

Selected Bibliography

Richard Serra: Drawings/Zeichnungen 1969–1990. Bern: Benteli Verlag, 1991. Edited by Hans Janssen. Essay by Yve-Alain Bois.

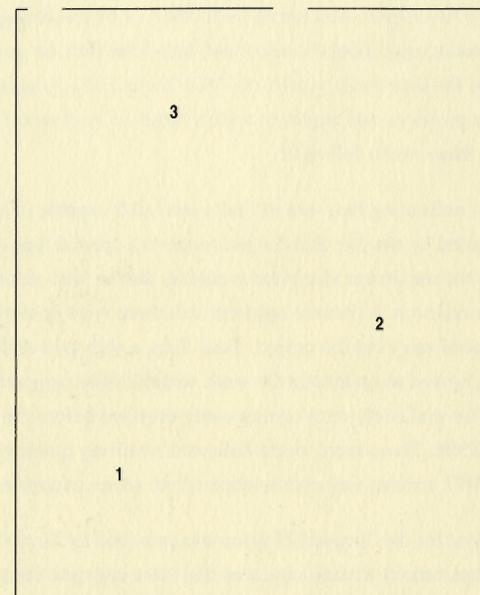
Richard Serra: Sculpture. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1986. Introduction by Laura Rosenstock. Essays by Douglas Crimp and Rosalind Krauss.

Richard Serra: Torqued Ellipses. New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 1997. Essay by Mark Taylor. Interview by Lynne Cooke and Michael Govan.

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Site Map



Born in San Francisco on November 2, 1939, Richard Serra studied at Yale University between 1961 and 1964, where he received his B.F.A. and M.F.A. He then spent two years traveling in Europe before settling in New York City, where he continues to live and work. In the following year, he began showing in museums and galleries in New York, and since then has exhibited extensively throughout the world, including a 1986 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In addition, Serra has created a number of site-specific sculptures in public and private venues in both North America and Europe.

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1. *Torqued Ellipse I*, 1996
Cor-Ten steel
12' height x 29' length x 20' 5" width (58" overhang)
Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York
2. *Torqued Ellipse II*, 1996
Cor-Ten steel
13' 1" height x 29' length x 20' 7" width (28" overhang)
Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York
3. *Double Torqued Ellipse*, 1997
Cor-Ten steel
outside ellipse: 13' 1" height x 33' 6" length x 27' 1" width (33" overhang)
inside ellipse: 13' 1" height x 25' 11" length x 20' 11" width (25" overhang)
Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York

Torqued Ellipses



Photo Credit: Ivory Serra

DIA CENTER FOR THE ARTS

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545 West 22nd Street, New York City

Torqued Ellipses

What interests me is the opportunity for all of us to become something different from what we are, by constructing spaces that contribute something to the experience of who we are.

—Richard Serra

While remaining determinedly focused on issues he defines as integral to sculpture, Richard Serra has over the past four years devised a body of work, the *Torqued Ellipses*, which radically challenges our previous experiences of space. In these new sculptures, space shifts and moves in wholly unexpected and unprecedented ways. So destabilizing are these spatial effects and so beguiling the sensation of movement, the spectator quickly gets caught up in a peripatetic exploration, one that links time inextricably with space.

Entering the galleries, one may start by tracking the exteriors of the sculptures, moving—in the particular configuration installed at Dia—in close proximity to the steel skins, a proximity that sets up a tension between one's bodily awareness and one's vision. Because one frequently sees the converse of what is occurring at one's feet happening over one's head, the works generate bodily based movement and responses, which are neither necessarily nor exclusively initiated by looking or seeing. Though, arguably, it is even more difficult to track visually the curvature of the wall surfaces when inside these works, the footprint of the sculpture and the shape of its upper profile become clear. Each is a perfect ellipse, and each has the same radius; however, these ellipses are not aligned but angled dramatically one to the other. In this lies both the structural and compositional source of the unprecedented spatial experiences.

By Serra's own account, the initial idea was breathtakingly simple: take an elliptical volume of space and torque it. The results are informed by an analogous clarity, stringency, and rigor. Characteristic of his work, too, is the forthrightness and directness of presentation. The rolled steel plates, each two inches thick and weighing twenty tons apiece, stand abutted on the ground. Giving little hint of the fundamental newness and potency of the experience, this manifest simplicity also fails to betray the prolonged and difficult process of realization.

Over four years ago while on a visit to Borromini's San Carlo in Rome, Serra conceived of taking the cylindrical spatial volume of the nave and torquing it in elevation. On return-

ing to New York, he began to try to devise such a space. Experimenting with two small wooden ellipses held by a dowel parallel but angled to each other, he created a "wheel" from which a template was drawn, which he then cut out in lead and rolled. By varying the angles at which the ellipses were set to each other, or by modifying the overall proportions, or by introducing a second component within the first, he gradually assembled some thirty models for large-scale sculptures. With the aid of a computer program, he then calculated the positions and angles at which sheets of steel would need to be bent in order to realize these works full scale.

The problem next confronting him was to find a steel mill capable of this exacting task, a difficulty compounded by the fact that the job required a special type of roller and by his need to work with the maximum size plate available, that is, with sixteen-foot sheets. After considerable research, it became apparent that there were possibly only two rollers in existence that could carry out the project. Beth Ship, a ship yard and rolling mill located outside Baltimore, agreed to undertake the work without fully comprehending the complexities entailed. Several trials were consequently required before the first sculpture was completed in late 1996. Three more works followed relatively quickly before the shipyard was sold in mid-1997, making any continuation of the series uncertain.

Although the catalyst for the *Torqued Ellipses* was provided by Borromini, the series nonetheless develops certain abiding concerns that have engaged Serra over almost thirty years. A trip to Kyoto in 1970 proved particularly influential, coming immediately after a period in New York City, where he had been strongly affected by the work of a number of contemporary dancers, above all, by that of Yvonne Rainer. Their work prompted consideration of "ways of relating movement to material and space, allowing me to think about sculpture in an open and extended field in a way that is precluded when dealing with sculpture as an autonomous object.... I found very important the idea of the body passing through space, and the body's movement not being predicated totally on image or sight or optical awareness, but on physical awareness in relation to space, place, time, movement," he recently explained.¹ Visiting Zen gardens in Japan reinforced his growing preoccupation with work that was defined through the processes of its reception, for there Serra discovered that "your vision is peripatetic and not reduced to framing an image. It includes and is dependent upon memory and anticipation.... The relationship of time, space, walking, and looking—particularly in arcs and circles—constitutes the only way you can see certain Japanese gardens."²

Pulitzer Piece: Stepped Elevation (1970), a work comprised of three large steel plates set in almost four acres of sloping terrain and created immediately after Serra's return from the East, synthesized these various experiences. Subsequent related pieces for indoor as

well as outdoor sites, in which dispersed elements again function like surrogate horizons across the field, also require that the entire terrain be traversed in order to experience the work. While sharing this requirement of extended temporality and peripatetic vision, Serra's latest series elaborates these concerns with orientation and movement in contained sculptures, which are now best suited to urban venues to be read against the abstract geometries of a built environment.

L.C.

1. Richard Serra, interview by Lynne Cooke and Michael Govan, *Richard Serra: Torqued Ellipses* (New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 1997), p. 26.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 26–27.