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“I never thought there would be an audience for my work”

Richard Serra on why the moving body is so important to him and on using steel as a material in its own right

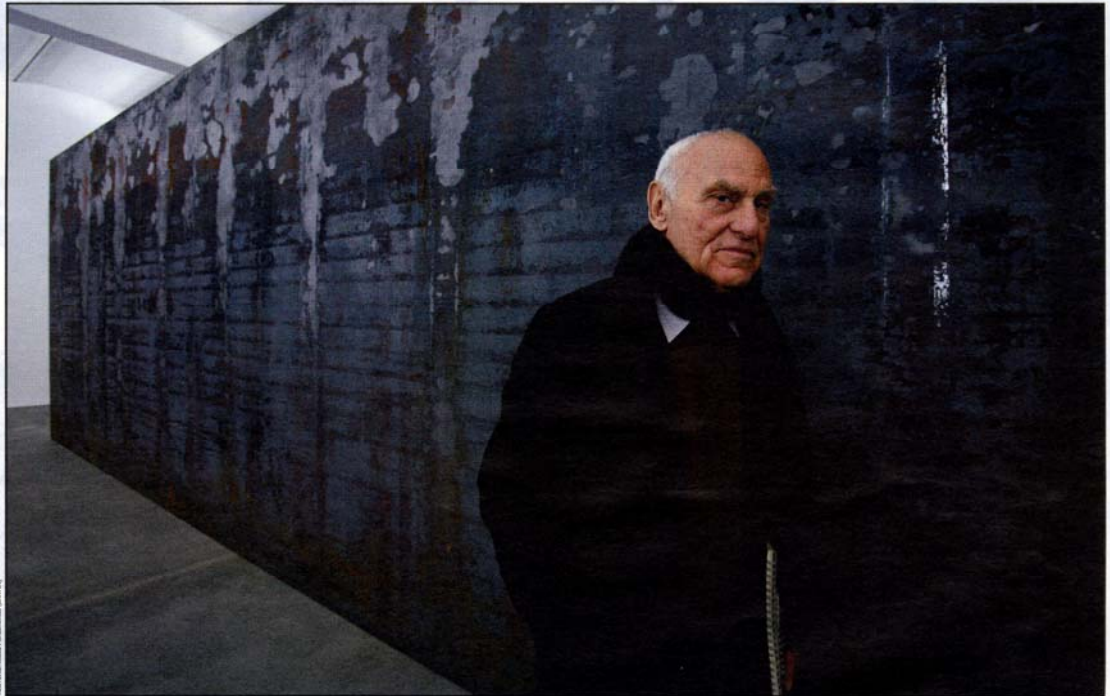
ARTIST INTERVIEW

LOUISA BUCK

Widely considered to be one of the most significant figures in contemporary sculpture, Richard Serra has caused both commercial galleries and museums across the world to scale and reinforce their spaces to accommodate his enormous steel sculptures. Earlier this year he unveiled—to critical acclaim—*Promenade*, a course of five slightly tilted rectangular steel elements towering 17 metres high at the Grand Palais in Paris. And anyone visiting the Guggenheim Bilbao will have walked through the enormous torqued ellipses and spirals of the 69-year-old San Francisco-born artist's eight-part installation *The Matter of Time*, which is on permanent show. Now, in his first exhibition in London for 16 years, Serra is showing a new body of sculpture and drawings at the Gagosian Gallery (until 20 December), whose Britannia Street space has been specially reconfigured to house these monumental investigations into the properties and spatial dynamics of weatherproofed Corten steel.

The Art Newspaper: Your three new sculptures fill the Gagosian Gallery with more than 300 tons of steel. *Fernando Pessoa* in the front gallery is a towering wall, nearly ten feet high and 30 feet long and eight inches thick. *TTI London* in the main gallery consists of two huge steel circles, one convex, the other concave, in which one seems to enclose the space and the other to throw it out. *Open Ended* in the back gallery looks almost like the prow of a ship but is a labyrinth that needs to be walked through. In their different ways the impact of each piece is immediate, powerful and physical.

Richard Serra: I wanted to make three different propositions about how one deals with and understands space. The *Pessoa* piece divides the room and I don't think the issue of the work is its weight, the issue is that the piece is the division of the room and the fact that the work functions as a sculpture and not an object. It has an internal dynamic which I think psychologically resonates differently to other pieces: it's about its stasis, it's about its gravitational load. I think you sense without even knowing it that the piece is solid, I think you realise immediately that it's massive. The piece in the centre gallery [*TTI London*] is made up of two torqued toruses, and they are exactly the same but one's inverted, and because it's inverted it tends to open outward and the other tends to compress the space downward so the body has a very different relationship to those volumes. In both cases the oval on the ground is exactly the same as the top oval of the rim. This means that as it rises in elevation the radius doesn't change, so its not conical. I think that this piece, more than the other two works, forces you



Man of steel: Richard Serra next to his sculpture *Fernando Pessoa*, 2007-08. Opposite page, *Open Ended*, left, and *TTI London*, 2007, right

to contemplate its centre: it centres you. Even if you walk around it or you make a figure eight around both pieces or you enter into it, you end up invariably being in the centre: the other two works don't do that.

TAN: *Open Ended* is completely disorienting...

RS: It's up close and personal. You can't avoid the skin of the piece because you are really implicated in your own movement and your own duration and what happens in relationship to your anticipation and memory as you move through it. Every time you take a stride in that piece you have to deal with your memory and your anticipation and your loss of directionality, and then once you hit the centre again, you turn around and pretty much lose the room.

TAN: So it's using space to make us aware of time—and I'm reminded that the title of your eight-part permanent installation at the Guggenheim Bilbao is *The Matter of Time*.

RS: Basically all I've been working on for maybe the last 15 or 20 years is dictated by the moving

body moving through various durations. Time and duration have really become the subtext of what drives the work because I think the thing that is probably most personal to all of us, and most subjective to all of us, is our relation to time.

Probably we all differentiate from each other and distinguish our own personalities and understand our own sensibilities through our particular relationship to our own time, depending on where we were born, the context of where we live, what our references are. What I think *Open Ended* does is enlarge that issue and focus that issue because you are continually asking yourself about your relationship to the place, and the consciousness of not knowing exactly what your positioning is and how it will unfold, and you'll have to give yourself the benefit of the doubt as you walk it.

TAN: Your recent installation in the Grand Palais [in Paris] was called *Promenade*...

RS: What was interesting about that piece was that people came to that space and rather than taking a look, they spent time walking. I think the

average time a person was there was for about an hour and a half, so people did spend the time walking the length of the context and I think they probably not only saw the sculpture but they probably saw the Grand Palais in a way they hadn't seen it before.

TAN: How do you go about making works for different locations, for, say, an interior space as opposed to outdoors?

RS: For me the context really informs and determines what I do...What I bring to site and context is my own toolbox which deals with weight, gravity, load, stasis, cantilever, balance—or lack of—and placement. Some pieces are totally driven by context. I would never have made *Promenade* [in the Grand Palais] if it hadn't been for the context. I spent about three days just walking back and forth and I thought that if I dealt with the central axis I might have a shot at holding it. I finally came to the conclusion that five pieces would probably hold and that we needed the spaces to be 100 feet apart.



TAN: It is nearly always a huge engineering feat to get your works installed. Are you always present, and is it personally important that you are there when they are put in place?

RS: I think how you do what you do confers meaning on what you've done, and if you pay particular attention to every detail of the process, from its conception to its completion, then you have a better understanding not only of the work but of the extension of the work in relation to what you are trying to accomplish. So when I can, as much as I can, I try to stay on top of all of it.

TAN: You described architecture as "an encyclopedia of thought". Are there any buildings that have shaped your thinking?

RS: There are certain spaces, given their containment and light source and thickness of walls and circulation, whereby the volume and the void is as material as the mass that's containing it, and that was a real eye-opener for me. When I was very young I hitchhiked from Athens to Istanbul and looked in the Hagia Sophia, and about 20 years ago I made a trip to look at the Romanesque churches in France. Then at one point I went to see Le Corbusier's [chapel of Notre Dame-du-Haut in] Ronchamp and that was very, very informative. When you leave Ronchamp in your mind's eye it seems like you've been in a very, very large space that has a

tremendous volume but actually the footprint of the space is quite small.

TAN: You worked in steel mills while you were at Yale, your father worked in a shipyard, but your earlier sculptures were in a variety of media. What made you decide to work exclusively in steel?

RS: When I first started working in New York I was working with molten lead and I was working with rubber and I didn't want to go to steel, not because I didn't know enough about it, but because it really had been the traditional material of the 20th century in terms of sculpture. But for the most part no-one was using steel in the way that I understood it. It had not been used for its weight, its counterbalance, not for its cantilever nor its stasis or gravitational load. It had not been used in the way that it had been used in the industrial revolution in terms of building processes and procedures. Instead what they had done was to cut and fold it and use it as kind of three dimensional surrogate for painting. It was hung out in space and painted to have a 3-D planar look so it's basic fundamental balance was untrue. It was either bolted into the ground or welded up in the air, then held with a staff and painted green, blue, pink or purple or whatever, so that its inherent properties of gravity were being denied in favour of its visual image readout. But

although that was very, very successful for years it was also a limitation and it always remained the handmaiden of painting. I think [Ad] Reinhardt said that sculpture was something that you bumped into when you were backing up from looking at a painting.

TAN: So you wanted to grapple with the inherent qualities of steel?

RS: Because I knew enough about the procedures of making of steel I thought no-one was using it in the way that it was actually made for. But I never thought at the end of the last century that there would be an audience for my work.

TAN: With pieces such as *TTI London* or *Open Ended* you seem to be pushing the physical capacities of steel in uncharted directions.

RS: When I started building "Torqued Ellipses" I went round the world for three years trying to find a place to build them: all the architects I knew said "build them in concrete!" That form doesn't exist in nature and it doesn't exist in engineering. I think that the way that my work probably differs from other people that are working now—and this isn't a criticism—is that my work, even though I'm implicated in the market, is not market-driven. What I'm really interested in is experimentation and the invention of form—and the context in which this takes place is not the context of the market. To make art I think that you have to invent

your own procedures, because if you are dealing with some hand-me-down procedures you are probably dealing with the academy as it exists. I think one of the interesting things about making art is that it is not linear, so every generation that comes up—and unexpectedly so—will invent their own procedures and processes for their own needs.

TAN: Which artists working today do you admire?

RS: Robert Ryman, Matthew Barney. I like the fact that Matthew is able to work with large groups of people and extend himself in various directions. He's one of the few artists that have come up who haven't been overly influenced by earlier generations and so he's been able to break new ground in a diversity of ways. He has a great deal of energy and personally I like him. ■

Biography

Currently showing: Gagolian Gallery, London, until 20 December **Born:** 1939, San Francisco **Education:** University of California, Yale University **Solo exhibitions include:** 2008 Kunsthhaus Bregenz, Austria; Grand Palais, Paris **2007:** Museum Of Modern Art, New York **1999:** The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain **1997:** Dia Center for the Arts, New York **1988:** Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands **1987:** Saatchi Gallery, London