

RICHARD
SERRA

Heavy

His work may be a bit rusty, but as MoMA launches a 40-year retrospective of Richard Serra's iconic sculptures, Jonathan T.D. Neil argues that it's lost none of its relevance to artmaking today

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colour photography MAX FARAGO

All art, though, is process art of one kind or another; it's just a function of what you choose to pay attention to



RICHARD SERRA ONCE NOTED THAT what characterised the artists of his generation, by which he meant figures such as Bruce Nauman, Yvonne Rainer, Philip Glass, Michael Snow, Eva Hesse and others, was their shared interest in a 'logic of materials'. What that material was, be it lead, sound, latex, film, the human body or some other so-identified stuff, did not matter much. What mattered was the matter itself, and how it could do for itself what was quite beyond the sole means of any individual artist, composer, director, choreographer or what have you.

The history of modern art has never tired of the story of the gifted creator's struggle with – so often euphemistically reframed as 'truth to' – the materials of his or her (mostly his) chosen artform. But it was not until the second half of the 1960s that that struggle began to serve as the very animating purpose of so much artistic endeavour. And it was no longer really a struggle either, but a kind of R&D programme and partnership in which artists adapted to modes of working with any kind of inexpensive stuff that was close at hand and so redefined the notion of 'work' in the process.

That boxcar term, 'process', when paired with the engine of 'art', is an awfully anaemic descriptor of the activities of which Serra was a part at the end of the 1960s, however. Partly put into play under a synonym codified by a now-much-cited show at the Whitney Museum of American Art from 1969, *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*, curated by Marcia Tucker and Jim Monte, 'process art', it seems, was the best commentators could do when faced with works such as Serra's *Casting* (1969). This piece, in which Serra threw crucible after crucible of molten lead into the 'mould' made by the meeting of wall and floor, worked

as a realisation of a number of selections – 'to splash', 'of gravity', 'to spill' – from Serra's *Verb List Compilation: Actions to Relate to Oneself* (1967–8), which offered the artist a preset catalogue of actions and conditions that could be exercised on any given material that would accept them. In Serra's case, items such as rubber and lead proved most amenable.

All art, though, is process art of one kind or another; it's just a function of what you choose to pay attention to. Pollock's art certainly rewarded such attentions, for example, and this connection was not lost on those who mounted the critical reception of Serra's early work, which saw *Casting* as nothing more than a reprise of Jack the Dripper's hurled paints. But Serra was more interested in the structural character of another verb, 'to prop', and the tectonics that the relationship between any floor and wall well served, whether that angle was in Serra's studio, in Leo Castelli's Upper West Side warehouse, the sidewalk and exterior wall of the Whitney itself or, in a later instance, in Jasper Johns's studio.

That last site proved decisive. Invited to recreate *Casting* for the older artist, but not having enough of a 'mould' for the piece as it was executed at the Whitney, Serra chose the corner of Johns's studio rather than its edge, and backed a short lead plate into it to facilitate the forming of the casts. The results of that session were double: there, of course, remained the accreted splashings of molten lead, *Splash Piece: Casting* (1969–70), but there also remained that single lead plate standing in the corner, free of any other support except the perpendicular meeting point of the studio's two walls. Contemplating

A large, curved wall of weathered, rusted metal, possibly a sculpture or architectural feature, dominates the frame. The metal has a rich, textured appearance with various shades of brown and orange. In the bottom left corner, a section of light-colored, polished stone tiles is visible. The word "Metal" is written in a large, white, italicized serif font across the center of the image.

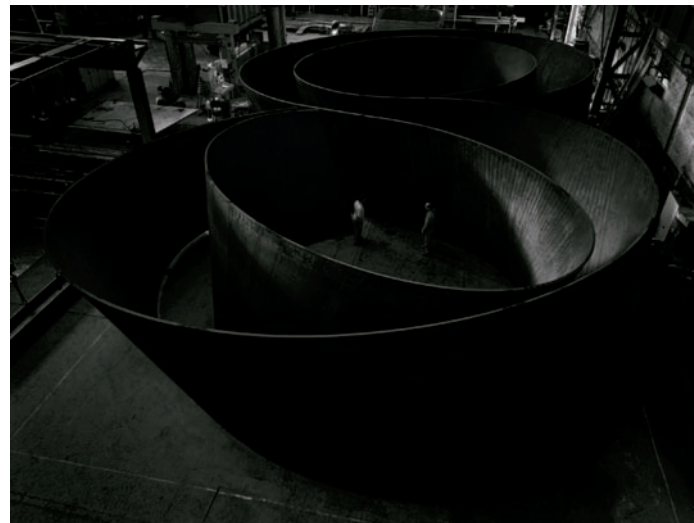
Metal



above: Richard Serra with *Torqued Ellipse IV*, 1998, in the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden, Museum of Modern Art, New York, April 2007

facing page, left: *Intersection II*, 1992–3, weatherproof steel, four identical conical sections, two 400 x 1570 x 5 cm along the chord, two 400 x 1550 x 5 cm along the chord. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder. Photo: Tom Powel. © the artist.

facing page, right: *To Lift*, 1967, vulcanised rubber, 91 x 200 cm. Collection the artist. Photo: Peter Moore. © the artist



above: *Sequence*. 2006, weatherproof steel, 390 x 1240 x 1990 cm overall, plate 5 cm thick. Collection the artist. Photo: Lorenz Kienzle. © the artist

left: *Sequence* (detail). 2006, weatherproof steel, 390 x 1240 x 1990 cm overall, plate 5 cm thick. Collection the artist. Photo: Lorenz Kienzle. © the artist

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this arrangement, Serra realised that, 'in terms of structure and tectonics, you don't need anything else'. So ensued *Strike: To Roberta and Rudy* (1969–71), which is simply the corner-mould of *Splash Piece* writ large, and the first of many works that one could, to quote Serra's consistent refrain, walk 'in, through and around'.

Johns's studio and the arrival at *Strike* inaugurated Serra's engagement with two conditions that have become synonymous with his oeuvre: site-specificity, whereby the sculpture, either explicitly or implicitly, engages the contingencies of its physical locale, and phenomenology, which understands the work as designed to isolate and stir the viewer's sensorimotor faculties in and over time. Though the fiasco of *Tilted Arc* (1981; destroyed 1989) did not necessarily put an end to the former, it would not be too long before Serra introduced work, such as his *Torqued Ellipses* (1997) and subsequent suites of large, complex topological forms, which turn the specificity of their engagements decidedly inwards, and towards the latter.

As Serra explains it, 'This work offers something that is not mediated, so the experience is direct. I'm not saying that qualitatively it's different but it is experience that is different in kind.' The problem with such statements is that the myth of the unmediated experience, especially when it is deemed aesthetic, is a familiar high modernist

trope, and Serra's contribution to the history of modern art, indeed the promise that his work has held out to younger generations of artists, would seem to be his consistent challenges to the received ideas of artistic convention, even while working within what appears as one of the most conventional and traditional disciplines on offer – sculpture.

In the face of this paradox, we would do well to remember that 'logic of materials' that Serra identified so early, and which, in retrospect, I believe should demonstrate how the whole issue of site- – not to mention medium- – specificity will be regarded as something of an interpretive distraction. Serra's 'logic' initiates an interrogation not of materials themselves but of *conditions of materiality*, by which I mean those conditions that automatically implicate and incorporate (enfold and embody) the place of some subjects, namely ourselves, within the ever-complex, objective furniture of the world. By this logic, Serra writes in 'Play It Again, Sam' (1970), one of his first and rare published statements on the state of the arts, 'I have chosen the structure of a relation' – a structure that describes the limits, be they physical, experiential or conventional, of that troublesome fact we call Art. •

Richard Serra Sculpture: Forty Years is on show at MoMA, New York, from 3 June to 10 September