The Place of Meaning in Public Sculpture
The Place of Meaning in Public Sculpture

“I know there is no audience for sculpture, as is the case for poetry and experimental film. There is, however, a big audience for products which give people what they want and supposedly what they need, and which do not attempt to give them more than what they can understand.”

Richard Serra

“When one seeks to please the monster with a million heads, called the public, one loses one’s personality and his independence. In limiting one’s needs, one can work however, as one wishes, and retain the full liberty of one’s own thoughts. I know well that there must be a struggle, for one is often in contradiction with the spirit of the times”.

Auguste Rodin

It wasn’t until Rodin that sculpture became modern. Admired and criticized, his prodigious oeuvre placed the art of sculpture at the seams of idealism and modernity. Unable and unwilling to compromise his artistic ideals, Rodin’s succeeded despite the episodic rejections and cancellations of his projects, usually by the very personalities that originally commissioned them. “The modern sculptor enacted rather than depicted values important to an enlightened modern society, such as making disciplined and constructive use of freedom of expression.” 1

In the 1915 text “Among Sculptures—Rodin, we find the quote: I wish above all that my figures may be vigorously real. I always have the living model under my eyes. I make him, or her, walk about my studio to fill my mind with their forms and their movements.” — “With this dictionary of forms that I have stored up in my brain, I am able to embody my synthetic vision.” 2

The historical texts describe Rodin as a man obsessed with creation, of making things with his hands, of becoming a slave to an obsession so powerful that it would all but consume him, as if time was infinite yet slipping away. “The sculptor Rodin incarnated for Rilke, “the attentive one whom nothing escapes, the lover who continually receives, the patient one who does not count his time and does not think of wanting the next thing. For him, what he gazes at and surrounds with gazing is always the only thing, the world in which everything happens…and this way of looking and living is so fixed in him because he acquired it as a handworker.” 3 Knowingly Rodin’s willful intention to
create (real) life from the solid masses of stone necessitated innovations not only in material representation but also in the way sculpture was viewed by its public, regardless of its location, inside or outside. His proposal to see humanity through its flaws and blemishes, with imperfect torsos and unprecedented sexual vulnerability, was depicted literally and metaphorically as broken body parts, exaggerated limbs, suggestive poses and defiant ambulation. How then could he capture the feeling he was after if these figures were placed atop a pedestal? Having embraced modernity in his methodology of re-presentation and multiplication of castings, Rodin’s dismissed the pedestal as the vestigial divide between the bourgeois ideal and the modern reality.

“The biggest break in the history of sculpture in the twentieth century occurred when the pedestal was removed. The historical concept of placing sculpture on a pedestal established a separation of the object from the behavioral space of the viewer. ‘Pedestalized’ sculpture invariably transfers the effect of power by subjugating the viewer to the idealized, memorialized, or eulogized theme.”

George Simmel, who like Rilke, spent time in the master’s atelier between 1905 and 1907, regarded the sculptor as one of the twentieth century’s great artists. He described Rodin’s art, and more precisely its ‘movement’ as the “embodiment of modernity — with its absence of a fixed point from where to judge everything. In the modern world, there exist many alternative viewpoints and many alternative values.” Simmel offers an account of Rodin’s interest in movement and his personal fondness for “The Walking Man” that would inspire the march of the burghers leaving for the King’s encampment. Later, Simmel would note the changes in modern city life that were operating on the reception of artistic enterprise “as the swift and continuous shift of external an internal stimuli, contrasted with the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory-mental phase of pre-modern social life”. Rodin’s opposition to the accepted conventions of public sculpture were seen by some as destructive to the cultural and artistic values of the time, but helped to assuage those who were still clinging to the empty promises of bourgeois aesthetics.

Twentieth century Modernist sculpture begins with Auguste Rodin. His apprenticeship training gave him the tools to make sculptural objects, yet the explanation for the fury of his passion and the intensity of his beliefs lie elsewhere. To paraphrase Richard Serra, the purpose of Art is to show us what we lack. It is the ‘what’, however rhetorical or profound, that has occupied the art historical discourse and that smuggles itself into every essay and paper on Modernism regardless of the subject.

Rodin was engaged precisely in the mystery of what was lacking. His drive may have reflected his own sense of lacking; denied the classical education at the French Academy he so coveted, his early training was through self-discovery and continuity of practice. The temporal context played a significant role; he lived in a time when sculpture had little place in Art, other than the decorative arts, where objects of commodification carried a serial number as well as the imprimatur of the maker. The field of sculpture was occupied by monochromatic figural objects, whose smooth stone surfaces rendered the human form as exquisitely perfect, lifeless and unknowable. As Rilke explains Rodin’s
struggle, “These were the years in which, still toiling in obscurity, he developed into a master, gaining complete command of his medium, constantly working, thinking and experimenting, uninfluenced by his time, which took no notice of him. Perhaps it was just this — that his whole development had proceeded in such undisturbed serenity — that would give him such tremendous confidence later, when he was attacked, and when his work became the object of no small criticism. When others began to doubt him, he no longer had any doubt in himself.” 7

One might argue that in this passage, Rilke’s romanticism had trumped his objectivity or that he was freely speculating on the terms of Rodin’s industry in the atelier. I might suggest that Rodin was engulfed in an arduous internal struggle, not to prove his talent, but to discover where his talent would lead him. With each drawing, maquette, model, fragment, statue and the recursive operations through which his hands and eyes examined and processed the material, Rodin was seeking knowledge, the ‘what’, that was only possible through iteration after iteration. Criticism was something he learned to do for himself and like many artists, he was his own best and worst critic.

While the artist exudes passion, even joy in the work, it is not so much the pleasure of seeing as it was the art of knowing. Rodin’s work and accomplishment sublated sculpture’s remoteness and inaccessibility and made it modern. Though much has been written, I would argue that for Rodin, who had long ago achieved mastery in the art of making sculptural objects, that despite his magmatic perturbations, he persisted in seeing his figures as inanimate things. The ‘what’ for Rodin was not about creating still motion, the equivalent of figures captured in freeze-frame, it was much deeper, a Gepetto-like fantasy of wishing the objects real. With each successive recursion and new commission, Rodin worked at finding the answer. “The model is before me, it moves, and lives, I seize a pose, a gesture, an expression.” 8

This constant seeking is consistent with the dialectic of Modernism, which finally opened up for Rodin in his opus “The Burghers of Calais”. He went deeper, bringing the chronicled narrative into a clear relation to self, and beginning with the hands, feet and heads, created the avatars for each of the six men. As if he were the seventh burgher, Rodin imagined their plight, their solitude and their solidarity, and used this to arrange the figures, humanity in emotional and physical disarray. Still, the absence of breath and pulse were aligned against his invocations, something that would only be solved if the viewer had the capacity to see into their faces, to walk among them, to occupy the same space and find their common humanity. Rodin created the group sculpture for a specific site and insisted that it be placed on the pavement, sans pedestal.

A fight between Rodin and the Counsel of Calais ensued and in spite of his protestations, the sculpture was placed on a pedestal. For Rodin, “The Burghers of Calais” exceeded the limits and boundaries of pictorial representation in order to enter the embodied space of the viewer. This prescient shift from object to subject and back again would become the playground for twentieth century artists including Brancusi, Carl André, Tony Smith, Robert Smithson and Richard Serra.
The Burghers of Calais occupies the art historical place of modernism at the beginning of the era of the non-monument, when the rules for public art outside the museum were developing. Rodin, I would argue, can be credited with surmounting the dominant belief in the Hegelian hierarchy that positioned sculpture below painting. To quote Serra, “Every language has a structure about which nothing critical in that language can be said. To criticize a language, there must be a second language available dealing with the structure of the first but possessing a new structure.”

The work of Richard Serra is counterposed to the work of Rodin and provides a frame through which the meaning of public sculpture can be thematized. Serra’s definition of sculpture is “that it motivate a body and frame a place in a parallactic relay between the two. But he also positions sculpture between two other terms: opposed to painting on the one hand and critical of architecture on the other.” More precisely, he employs the relative materiality of sculpture —its ability to activate the body, to critique painting, and the relative autonomy of sculpture —its ability to analyze structure —to critique architecture.”

I have focused my attention on two works: Rodin’s “Burghers of Calais” and Richard Serra’s “Tilted Arc”. These controversial works confronted the issues of place and meaning in their respective historical moments. The comparison of “The Burghers of Calais” and “Tilted Arc” sharpens the point of this modest examination of Modernist discourse and the conventions of public sculpture within the temporal plane. My paper will focus on critical issues of intentionality, signification and representation through the arc of site specificity.

The organization of the paper is in two parts; the first situates and thematizes the intellectual currents of public sculpture within the modernist discourse. The second part of the paper presents a detailed analysis of the individual works, their particularities of site context and the role of intentionality in their respective moment of exhibition to the public.

Part I

The art historical site is Paris, the tumultuous Fin de siècle when Rainer Maria Rilke utters the words “Things” —“Dinge”. Guenther Stern in his essay ‘Homeless Sculpture’, published only forty years after Rilke’s famous speech, explains that this was the moment of cultural shear, a dramatic rip in the constitutionality of western thought. For Rilke it meant the displacement of romanticism and its substitution with the modern world of objects. Things with a capital T, would render the world as something less, but less than what? His speech, a pairing of lamentation and rationalization, expresses his fear and sense of alienation that he believed to be universal. In one of his letters from Rome he writes, “Things, which, after all, are essentially nothing more than accidental remains from another time and from a life that is not and should not be ours.” Through Rilke, we understand that Things have destabilized Things, and despite of his deeply felt misgivings, he offers advice to Mr. Kappus as follows: “Don’t search for the answers, which could not be given now, because you would not be able to live with them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”
Here is where we begin, a time of rupture in the art historical discourse that situates Rodin's work.

“...it is not difficult to see that the word “things” is particularly suited to describe the works of a sculptor. For two reasons: once the sculptor’s product has been achieved, it is a massive three-dimensional object among other objects of the world and claims its place—while the painters work, the two-dimensional illusion of three dimensions, does not occupy a real place in the three-dimensional real world. Furthermore, the sculptor is the isolating artist; while the painter is able to offer the whole world—a landscape, people among people, people among things, things among things—the sculptor cuts off one object, mostly the human body, out of the universe of objects.” 14

Until the nineteenth century, public sculpture was in the service of institutional entities and commissioned by either church or government. The sculpture served the dual purpose of public signification of place and of commemoration of cultural values that were suspended in time. From the perspective of history, Rosalind Krauss writes, “The logic of sculpture, it would seem, is inseparable from the logic of the monument. By virtue of this logic, a sculpture is a commemorative representation. It sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolic tongue about the meaning and use of that place.”15 The representational system dictated a set of values having to do with size, material and position of viewing. Cylindrical niches and wall reliefs afforded frontal views while other sculptures were to be viewed from all angles. They were almost universally figurative and vertical, with group compositions taking a pyramidal form with a central figure surmounting the group. Whether the sculpture was a Greek standing figure, a Roman Bust, a Gothic altar figure, or a Renaissance equestrian figure, they sat on pedestals, a device which helped to mediate the super-mortal or mythic figure from the mere mortal.

According to Adolf Hildebrand, “Each of these figures creates a specific space about itself, as definite in volume and shape, and as impenetrable as the compact core of sculptured marble, bronze or wood. The modeled figures generate these enveloping space forms, which differ from one another as do the enclosed sculptures.”16 Paul Zucker generalizes this theme of spatial penetration of the sculptural form yet reinforces the importance of the perceptual space of viewing, “All these finite, ambient space-forms are created by the sculpture themselves, and whatever their specific size and shape, independent from style, period and artist, they have one common quality: namely, they exclude the spectator. That is the essential difference between the space of architecture and that of sculpture. Sculptured space is aesthetically as impenetrable and unambiguous as the solid that gave rise to it. It is separated from the spectator’s space as the space of the stage is separated from that of the audience.” 17

We can speculate that the subject of this critical commentary was likely to have been a realistically modeled figure set on its pedestal base, in a static pose and more than likely cast in bronze whose dark finish both absorbed and reflected light in such a way as to repel the viewer. As Baudelaire noted in his 1846 expository on why sculpture is so boring, he wrote, “Brutal and positive like nature, it is at the same time vague and eludes one’s grasp, because it presents too many faces at once. The artist has no control over how the spectator sees his work.” In contrast to
painting, Baudelaire continue; “the sculptural object has no clearly defined frame through which to dictate the viewing subjects’ position in relation to it.” 18 Baudelaire had other problems with the sculptural figure, namely its fetishistic, thing-like presence and the potential for its display as a commodity. His comments merit consideration when recognizing that before the 19th century sculpture occupied salons and gardens much the way that furniture did and was probably just as easily taken for something on which to rest a weary limb.

By the 19th century, the prevailing system of logic began to weaken. Rosalind Krauss invokes Rodin in her essay “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” when she describes the phenomena of “place-lessness”, as the un-tethered statue, liberated from its value-laden pedestal and seemingly able to multiply itself and in so doing, occupy various museums in different places simultaneously. In other words, the technical means for (re)production makes it possible for Art objects to be mass produced, resulting in many “originals”, and at the same time, effecting the possibility for autonomous “copies” or others. The condition of multiplicity jettisons the logic of place in favor of places, and confronts the art historical conventions of exclusivity and singularity as the premise upon which desire and value are apprehended.

Rather, the autonomous sculpture, place-less, site-less and self referential, by definition modernist, is set free from its cultural and historical constraints and finds its place as its own agent in re-defining the terms of its existence. “It is these two characteristics of modernist sculpture that declare its status, and therefore its meaning and function, as essentially nomadic. Through its fetishization of the base, the sculpture reaches downward to absorb the pedestal into itself and away from actual place; and through the representation of its own materials or the process of its construction, the sculpture depicts its own autonomy.” 19

It follows that the beginning of the twentieth century would be a time of intense interest in the non-referential, generative forms of sculpture. Artists who themselves identified with the avant-garde made no pretensions about their introspections; the concern for public sentiment was thought to be an unworthy distraction. This attitude of breaking through the normative conventions of public sculpture were described by Mary Miss in her essay “On a Re-Definition of Public Sculpture”, “Though the content and image had altered radically from the traditional sculpture as monument, the artist and architect continued the tradition of placing works outdoors, usually in close proximity to buildings. Everyone seemed to presume that, since buildings and sculpture had been seen together in the past, there was no reason to abandon the practice.” 20 Apparenty there was little evidence that artists were concerned or felt the need
to control the site selection or installation of the piece. She quotes British sculptor William Tucker, "If you have to change a sculpture for a site, there is something wrong with the sculpture." 21

Site, as the place of the artistic intervention or assimilation, took the stage as it were and assumed both leading and supporting roles, as mid-twentieth century artists explored the meaning of autonomy in public sculpture. "If modernist sculpture absorbed its pedestal/base to sever its connection to or express its indifference to the site, rendering itself more autonomous and self referential, and thus transportable, place-less, and nomadic, then site-specific works, as they first emerged in the wake of Minimalism in the late 1960s and early 1970's forced a dramatic reversal of this modernist paradigm."22 Rather than situating the object or construction on the site, the work of art would be conceptualized, even formally determined by it. "The uncontaminated and pure idealist space of dominant modernisms was radically displaced by the materiality of the natural landscape, or the impure and ordinary space of everyday."23 Public sculpture, the words too confining and over-determined, could become a phenomenological or embodied experience, of being in the moment, like jumping into a pool of water. In the increasingly elastic discourse of modernist art, site-specificity became the agency for ideation through its negation of itself; "the expanded field is thus generated by problematizing the set of oppositions between which the modernist category sculpture is suspended."24

Part II The Burghers of Calais

The Burghers of Calais was commissioned by the Municipal Council of Calais in 1884 to celebrate its local heroes. It depicts an event that took place in 1347, ten years into the Hundred Years War (1337-1453) between France and England. The scant historical material was found in “The Chronicles” by Jean Froissart, a story of tragedy and redemption, of how the city of Calais besieged by the English King Edward III and was eventually freed from its tyrannical nemesis. The King, whose promise to repopulate the town with Englishmen seemed certain and his refusal to show mercy to the starving citizens left them bereft of hope. In the end, he agreed to lift the siege if only its six most distinguished citizens would deliver themselves to him personally. His demands were that they leave the city with nothing more than their shirts on their backs, ropes around their necks and who were prepared to turn over the keys to the city to the King.

This was Rodin’s main source of inspiration for his sculpture, “The Burghers of Calais.” Maria Rainer Rilke, seeing into the mind of the artist wrote, “Rodin felt immediately that there was a moment in this story when something portentous took place, something independent of time and place, something simple, something great. He concentrated all his attention upon the moment of departure. He saw how the men started on their way,
he felt how through each one of them pulsated once more his entire past life, he realized that each one stood there prepared to give that life for the sake of the old city. Six men rose before him, of whom no two were alike.”25 “He felt how each of them was filled with the whole life they had lived, how each one stood there, weighted with his past and ready to carry it out of the city.”26

The original commission for the sculpture was in 1884 when the Municipal Council voted to hold a competition for a statue of the lead actor of the burghers, Eustache de Saint-Pierre. The triumphant burgher, de Saint-Pierre, would be a fitting way to celebrate the city and claim its place in French history.

Rodin was in his mid-forties and not yet recognized as a major sculptor. It had been only a few years earlier that he had received his first commission for the monumental gates for a building portal, (The Gates of Hell) which had failed to materialize as a real project. Upon receiving the invitation to enter the competition for the Monument in Calais, he drafted a letter to the Mayor and wrote that he was captivated with the tale of the burghers. He went on to say, “The idea seems to me to be completely original from the point of view of architecture and sculpture. The subject imposes a heroic conception and the ensemble of the six self-sacrificing figures has a communicative expression and emotion. The pedestal is triumphal and has the rudiments of a triumphal arch, in order to carry, not a quadriga, but human patriotism, abnegation and virtue...Eustache de Saint-Pierre, alone, his arm slightly raised, by the dignity of his determined movement leads his relatives and friends.”27

The Mayor of Calais, Omer Dewavrin, visited Rodin’s studio in Paris and was pleased with the sculptor’s first attempt at depicting the hero; to his surprise, Rodin’s first model included all six burghers, a demonstration perhaps of Rodin’s desire to win this competition, which was reinforced by his assurance to the Mayor that the city would be able to afford his work. This first model met the irreducible artistic conventions for public sculpture in the late nineteenth century; the six burghers were standing atop a pedestal, on which a triumphal arch had been sketched, the figures closely spaced yet Eustache is leading the way with an outstretched arm. The group en mass was encircled by a rope; “the general atmosphere of the model is one of triumph and defiance in the face of a difficult fate.”28

On the basis of the enthusiastic response from the mayor, Rodin was awarded the commission and by contract was responsible for producing a new model for the approval of the Committee for the Monument of Calais. Six months later, in July of 1885, Rodin was ready to show the second model, a variant of the first that radically re-configured the composition. The pedestal had been eliminated, the single rope had been replaced by individual ropes around each figure’s neck, and the burghers stood as six individual and separate sculptures; the arrangement of the group had yet to be determined. No longer were the burghers united triumphantly, they were standing on the ground, a depiction of their suffering and sorrow as the marched to the enemy’s camp. Eustache de Saint-Pierre was no longer the leader of the group as had been obvious in the previous model. The work was severely criticized. In response, Rodin explains in a letter the reasons for the changes:
"Eustache de Saint-Pierre is according to the critique in front of the King… but no, he is leaving the city and descending towards the camp (of the King) and it is this that gives the group its aspect of march, of movement. Later, in response to the criticism of Le Patriote being preserved in the absence of a hieratic pyramid, he explains, "No rule, no regulation says that you have to use the form of a pyramid: this is a good convention and has its justification in many cases, but in this case it would be perfectly awful. . .That the figures in the group are equally high has to do with their union in justice. Their sacrifice is equally huge — and so should their dimension be; they should only differ between themselves in attitude."

For Rodin, “The Burghers of Calais”, as chronicled by Jean Froissert, were related by their common humanity an extension of their equality as individuals; he expressed their attitudes as uncommon estrangement mixing bewilderment with hopelessness, with utter despair.

Rodin it seems had begun the project as one might in a competition, by acting on his theoretical speculations of what would constitute a winning entry. His first model was the result of this thinking and approach. One might also imagine that at the same time, he was developing his conceptual ideas for the sculpture and that he knew he would be entering into a culturally bounded environment, such that he would have to strategically calculate the risk and reward for taking that step. The accepted explanations for the changes made to the sculpture, which for the most part were carried into the final model were found in Rodin’s own words, “The ‘advancement’ towards death is the dominating content of what happen here. As for the burghers, they are tied voluntarily by the same sacrifice, but each one responds individually according to his age and situation”. “Each of the burghers expresses his feelings, his torment or fear”. “Saint-Pierre was the soul of the sacrifice, and the one who said to the others, “We have to do it”.

Rodin described the work this way: “I did not hesitate to make them as thin, as emaciated as possible for men who have passed through the great privations of a long siege would only have the skin over their bones. I have not grouped them in triumphant apotheosis. For that would not correspond to the facts. I have placed them, one back of the other, because in the last mental combat between their devotion to their city and their fear of death, each of them is isolated before his own conscience. Each asks himself again if he will have
the strength to accomplish the supreme sacrifice. Their soul push them forward, their feet refuse to go, they painfully
drag themselves along, not because of the physical feebleness caused by the famine, but because of the terror of
their coming punishment. If I have been able to show how the body, even when weakened by the most cruel suffering
still holds to life, how much it still rules the soul, I can be complimented on the result. I dressed them as I have, with
head and feet uncovered for I have supposed that, like penitents, they were in sackcloth. It seemed logically to best
 go with their situation. To tell the truth, I have not accomplished my ideal. The official routine prevented it. I did not
 wish a pedestal for these statues. I wanted them placed directly on the pavement before the Hotel de Ville of Calais,
so that they might have the air of going from there to the camp of the enemy. In this way they would have mingled in
the daily life of Calais. This personal contact would have brought the past to the to the passerby who would have said
to himself: ‘Our’ ancestors are our neighbors and our models; we must show that we have not deteriorated from their
standard. In spite of my violent protestations they have placed my Burghers on a hideous pedestal that dishonors my
work and takes away the greater part of its effect, all because they had never seen a statue without a pedestal!”

In notes from an interview in Le Journal de Rouen, 21 January 1889, Rodin is quoted saying,

“Eustache braces himself. It is he who is going to speak. And he doesn’t want his voice to tremble. He is im-
mobile but he is going to walk.” According to Ruth Butler, Rodin referred to “The Burghers of Calais” as ‘my novel’.
There is little doubt that Rodin’s obsession with the tale provided entry to a different interpretation of public sculpture
as culturally symbolic. In spite or because of the spirit of the time, Rodin enacted his own cultural critique on the art
of sculpture, and more precisely, on sculptural space. By removing the pedestal, and bringing the sculpture to the
ground, the viewer was free to move about the sculpture willfully changing his or her angle of view. The overlapping
figures with tangled limbs and torsos create a compositional sculpture that appears to change as the viewer walks
around it, moving and adjusting their individual gaze. It is in this operation that we understand the role of viewer as a
participant in creating the sculptural effect, a prescient move by Rodin that I argue anticipated the minimalist sculpture
that would further complicate the discourse sixty years hence. It is equally interesting to note this condition of partici-
pation by walking taken to its extreme at Stanford University, where Elsen not only separated the burghers but allowed
them as individuals to wander across a quad, portraying themselves in their dramatic place of misfortune, while also
freely entering the space of our reality.

Tilted Arc

“Serra insists that his work is strictly sculptural, while his best critics regard it as a deconstruction of sculpture.
Yet, this paradox might be the point, for with Serra, sculpture becomes its deconstruction, its making becomes its
unmaking. For sculpture to harden into a thing-category would be for sculpture to become monumental again—for its
structure to be fetishized, its viewer frozen, its site forgotten, again. In this light, to deconstruct sculpture is to sever its
“internal necessity”; to extend sculpture in relation to process, embodiment, and site is to remain within it.”

To wit, “Despite what he says about it, all of Serra’s work is based on the deconstruction of such a notion as
“sculpture itself”. This is how Rosalind Krauss describes the relations between Serra’s oeuvre and Merleau-Ponty’s, “Phenomenology of Perception.”34 We will return to this topic of perception but first, we need to ask what is Serra saying about his sculpture.

“The site determines how I think about what I’m going to build, whether it be an urban or landscape site, a room or other architectural enclosure. “Some works are realized from their inception to their completion totally at the site. Other pieces are worked out in the studio. Having a definite notion of the actual site, I experiment with steel models in a large sandbox. The sand, functioning as a ground plane or as a surrogate elevation, enables me to shift the building elements so as to understand their sculptural capacity. The building method is based on hand manipulation. A continuous hands-on procedure both in the studio and at the site, using full-scale models, etc., allows me to perceive structures I could not imagine.”35

For Serra, and one might speculate for many artists, there is not an a priori idea or image of the sculpture because it comes into being only through the spatial effects that he perceives as the result from real time modeling. In contrast to Rodin and perhaps most artists, Serra begins with neither a drawing nor a plan of the site, even though his pieces, like architecture, occupy the ground plane. Rather, he begins with an elevation: “Even pieces that are low to the ground, I am interested in the specificity of the elevation.”36

In interviews, Serra explains his work in sculpture as, “a life-time involvement”— “to follow the direction of the work I opened up early on for myself and try to make the most abstract moves within that . . . To work out of my own work, and to build whatever’s necessary so that the work remains open and vital.”37 Hal Foster takes up this statement and offers a perspective on how to read Serra’s work, suggesting that the phrase “open-up” is a referent to modernist precedents, that I would argue begin with Rodin and include Brancusi, André, Smithson, etc. The phrase, “the most abstract moves” connotes a break with the figurative and imagistic: “pictorial conventions of figure-ground and Gestalt readings of images in general remain anathema to Serra.” And finally, the phrase “open and vital” suggests simply that, that according to Serra, the work operate successfully within the “three dynamics that have governed his work since its opening up, three forces of which it is the fulcrum: engagement with particular precedents; elaboration, through pertinent materials, of an intrinsic language; and encounter with specific sites.”38
Minimalism introduced the notion of the object, the thingness of sculpture as irrelevant. As the medium or volume through which spatiality was perceived, it no longer mattered. Rather, artists including Serra, pushed the situational, including site-specific aspects of sculpture, a move made possible once the pedestal had been banished. “In 1966 when Serra opened-up his work, it meant that minimalism had obviated sculpture more than it had exceeded it.”

The changed relationship between the object and the viewer, an artifact of experience, (again I might argue this took place in Rodin's time), that occurred when minimalism dominated the modernist art theory in the 1960s and 1970s, provided a change in the sculptural object. “The viewer and the object are seen as occupying the same space.”

According to Serra, “Changing the content of perception by having viewer and sculpture coexist in the same behavioral space implies movement, time, anticipation, etc.” — “When sculpture enters the realm of the non-institution, when it leaves the gallery or museum to occupy the same space and place as architecture, when it redefines space and place in terms of sculptural necessities, architects become annoyed. Not only is their concept of space being changed, but for the most part it is being criticized.”

By the mid seventies, the emphasis on Serra's sculpture was on the constructivist-inspired technological operations of making. His focus shifted to a concentration on materiality, perhaps a variant of idealist conception of the primacy of material. In Serra's case, the materials preferred were industrial, mostly steel and lead, that he would deform, bend, fold, crease: he worked prodigiously down through his list of material operations: 108 verbs in total. His other primary concerns focused on the phenomenological and the experiential, that sculpture exists in relation to and is activated by the human body. The third principle was defined as site-specificity, that “sculpture engages the particularity of place and not the abstraction of space, which it “redefines” immanently rather than “re-presents transcendentally”.

“Together, then, these principles define sculpture as a structuring of materials in order to motivate the body and to demarcate place: not a fixed category of autonomous objects but a specific relay between subject and site that frames the one in terms of the other, and transforms both at once.”

Along the trajectory of Serra's work we find the dialectical detritus of cultural stasis and technological change, of sculpture as something once apprehended for its pictorial beauty to one whose indifference to site and viewer becomes an alienating force, and finally to modernism's self-doubt; its secure place in the world of commodified art objects once informed by Kantian exaltation of form, to a question of being, or the infinite search for the 'what'. By the late 1970s, Serra is exploring the literal ground of urban sites in New York City as places of interest for new sculptural intervention. The sublime, counterposed to Kant's beauty, “can be found in the formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of its boundlessness is represented in it, and yet its totality is also present in thought.” And while in the beautiful totality is immediately apprehended, the feeling of the sublime comes form the contradiction between apprehension (which can go on ad infinitum) and comprehension (which quickly reached its maximum, beyond which the
imagination cannot go).” In other words, the feeling of the sublime lies in the separation between the idea of totality and the perceived impossibility of understanding that totality.

Serra’s “Tilted Arc” had several realized precedents including “St. John’s Rotary Arc” in 1980 and “Clara Clara” in 1983. If we skip ahead to his more recent works, specifically the “Torqued Ellipses”, we can observe the continuity of his search and persistent belief in the material operations, site-specific conceptualization and the participation/motion of the body as the irreducible component of the sculpture. The viewer has been fully co-opted into the role of performer, therefore displacing the very notion of viewer.

This is not to say that the role of performer is not without its rewards. Going back to Merleau Ponty’s “The Phenomenology of Perception”, and the idea of pre-objective experience, we can deploy the logic in order to articulate the process of making and enacting the sculpture. “Movement is the displacement or change of position, even if it cannot be defined as such. As we initially encountered the idea of position, which defines it in terms of relationships in objective space, so there is an objective conception of movement, which defines it in terms of relations within the world, taking the experience of the world for granted. And just as we had to trace back the origin of the positing of space to the pre-objective situation or locality of the subject fastening himself onto his environment, so we shall have to rediscover, beneath the objective idea of movement, a pre-objective experience form which it borrows its significance, and in which movement, still linked to the person perceiving it, is a variation of the subject's hold on his world.”

The Tilted Arc was conceived as site-specific sculpture and literally designed by the site. “The Neo-avant-garde aspiration was to exceed the limitation of the setting; the epistemological challenge to relocate meaning from within the art object to the contingencies of its context; the radical restructuring of the subject form an old Cartesian model to a phenomenological one of lived bodily experience; and self-conscious desire to resist the forces of the capitalist market economy, which circulates art works as transportable and exchangeable commodity goods--- all these imperatives came together in arts' new attachment to the actuality of the site.”

Douglas Crimp interviewed Serra and has written extensively about his work including “Tilted Arc”. He begins his essay, “Re-defining Site Specificity” with the exhibition of Robert Morris that took place in an old warehouse that the Leo Castelli Gallery used as storage on the Upper West Side in Manhattan. The year was 1968 and among the artists showing their work was Richard Serra with his work “Splashing”. Crimp exercises the dialectic of late avant-garde issues when speaking about Serra including the problems with site-specific work and the potential discontinuity of creation and dissemination of art objects in the world. He writes, “Of the things in the warehouse, certainly none was more defiant of our sense of the aesthetic object than Richard Serra’s Splashing. Along the juncture where wall met floor, Serra had tossed molten lead and allowed it to harden in place. The result was not really an object at all; it had no definable shape or mass; it created no legible image.” — “Serra was obscuring a marker for our orientation
in interior space, claiming that space as the ground of a different perceptual experience.” Crimp uses *Splash* evidently to underscore the meaning of Tilted Arc as site specific work and observes a slight shifting of the debate in Serra’s assertion “to remove the work is to destroy the work” when confronted by his prosecutors who wanted the piece removed.

In a 1980 interview with Crimp, Serra elucidated on the *Tilted Arc* piece:

“*The Federal Building site didn’t interest me at first. It’s a “pedestal site” in front of a public building. There is a fountain on the plaza; normally you would expect a sculpture next to the fountain, so that the ensemble would embellish the building. I’ve found a way to dislocate or alter the decorative function of the plaza and actively bring people into the sculpture’s context. I plan to build a piece that is 120 feet long in a semicircular plaza. It will cross the entire space, blocking the view from the street to the courthouse and vice versa. It will be twelve feet high and tilt one foot toward the Federal Building and the Courthouse. It will be a very slow arc that will encompass the people who walk on the plaza in its volume.*”

In response to questions about his intentions, Serra replies, “*The intention is to bring the viewer into the sculpture. The placement of the sculpture will change the space of the plaza. After the piece is created, the space will be understood primarily as a function of the sculpture.*”

In 1985, The General Services Administration, better known as the GSA, that in 1979 conceived and implemented the percent–for art program known as Art-in-Architecture, and commissioned Richard Serra to build a sculpture to foreground the Federal Building in lower Manhattan, exercised its power and political will to dismantle and remove the sculpture from its site. Despite the overwhelming numbers of defenders, many of whom representing official art policies and whose voices were heard unremittingly, were at last defeated. The case against *Tilted Arc* and site specificity was all but fixed.

The Crimp essays seek to explain and make use of the event, a harbinger of better, smarter times we hope, while journalistically acknowledging the culprits, their politically motivated self-interests and those larger interests that will forever be denied. There is no real value in trying this case again and therefore, little need to here to revisit all of these facts, yet we cannot dispense with them entirely.

According to the text, “*The Tilted Arc Destroyed*,” “Culturally and politically, the two most important facts about the *Tilted Arc* are that Serra had followed established procedures
and fulfilled all GSA requirements such that the GSA could not have been caught or surprised by the appearance of the sculpture. The most salient art issue of the sculpture was its site specificity.” The generative aspects of the project were conceptual and describe the intent of the piece, and it was this that convinced and advisory panel that the piece could not be moved to another location without destroying it. In terms a public could understand, the report articulated the purpose of Tilted Arc as follows:

- Structure the plaza and create directions
- Accentuate existing pedestrian patterns
- Link the 2 sites of the Federal enclave via sculpture as bridge
- Connecting and visually gathering the different Federal architectures
- Create a sculptural space within the plaza.

The Tilted Arc realized Serra’s ideals of placing sculpture, not in the white cube, but in the messy street life of lower Manhattan. It provided a variety of changing views within the empty plaza reframing the void in order to create a sustainable visual energy that could be experienced simply by the motion of walking.

I will conclude with a summing up from Hal Foster who brings us brings us to the place and meaning of public sculpture: This convergence of opposite trajectories in modernism suggests the semi-autonomy of artistic development won by Serra in his practice. Again, this practice deconstructs sculpture vis-à-vis its site, but in a way in which unmaking is not opposed to making, or a commitment to site specificity to the category of sculpture. Indeed the semi-autonomy of the work is crucial to its site-specificity—as it must be if site specificity is to be site critical as well. This point—is often lost in recent developments of site-oriented and project-based practices today, which threaten to dissolve artistic practice into sociological or anthropological fieldwork. Serra has always stressed the “internal necessity” of sculpture, always insisted on the “uselessness” of art in general. Here this necessity, that uselessness, do not void the political criticality of art; Serra shows that they can also underwrite it. This lesson is important to learn again today.”

“Placing pieces in an urban context is not synonymous with an interest in a large audience even though the work will be seen by many people who otherwise wouldn’t look at art. The work I make does allow for experience outside the conventions of sculpture as sculpture. My audience is necessarily limited.”

(Endnotes)


13. Ibid., pp. 34


17. Ibid., pp. 15


21. Ibid., pp. 55


23. Ibid., pp. 86


28 Ibid., pp. 51

29 Ibid., pp. 51

30 Ibid., pp. 55


35 Ibid., pp. 62

36 Ibid., pp. 62


40 Ibid., pp. 146


43 Ibid., pp. 85


48 Ibid., pp. 127
Bibliography


Steinberg, Leo, “Other Criteria with Twentieth Century Art”, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1971


