Dead Weights show at Pace, there was the idea of the top compressing the bottom. This dynamic became a kind of vocabulary.

**RS** A vocabulary in relation to drawing?

**DS** To drawing in relation to form.

**RS** I've made sculptures where the supporting element has been the compressed weight overhead.

**DS** The Skull Cracker series is like that.

**RS** Yes, it goes back as far as the early '70s. One of the things that impressed me in Egypt was that they used the same method, it may be an overzealous or a heavy handed way of building. It seemed very clear to me that the aspect of placing something on top which compresses and supports the weight underneath isn't something that has been part of the language of sculpture.

**DS** No. This idea of compression sometimes looks precarious and a little frightening. Is the title, Skull Cracker, intentionally threatening? Is fear part of the emotion that one is supposed to feel?

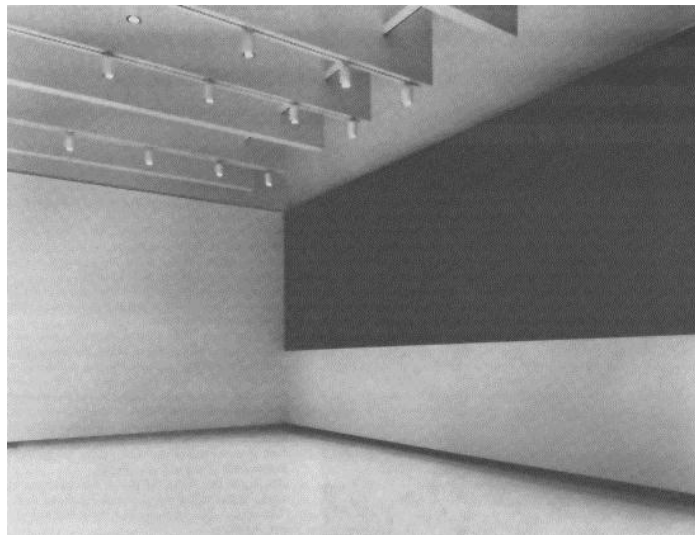
**RS** I didn't invent the title. The title was the name of the steel yard I was working in at Kaiser Steel, in Fontana, California.

**DS** But there are pieces that feel dangerous.

**RS** Since 1969, I have had everything I've made verified by structural engineers. The work always complies with the required standards of safety—even considering things as far fetched as earthquakes where there aren't any earthquakes.

**DS** Is the idea of fear or provocation in the work when you make it? You understand the experience that one can have looking at one of these works?

**RS** I understand people are fearful of the pieces but that has to do with their lack of information about how rigorously the pieces are worked out beforehand. If they understood the engineering that went into the pieces, it would relieve their anxiety. They're probably fearful because the pieces present physical and mechanical propositions they haven't seen before and are predicated on a balance that looks haphazard even though it is not.



Richard Serra, *Judith and Holofernes*, 1991, paintstick on linen, (two panels), each: 132 x 504". Installed Carnegie International, October, 1991. Photo by Richard Stoner.

**DS** What do you think of Richard Tuttle's work?

**RS** I think Tuttle is a poet. I don't think of him as primarily a sculptor or a painter. Tuttle's one of those guys who hits a chord that we all lack. He has a particular sensibility that's missing in the New York art world. He is not constrained by a particular style, in that way he reminds me of Polke. I just saw those Polke paintings which look like he dipped them in caramel or something . . .

**DS** Resin.

**RS** Polke has a flexibility that allows him to be aggressively cynical and still make something that's interesting to look at.

**DS** It reminded me a little of some of Fontana's surfaces . . .

**RS** I think they are more perverse. Some surfaces are granulated, and very transparent, and a little disgusting. But also super-elegant. I'm not saying that he's just playing off taste, I'm saying that the guy really does understand the potential of painting and that he's not limited by the conventions of painting, whereas Richter is a master of the conventions of painting, but may be also limited by them. Richter has made very interesting paintings by taking a Post-Modernist appropriation strategy and painting abstract expressionist paintings with a two or three-inch brush.

**DS** I think he scrapes them.

**RS** They're painted with a small brush.

**DS** Are they really?

**RS** Yes.

**DS** They're not?

**RS** No. (laughter)

**DS** They look like they're pulled . . .

**RS** Yeah, they look like they're screen pulled. That's not how they're done. At least I've been told that by several people.

**DS** Do you consider yourself an Anti-formalist?

**RS** I think that the words are silly. "Anti-formalist." "Formalist." You know, five years ago, "Formalism" was a bad word, and twenty years ago, it was an interesting word, and now it's probably a revival word. I think it's meaningless.

**DS** Can I tell you what I think?

**RS** What.

**DS** I think that you were an Anti-formalist, that you created your own vocabulary and through seeing it over and over again like one sees the films of Goddard or the paintings of Picasso, that it's become Formalist, because it's become accepted.

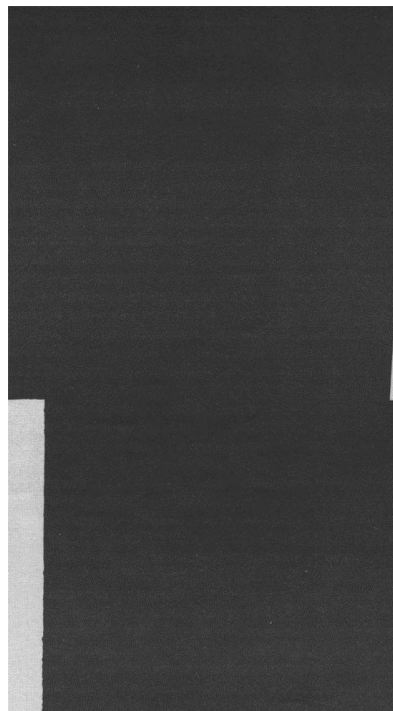
**RS** You might call it Formalist because it has become a decipherable language. If one were to look at an early rubber piece, a neon piece, a lead Prop, a landscape sculpture, one might think that taken on their own they were singular anti-Formal gestures. However, once the interrelated-ness of the work is understood, it reads as a language. It's hard to be working for 25 years and not develop a language.

**DS** Hopefully, I don't think it happens so much anymore. I mean there are no more Erik Saties using their scores to keep the drafts out.

**RS** No, but I think that there are recognizable authentic languages that emerge and that have an impact . . . .

**DS** There's such a glut of information that it seems really impossible to experience something that we haven't already experienced.

**RS** If you're not able to translate information into meaningful activity, then you're paralyzed by it, but if you can translate whatever the information is into terms that relate to everyday living, then it's all useful.



Richard Serra, Deadweight XIII (Edfu), 1991, paintstick on paper, 151 x 81." Collection: The Museum of Modern Art, New York City.



**DS** You mentioned that the forged pieces at Gagosian Gallery were not new work, and it disturbed you that people came to them and thought, that it was new work. What is new work?

**RS** The process of forging is not new to my work.

**DS** I mean what is your new work?

**RS** To say “new works” sounds a little bit like a change of fashion every year, a novelty. If you have a body of work that is developing, then work comes out of work, onionskin by onionskin.

**DS** Are there times that you feel there are breakthroughs, that you’re doing something you haven’t done before.

**RS** If I work on a piece where the outcome seems knowable, I stop. The resolution of each piece usually spawns new ways of thinking about how to continue.

**DS** I see most of your work being about perceptual problems—where the viewer relates him/herself to the work. Of course, there’s mass, and weight, and displacement, and all those things. What are the perceptual problems with the forged pieces?

**RS** They’re the same in that they are about walking, and looking, and anticipation, and memory, and location. But because they are about weight and mass, they are different in that they make the volume of a space manifest in a way that allows you to experience it as a whole.

**DS** Do you think artists work for other artists?

**RS** Yes. Not consciously, but for sure they’re the first audience you care about. Every artist has a particular group of other artists whom he would like to see the work.

**DS** Where do you see your work going? Do you think about that? Are there times when you’re thinking more than you’re making, and vice versa.

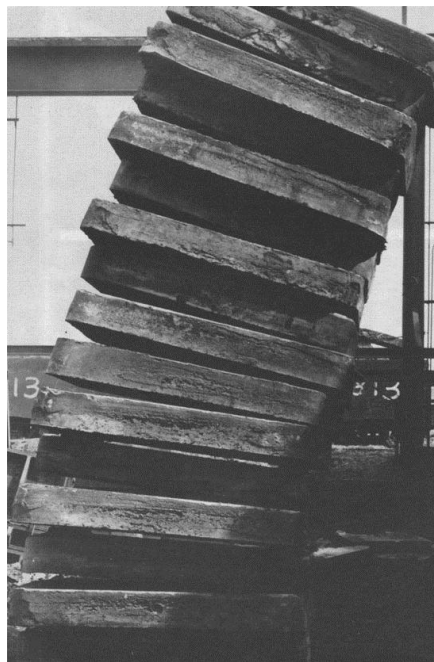
**RS** There are times when I am on the road almost continuously. I get off the road for two or three months in the summers. The time in the summer is replenishing, like filling up the reservoir. I get a lot of work done on the road. If you are continuously traveling, you have to adjust to different situations and your response is different than it would be if you were confined to your studio. For me the changing conditions open up a lot of possibilities.

**DS** Here’s another question you’re not going to like. Can you define early Serra and late Serra?

**RS** If you talk about the pieces that were done in '66, that's early work. If you talk about the work I'm doing now, I wouldn't call it "late work." But I would call it work that's certainly more developed.

**DS** Speaking of the early work, is it true that at Yale you put a live chicken in front of Rauschenberg's face?

**RS** No, I actually tied it to a dowel, which was anchored into a block and the chicken was in a box. And when Rauschenberg opened the box, the chicken flew up in the air about fifteen feet, and then stopped, because it was tethered. It began to flap its wings, it crowed and shit. (laughter) They kicked me out for two weeks. They told me I wasn't "polite to guests." How can they kick you out of art school?



Richard Serra, Stacked Steels Slabs (Skullcracker Series), 1969, hot rolled steel, approx. 20 x 8 x 10". Installed: Kaiser Steel, Fontana, CA.

**DS** Why did you give up painting?

**RS** I was using paint with a certain disdain, with the attitude that any material was as good as any other material. And once you find that you're not using paint for its illusionistic capabilities or its color refraction but as a material that happens to be "red," you can use any material as equally relevant. I started using a host load of materials. I was living in Fiesole outside of Florence at the time and I started using everything that was in the parameters of my surroundings: sticks and stones and hides. I did a whole show of 22 live and stuffed animals.

**DS** Cages.

**RS** Well, cages and habitats. I got very fascinated with the history of zoos. The first zoos were in Florence and the Florentines saw zoos not only scientifically but as aesthetic displays.

**DS** That was the bridge for you between painting and sculpture?

**RS** Yes, that was the bridge, I referred to Jasper John's beer can (Is it real, is it painted?). At one stage, I had a double cage with a live chicken and a stuffed rabbit. I showed the work in Rome and all the Italian artists came and screamed, "ignoble, brute."

**DS** The Arte Povera artists?

**RS** Arte Povera hadn't started at that time, a year and a half later Arte Povera began and they were all too willing to line horses up in a basement but up to that point they looked at my work as not being legitimate, it wasn't even Dada.

**DS** Had you seen Eva Hesse's work before you made The Splash and Cast pieces?

**RS** I knew Eva quite well. I have enormous respect and admiration for her. Right after she died, Lucy Lippard asked me what my relation to Eva Hess was and I said, "Technical." Because I really didn't think that after Eva died it was up to me to be telling people what our relationship had been. It was too personal to be made public. I responded the same way when Smithson died. He was my closest friend. After a death there is a kind of vulturism that sets in. But to answer your question, when I was first in New York, in '67, Eva was one of the prime influences for a large group of people, people as different as Nauman and Bochner. I knew her work and I would visit her on the Bowery. Eva was quite shy, people were hanging out at Max's and when Eva would show up, she would keep to herself. She always had a very difficult time meeting with larger groups. One on one, Eva was terrific. Very, very thoughtful. She represented a real foil to strict Minimalism even though she used repetition. She was very, very concerned with putting her inner feelings on paper or in form.

**DS** And the process of the hand.

**RS** Yes, that was an extension of her skin, the ability to manipulate form was an expression of her feeling. For a lot of people that was almost a taboo concern because they were interested in things as bland as permutations and serializations and logical equivalents and God knows what . . . maybe it was because of the demythologization of Abstract Expressionism.

**DS** Or an extension of Newman.

**RS** I never thought of Newman as having anything other than a great amount of passion in his work; you can't look at Newman as a geometric painter. One of the constraints of minimalism . . .

**DS** You don't see Newman as a reductivist?

**RS** Not anymore than Mondrian is a reductivist. I don't think it matters if you reduce form if you can carry an engagement with content. People who wanted to eradicate all content in favor of the explicitness of form end up like Vasarely.

**DS** Where do you see your work going?

**RS** (laughter) Up and down and sideways. And in between.

**DS** You mentioned to me that people loved your drawing show at Matthew Marks because the small drawings were easy to relate to in an art historical continuum. Does that imply that you think the large drawings are difficult to relate to?

**RS** For most people, they're more difficult to relate to. They present more of a challenge since they can only be seen in relation to space. The piece at the Carnegie consisted of two 40 foot long, 12 feet high canvases covered with paintstick. One canvas was 12 feet off the ground, whereas the piece on the opposite wall was down to the floor. When you walked into the room, the floor shifted, you felt like you were standing on the deck of a boat and the ballast had rolled. To articulate a space through the location and delineation of a plane on the wall, is an extension of drawing that most people seem to be unable to comprehend, but they respond to it physically.

**DS** One of the most beautiful perceptual pieces I ever saw was by Doug Wheeler, at The Ace Gallery in the '70s . . .

**RS** I saw the same piece.

**DS** Where he painted two walls and the floor black, and two walls and the ceiling white...

**RS** No, that wasn't Doug Wheeler, that was Michael Asher.

**DS** It was Doug Wheeler.

**RS** No, no it was Michael Asher, because the same piece was at Documenta in '72.

**DS** Anyhow, you walked in—and with a can of paint, literally, the means were so simple—it completely threw you off.

**RS** Yeah, that was a great piece, however it was an illustration of a perceptual problem right out of Scientific America. I think that the piece at the Carnegie is more subtle. But there's a relationship in that the placement of the paint on the surfaces of a room allows you to experience the volume of a space. And that's very different than hanging something flat on the wall.

**DS** Do you make objects?

**RS** I don't think so, no. Objects are really of a different order. Like how many cars did Ford make in 1991. That's different from the number of lithographs in an edition. I'm not saying that just the number in which something exists makes it more or less of an object. Uniqueness and intentionality make a difference. Also,

most objects imply usefulness, whereas art is purposefully useless. You use a chair but you experience a sculpture.