

The Museum of Modern Art

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RICHARD SERRA/SCULPTURE

February 27 - May 13, 1986

The first American retrospective of the sculpture of Richard Serra opens February 27, 1986, at The Museum of Modern Art. RICHARD SERRA/SCULPTURE features ten works that are among the most innovative investigations of the sculpture medium. Ranging over a twenty-year period, these include a newly created Splash Piece, Prop Pieces, and several site-specific steel works. Other highlights are a sixty-foot piece that will be installed in the galleries and a cone section sited for the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden.

RICHARD SERRA/SCULPTURE was organized by Laura Rosenstock, assistant curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture, in collaboration with guest curator Rosalind Krauss, professor of art history at CUNY and author of the exhibition catalog. The exhibition has received support from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Since the mid-sixties Serra has been vigorously challenging traditional notions about sculpture and the materials and processes involved in its creation. His projects have inspired both critical acclaim and public controversy and, most importantly, have had a crucial impact upon contemporary sculpture. His work encourages--and often demands--the complete attention and physical involvement of the viewer. As the artist said recently:

My sculptures are not objects for the viewer to stop and stare at. The historical purpose of placing sculpture on a pedestal was to establish a separation between the sculpture and the viewer. I am interested in creating a behavioral space in which the viewer interacts with the sculpture in its context.

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Richard Serra concentrated on painting at Yale University, where he was a teaching assistant in Josef Albers's historic color course. He later became friendly with Donald Judd, Philip Glass, Eva Hesse, Sol LeWitt, Steve Reich, Robert Smithson, and Frank Stella. In 1964 Serra received a traveling fellowship from Yale University, which enabled him to move to Paris. While in Paris, he became so intrigued by the sculpture of Constantin Brancusi in the Musée National d'Art Moderne that he made repeated visits to sketch the artist's work. As a result of this quest to understand Brancusi's techniques, Serra's interest in painting began to wane. The following year he went to Florence as a Fulbright Fellow and began to produce grid paintings. By the time he returned to New York in 1966 his painting had been eclipsed by this new interest in sculpture.

Serra's Splash Pieces began to capture the attention of the art world in 1969. In these pieces, the artist splashed molten lead into the angles formed by floors and walls in such locations as Jasper John's studio, Leo Castelli's warehouse, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, literally interpreting the verb "to cast" ("to throw or fling with a quick motion and sudden release"). As Laura Rosenstock said, "These works were described as 'process art' in that their forms recount the method of their making." They exemplified the verb "to splash" that was included on the list of verbs that Serra compiled between 1967 and 1968 to illuminate the actions involved in creating sculpture. The list contained, among others, "to roll, to cut, to tear, to shorten, to chip, to simplify, to support, to splash, to refer, to force." Serra will create a new Splash Piece in the Museum galleries the week before the retrospective opens.

In his 1969 Prop Pieces, Serra turned his attention to the physical properties of sculpture, exploring its weight and materials and exposing

rather than disguising its construction. In her catalog essay Rosalind Krauss wrote that the Prop Pieces express the principle of "...stability achieved through the conflict and balance of forces. In One Ton Prop (House of Cards) four lead slabs (each weighing 500 pounds) maintain their mutual erectness through the reciprocity of their leaning sides, propping each other up by weighing each other down."

The scale and placement of all of Serra's sculpture are such that the works are fully engaging. The viewer is forced to become intensely aware of his or her perception of the sculpture. Circuit, II (1972-86), which consists of four ten-foot steel plates, restructures the space of the square room that it was designed to occupy. The viewer must walk through Circuit, II in order to comprehend it. Equal Parallel and Right Angle Elevations (1973-83) is another work that radically alters the viewer's perception.

The Museum first decided in 1976 to devote an exhibition to the work of Richard Serra. William Rubin, director of the Department of Sculpture and Painting, observes:

We felt that the pieces he had then been producing--most of them indoor and landscape-sited works--were of the highest order of creative energy and quality. Various delays attendant on the construction of the Museum regrettably forced postponement of the project; and all the while the artist's body of work, more than only fulfilling our early estimation of his talents, continued to expand in the area of urban projects and to gain even more dramatic public prominence....We are happy now to provide...the occasion for a better awareness of the full range of this important artist's work and of the impact he has had on our visual consciousness these past two decades.

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Museum is publishing Richard Serra/ Sculpture, which includes 120 photographs of works ranging from early rubber and neon-tubing pieces to large-scale projects in steel. The book also contains an analysis of the intellectual and perceptual basis of Serra's

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work by Professor Krauss, author of Passages in Modern Sculpture (1977) and The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths (1985). Art critic Douglas Crimp has contributed an essay that investigates Serra's public projects and his redefinition of site specificity. Ms. Rosenstock has provided an introduction, chronology, and selected bibliography, along with lists of the artist's previous exhibitions, films, and videotapes. On March 11 at 8:30 p.m. Rosalind Krauss will lecture about the artist's work in the Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1.

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