Richard Serra
Open Ended

VOORLINDEN

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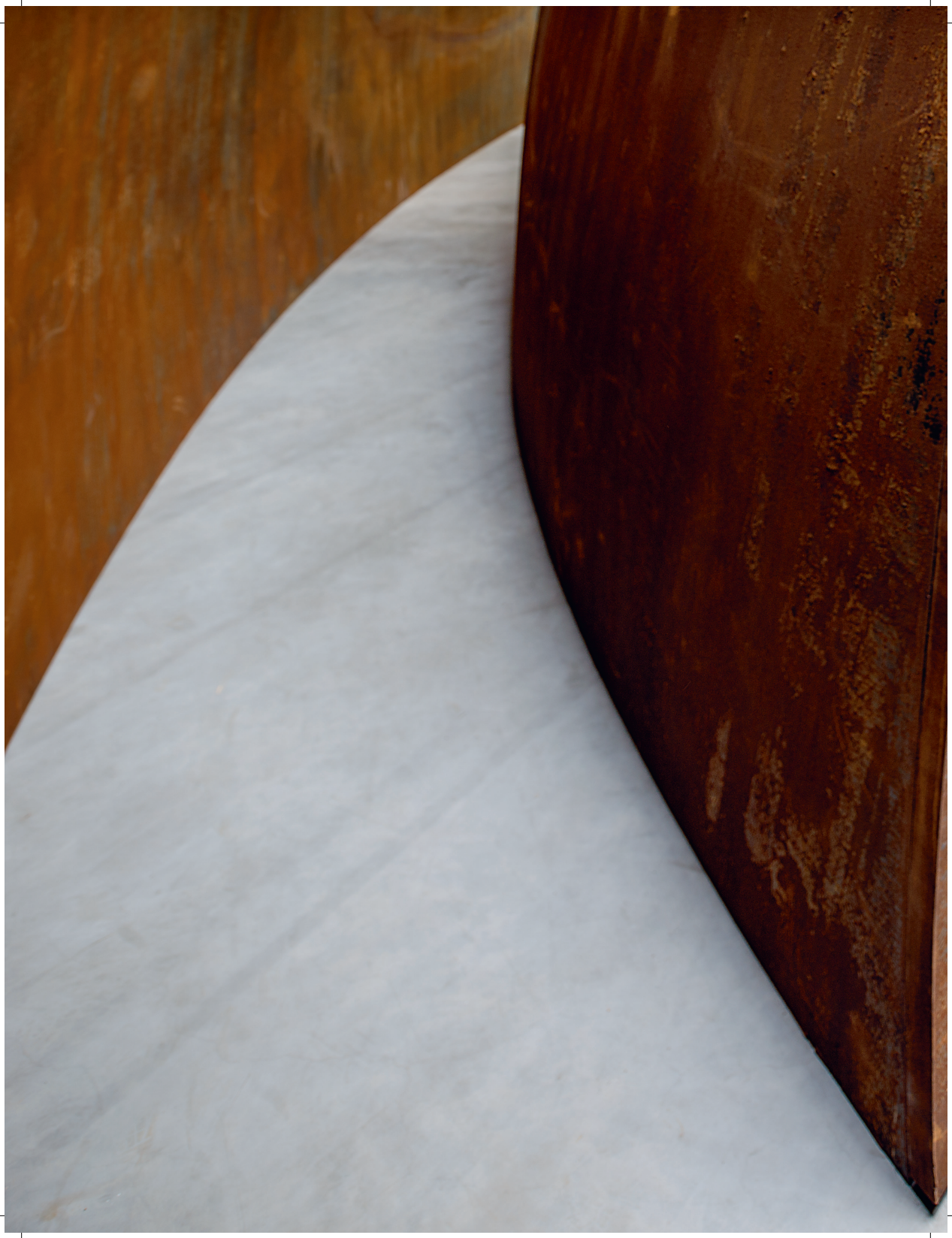
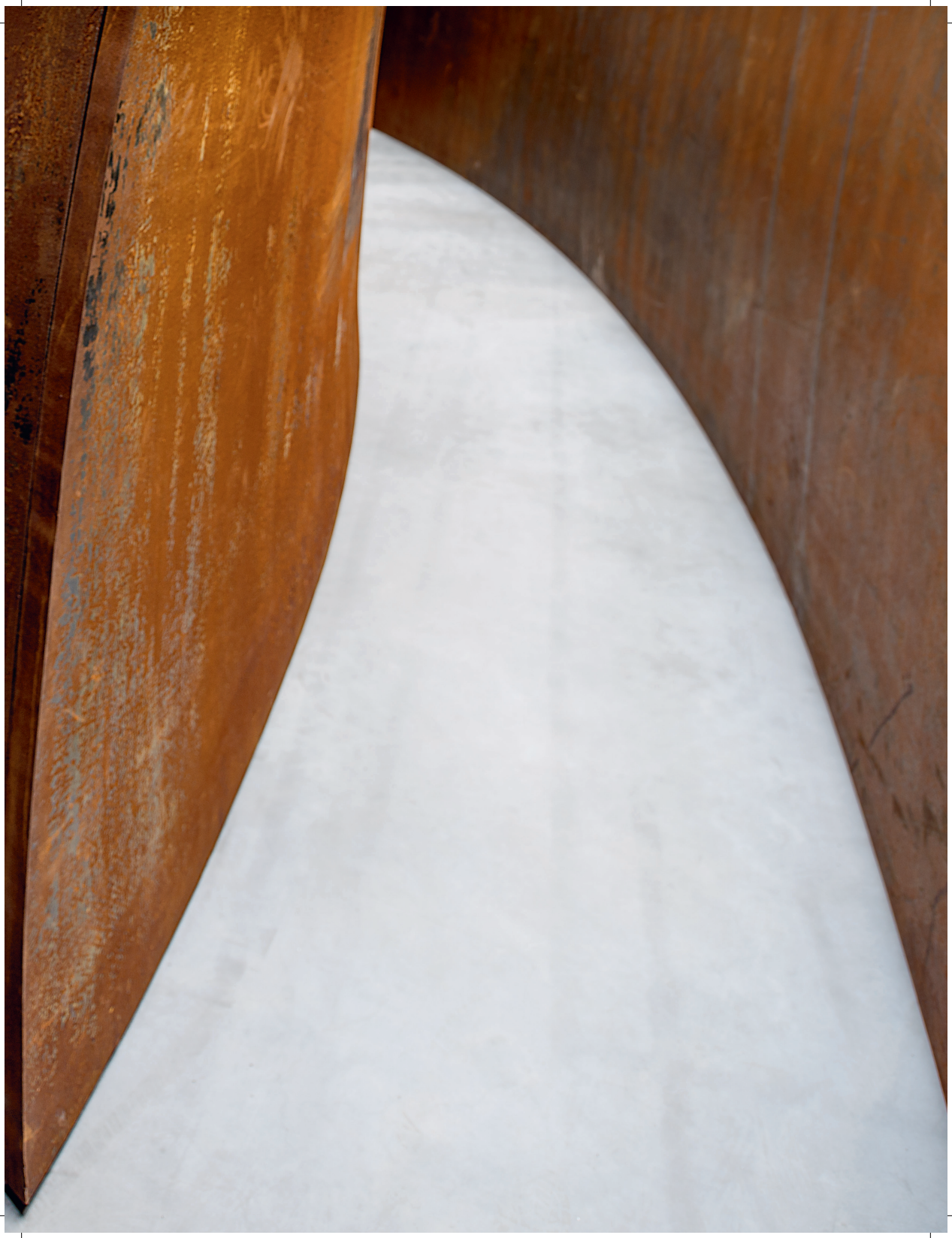
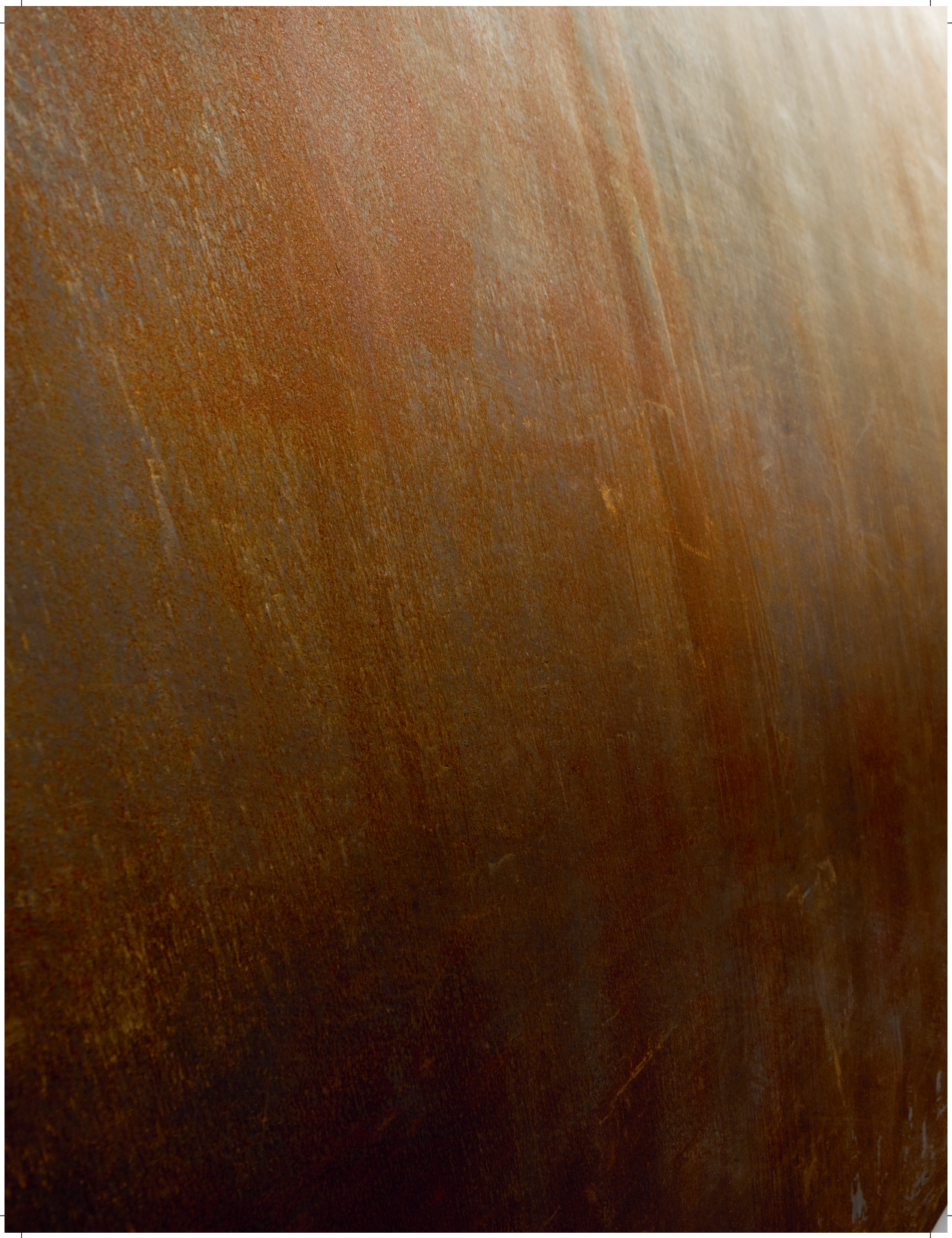
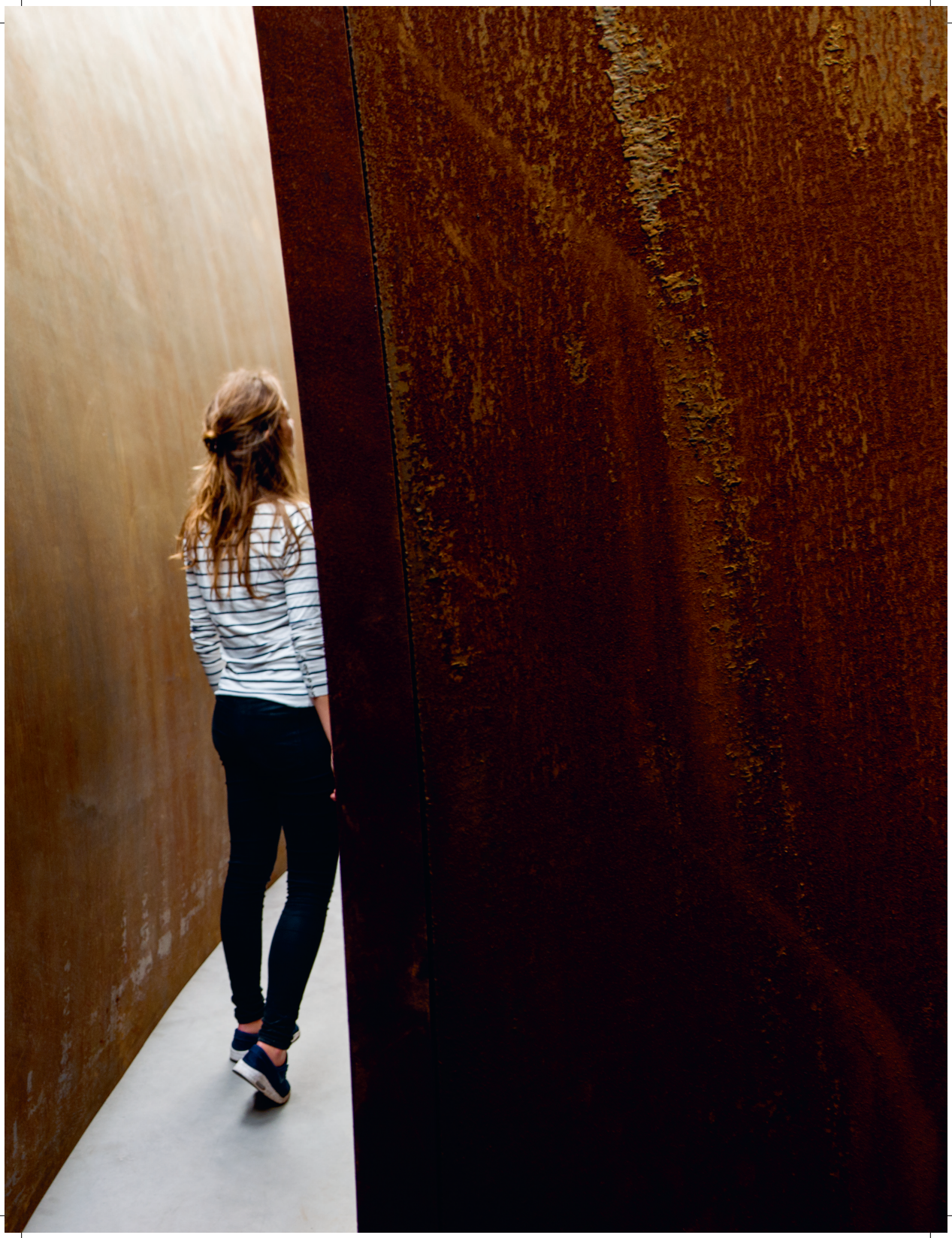




Richard Serra, Open Ended (2007-2008)





Preface

Whirlwind in slow motion

EXPERIENCING 'OPEN ENDED'

The first confrontation with 'Open Ended' is impressive, almost overwhelming. The gigantic sculpture looms up like the bow of an ocean liner. It is an artwork full of contradictions: it is extremely heavy and elegant, industrial and organic, majestic and playful, hollow and round. The sculpture is earthy and physical and yet also possesses an almost immaterial lightness.

Six gracefully arched steel plates together form an elegant labyrinth. 'Open Ended' is a work of art that should be experienced while walking. The work invites you to enter it. In no time, you will find yourself in another world, completely surrounded by the artwork. To the left and to the right the walls are towering above you. Taking a step backwards is not an option as you are now so close to the artwork's skin that you are able to see the jagged structures in the rust-coloured surface from up close and must resist the temptation to stroke it with your fingers.

When your gaze wanders upwards, an elegant play of lines unfolds. The composition and the view of the sky above are continually changing as you walk. The walls are reflecting the echoing rhythm of your footsteps. Then, the undulating curve abruptly ends in a sharp bend. And as you penetrate further into the labyrinth, the tension is mounting.

Suddenly, the walls recede and you have arrived in the centre of the sculpture, a room with a sacred feel. The light is pouring in. Here it becomes clear that Richard Serra has mastered the essence of sculpting: to create a balance between positive and negative volumes. After walking through

the narrow space between the steel walls of ‘Open Ended’, entering the centre provides a dénouement, much like reaching a clearing in a dense forest.

On the other side of the internal space, the path continues. Here you are again surrounded by the rhythm of your footsteps, the high walls, the changing views above your head. But the way out is actually very different from the way in. After the spaciousness of the clearing you will now experience the proportions of the work in a new way.

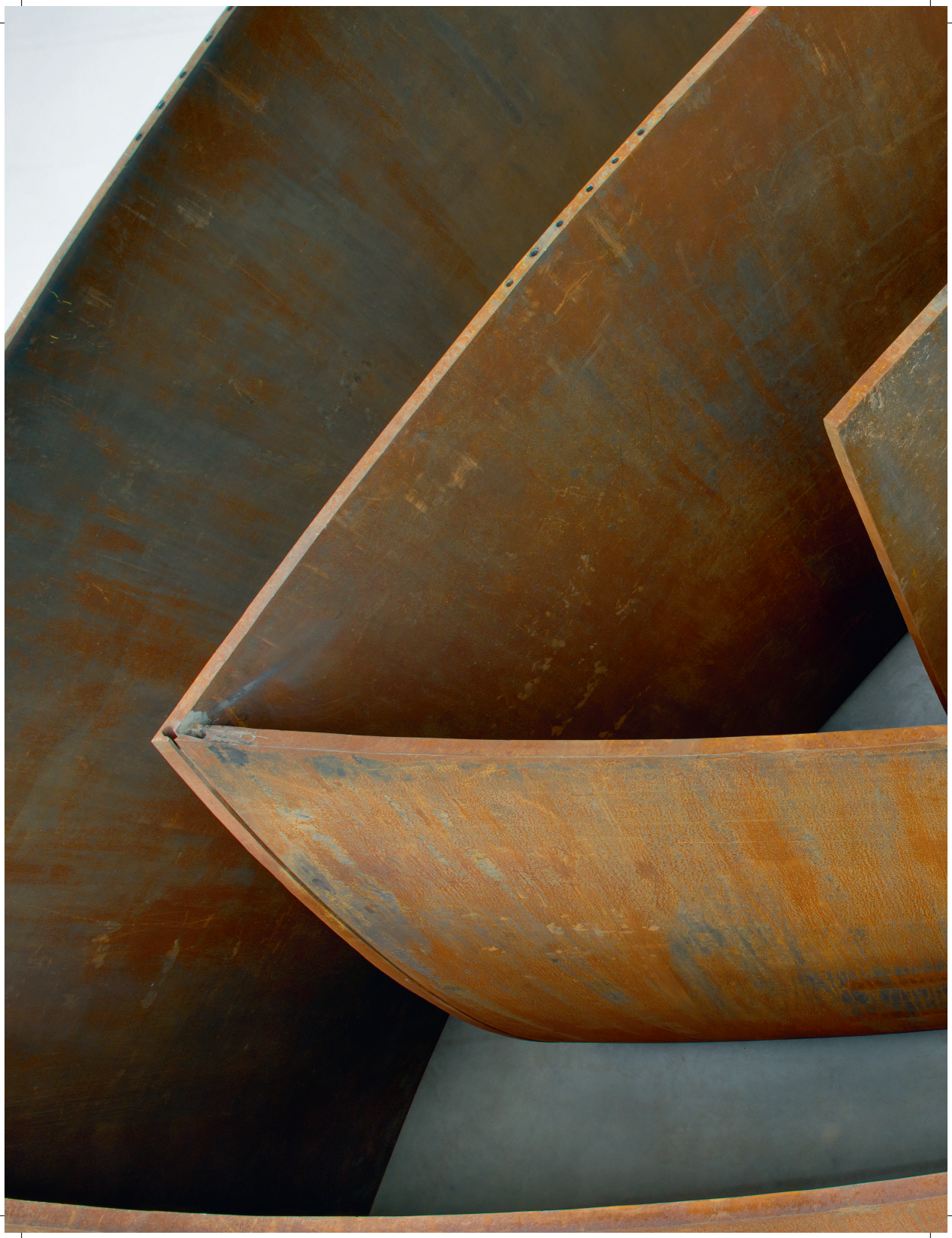
At the end of the path, after a short moment of disorientation – ‘Open Ended’ tampers with your sense of direction – the outside world is waiting. Once there you will observe the museum’s architecture and its natural surroundings in a new light. Experiencing this whirlwind in slow motion has sharpened your senses.

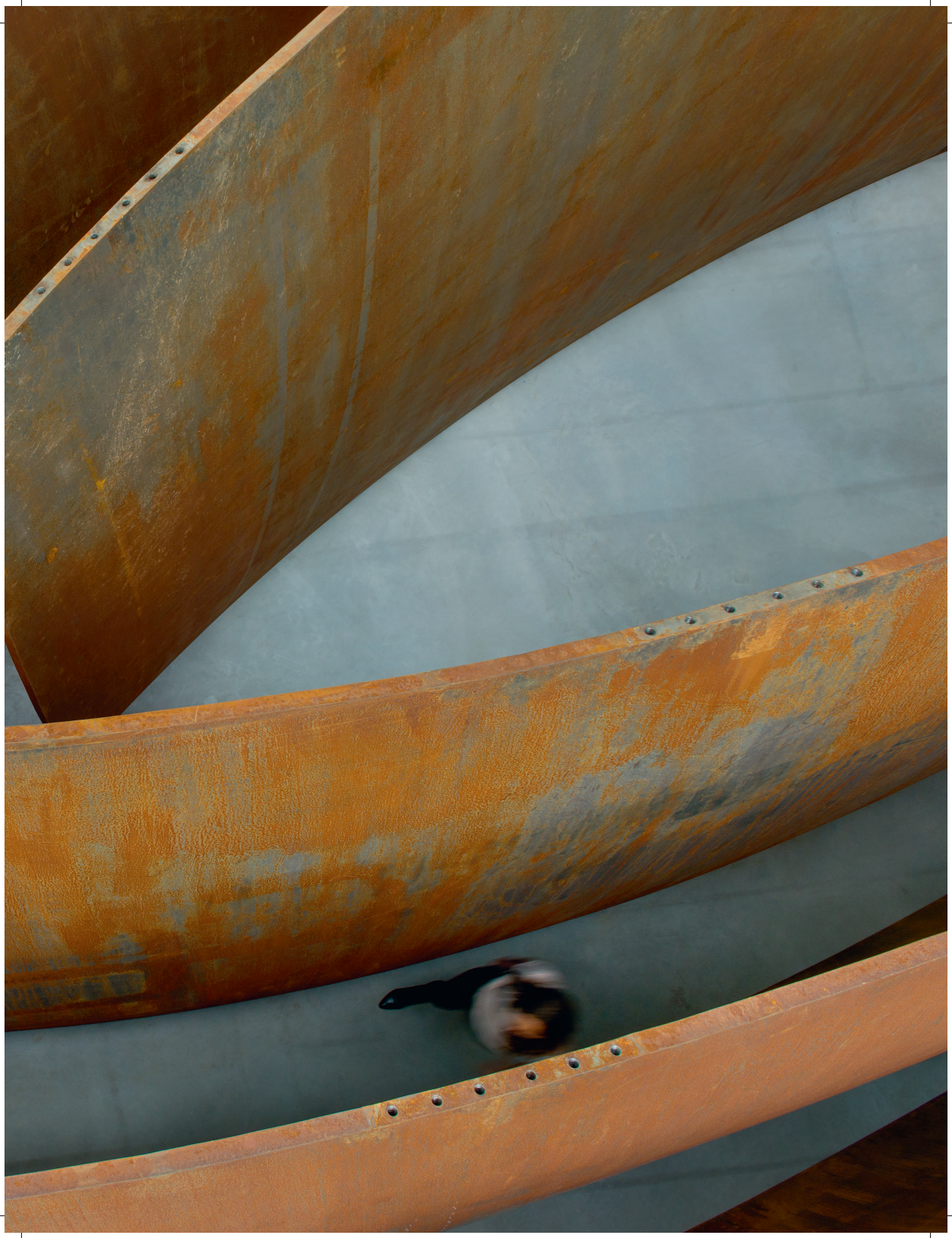
Richard Serra, Open Ended (2007-2008)

Without words, but by appealing to your intuition, Serra leads your gaze, like a director, through his artwork and makes your body follow. Your point of view is continually changing while you are walking, activating a play of movement, volume, light and lines. You are invited to go on a voyage of discovery within your own field of vision.

This artwork is experienced in fragments: a glimpse of a vanishing point, the reflection of sounds or the patterns made by the sun on the walls and the floor. Your perception of 'Open Ended' depends heavily on the time of day, the season and the weather, but also on your mood. The artwork offers an incredible physical discovery that can only be experienced live.

Richard Serra, Open Ended (2007-2008)





CHAPTER 1.

A recurring dream

THE LIFE AND WORK OF RICHARD SERRA

Most art lovers will be familiar with Serra's impressive rust-coloured, abstract steel sculptures that grace city squares like monoliths or cut their way through galleries in the world's most important museums. They are instantly recognizable as Serra's work. From the 1960s, he has been constructing his body of work, which occupies a prominent place in the art-historical canon of the second half of the twentieth century.

In a text from 1985 the artist describes a memory from his youth that he considers to be the foundation of all the work he will later produce. When he is four years old his father, a pipefitter, takes him to the shipyard where he works. That day a new oil tanker is launched. *"When we arrived, the black, blue, and orange steel-plated tanker was in way, balanced up on a perch. It was disproportionately horizontal and to a four-year-old was as large as a skyscraper on its side."* Thousands of people are working there. The atmosphere is tense and filled with expectation. Then, with a speed and flexibility that seems incompatible with the enormous mass of the ship, the cables on all sides are released. The colossus starts moving and picks up speed as it slides from the slipway. The moment the ship hits the water and regains its balance, a collective sigh of relief is heard across the shipyard. Everyone is cheering, an orchestra starts playing and ship's horns are sounded. *"Not only had the tanker collected itself, but the witnessing crowd collected itself as the ship went through a transformation from an enormous obdurate weight to a buoyant structure, free, afloat, and adrift. My awe and wonder of that moment remained. All the raw material that I needed is contained in the reserve of this memory which has become a recurring dream."*

That day makes a deep impression on the young Serra and sows the seeds for a fascination with gravity, weight and industrial processes that is still visible in his work today.

MY SON, THE ARTIST

Serra was born in San Francisco in 1938. Already at a young age his father introduces him to the work at the shipyards. His mother notices the boy's

talent for drawing and from then on introduces him as 'my son, the artist', causing the young Serra a lot of embarrassment.

At the end of the 1950s, he decided to study English literature at the University of California. In order to supplement his income, Serra regularly works in the steel mills. Drawing is also one of his main activities. At the beginning of the 1960s, he was admitted to the prestigious Yale University School of Art and Architecture in New Haven on the basis of only a handful of drawings. His teachers are famous artists like Josef Albers (1888-1976), Frank Stella (1936), Philip Guston (1913-1980) and Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008). Here Serra obtains his bachelor's and master's degrees in Fine Art; not as a sculptor, but as a painter.

In the mid-1960s, Serra was offered a scholarship to travel to Europe. It was to be a defining trip in his artistic career. In Paris he is fascinated by the studio of sculptor Constantin Brâncuși (1876-1957), which has been meticulously reconstructed at the Musée National d'Art Moderne. Serra visits it every day. He endlessly draws the sculptures to learn more about volumes, lines, mass and spatial forms.

Another epiphany follows in Madrid. At the Prado, Serra sees 'Las Meninas' (The Ladies-in-waiting, 1656-1657), the world-famous painting by Diego Velázquez (1599-1660). He immediately realizes that the subject of this artwork cannot be found in the painting itself. Because of its ingenious composition he, the spectator, is the subject himself. This is exactly the effect Serra aims to produce through his art. But he is aware of the fact that he will never be able to surpass Velázquez as a painter. He abandons his brushes, his paint and his painter's easel and starts experimenting with other materials.

Serra settles in New York when he returns to the United States. He starts to befriend artists such as Robert Smithson (1938-1973), Carl Andre (1935), Bruce Nauman (1941), Eva Hesse (1936-1970) and Joan Jonas (1936). Together they make up a generation that reacts both admiringly and critically to

abstract expressionism, the movement that had dominated the American art world in the preceding decade.

Serra had an enormous drive to experiment during those years. He starts using new materials such as neon, rubber and lead. He focuses on the process of creation instead of the finished product. He shares this attitude with his artist friends, and the art that evolves out of it is known as *process art*. The works Serra produced during this period already articulated a clear fascination for weight, balance and gravity. Among other things, he creates a series of works using lead in which he researches the material by smelting, stacking and balancing it in different ways. The traces of the creative process are not erased, but are an important part of the finished artwork.

HOW WEIGHT BECOMES SERRA'S SIGNATURE

In 1969, Leo Castelli (1907–1999), director of the leading art gallery in New York at that time, decided to dedicate a solo exhibition to the young Serra. It is the opportunity of a lifetime. Castelli gives him free rein, despite the fact that the work he creates isn't exactly easy to sell because of its large format. At some point Serra owes the gallery owner 500,000 dollars. Castelli discreetely suggests to Serra that he might start creating smaller work, which causes the artist to burst into joyous laughter. It is of no consequence as Castelli's faith in the artist remains rock solid.

Through the gallery, Serra meets many artists and other influential figures in the art world. His career is gaining momentum. In the very same year he was selected for two pioneering exhibitions: 'Live in your Head. When Attitudes Become Form' at the Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland and 'Op Losse Schroeven: Situaties en Cryptostructuren' (Square Pegs in Round Holes: Situations and Cryptostructures) at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. From that moment on, it is also known in Europe that Serra belongs to a new generation of radically innovative artists.

In 1970, the artist stopped using lead, his favourite material, and traded it in for steel. This allows him to produce even larger works. His sculptures

are now becoming so heavy that he is forced to start collaborating with steel manufacturers and engineers. Over the following decades, Serra established his reputation for making large, rust-coloured steel sculptures. His work is featured in a number of important retrospective exhibitions and is realized at prominent locations in cities all over the world.

Already well on the way to becoming a household name, Serra keeps experimenting. The shape of his sculptures becomes increasingly complex and from the 1990s onwards he starts exploring the limitations of the physical possibilities of steel. More elegant, organic lines start making their appearance in his work.

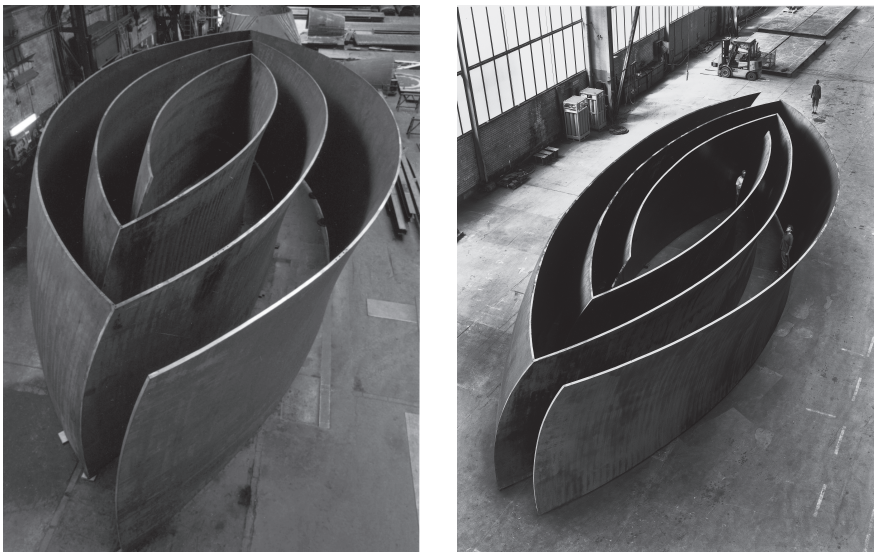
In essence all of Serra's artworks are an exploration of weight. It is their main connecting factor. In his own words:

"I simply know more about weight than lightness and therefore I have more to say about it (...) I have more to say about the processing of the weight of steel, more to say about the forge, the rolling mill, and the open hearth."

Richard Serra, Spin Out (For Robert Smithson) (1972-1973)

CHAPTER 2.

Unbearable lightness



Richard Serra, Blind Spot (2002-2003) and Open Ended (2007-2008)

SCULPTURES OF STEEL

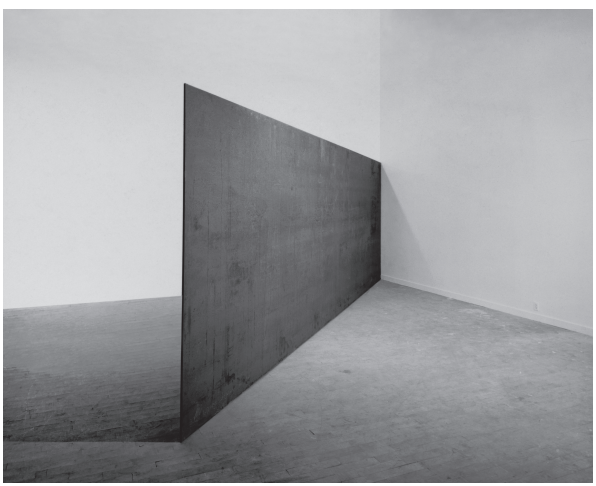
As a material, steel symbolizes inflexibility. But Serra is still able to manipulate it as if it were as flexible as modelling clay. 'Open Ended' is a testimony to that. It is closely connected to the work 'Blind Spot' (2002-2003) that is similar in style but consists of one instead of two spirals. [p. 29] 'Blind Spot' is a continuation of a series of works from the 1990s in which Serra explores the tension between hollow and round. His experiments led him to the invention of an entirely new shape, the torqued ellipse, an ingeniously twisted curve. The works appear to be undulating elegantly, but are extremely complicated to realize and can only be constructed by a limited number of steel manufacturers around the world.

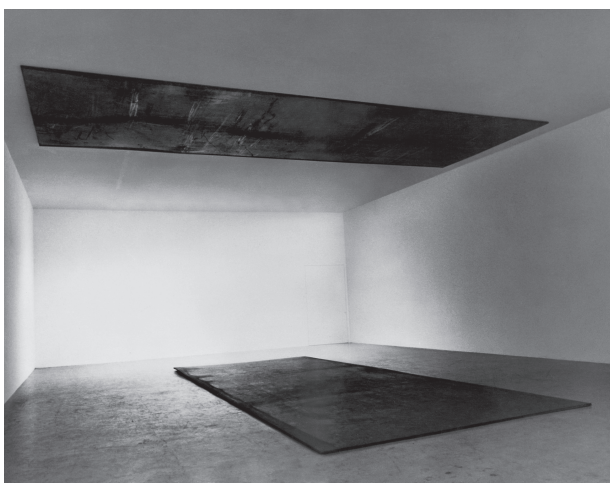
THE DEVELOPMENT OF A BODY OF WORK

From the perspective of a biologist, Serra's body of work shows signs of evolution. At the beginning of his career he often placed single, straight

surfaces or volumes in a landscape or a space, that seem to have originated from a simple question. What happens when a steel plate cuts through a space from a corner? The answer: 'Strike: To Roberta and Rudy' (1969-1971). [p. 30] Slowly the questions, and therefore also the answers, become more complicated. When are two elements perfectly balanced? What causes the spectator to become physically involved with a sculpture? ['Sight Point (To Leo Castelli')], (1971)]. How far do you have to bend a steel plate before it is able to stay upright on its own? ['Tilted Arc', (1981)]. [p. 35] And, regarding 'Open Ended', in what sense is the physical experience of a leaning wall different to that of a receding wall? As Serra explores and stretches the technical possibilities of steel, his sculptures become increasingly complex. However, the crystal clear stylistic idiom of his early work remains intact.

A number of art historians have subdivided Serra's sculptures into families, based on the complexity of their shapes. First, there are the vertically-standing steel plates that mark a spot, like a monolith. 'Bramme für das Ruhrgebiet' ['Slab for the Ruhr', (1989)] is a magnificent example of this. Sometimes several straight plates are placed in a certain formation to create tension or set out a path, as is the case in East-West/West-East (2014) in the Brouq desert of Qatar. [p. 32] And then there are the slightly more complex





Richard Serra, Strike: To Roberta and Rudy (1969-71)

Richard Serra, Delineator (1974)

structures in which several elements balance each other out. Visitors are often able to walk through them. Another series consists of closed volumes, seemingly solid cubes. The moment Serra starts to experiment with bending steel, he also starts working on his series of 'Curves', sculptures consisting of one or more bent plates. According to Serra, *"work leads to work"*. The 'Curves' trigger a series of undulating circles: ingenious shapes with a curve at the top of the plate that is different from the one at the bottom.

The latter is the most complex category to date. The most famous example is the series 'The Matter of Time' (2005) at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. [p. 33] Although it is the largest artwork made of Cor-Ten steel in the world, these eight colossal sculptures appear to have been scattered through the room with a feather-light touch. 'Open Ended' is also part of this family of sculptures within Serra's work.

TYPICALLY SERRA: ABSTRACT AND AUTONOMOUS

In each individual sculpture, Serra explores new questions with regard to weight. His body of work is consistent, with all works containing strong characteristic traits. The most obvious of these traits is the use of Cor-Ten steel, Serra's trademark. Cor-Ten steel, also known as weathering steel, is a type of metal that is often used in architecture, shipbuilding and heavy industry. Exposing it to the elements creates an oxide skin, a thin layer of rust that stabilizes after about ten years and prevents further corrosion. Painting the material is therefore not necessary, which is in keeping with Serra's philosophy to show the process of creation as straightforwardly as possible. In his sculptures the traces of rolling, heating and forging the steel are clearly visible.

Serra's works are also always abstract and autonomous, which means that they only refer to themselves and don't carry a symbolic meaning. The artist draws on a limited repertoire of basic geometric shapes. The result is always rational and clear with an unconcealed structure that exactly shows how the sculpture was constructed. And in spite of the fact that they weigh many tons, they appear to be almost weightless, as if it took no effort at all

Richard Serra, East-West/West-East (2015)

to erect them. This contradiction, this unbearable lightness, is possibly the most distinctive characteristic of Serra's sculptures.

MADE BY MANY HANDS: SERRA'S WORKING METHOD

On seeing the immobile, heavy-weight sculptures, you might not think they have evolved out of a playful creative process. Rather than first sketching his structures, Serra designs his works by means of empirical research, a process that leaves room for unexpected results. Driven by curiosity, he experiments in his studio with models made of lead, wood, cardboard and other materials. His main points of departure are weight and balance. The question is always: how will it remain in its upright position? Usually there is a period of about three years between the raising of this question and the final sculpture.

When he talks about the process of creation, Serra nearly always refers to 'we'. He is averse to the image of the solitary genius who slaves away

in his studio and subsequently presents a ready-made artwork. Serra's work is made by many hands. It couldn't even exist without the expertise of engineers, steel workers and transportation companies. Serra is transparent on this subject and is against any form of mystification surrounding the artistic production process. He greatly values the craftsmanship in the steel mills where his sculptures are made. For rigging and hoisting activities, for instance, he has been working with a close-knit team for forty years; first with the fathers, now with their sons.

This attitude is consistent with the fact that Serra's focus is on the process of creation and not on the finished product. A much-quoted remark by him summarizes this: *"There is no way to make a drawing – there is only drawing."*

SITE SPECIFICITY: THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SPACE

The effect of encountering a sculpture in a field is completely different to seeing one in a white-walled museum gallery, or on a busy square. The setting of art is important and this also applies to Serra's work. Many of his sculptures are made specifically for the situation in which they are placed. During the creation of an artwork, he already takes certain characteristics

Richard Serra, The Matter of Time (2005), Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

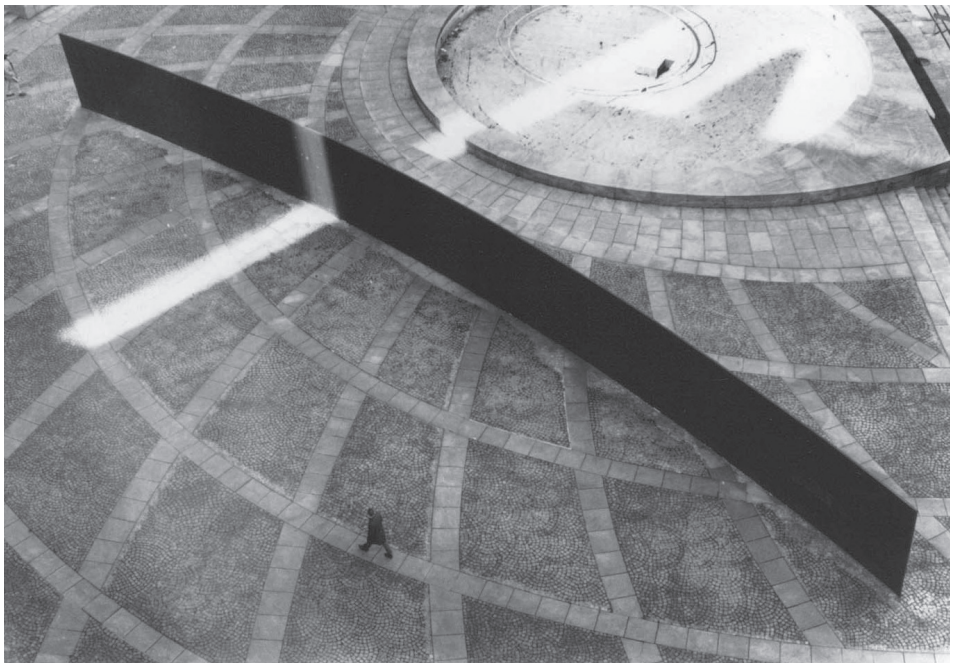
of the environment, such as height differences in the landscape or the surrounding buildings, into consideration.

But not all works by Serra have been made with a specific location in mind. 'Open Ended' wasn't, for example. However, this does not mean that the location the work is placed in is not important. At Museum Voorlinden, 'Open Ended' has been given a space inside the building. This was done in close consultation with the artist. He provided exact specifications for, among other things, the ideal measurements of the space. These were taken into account in the design of the museum and entailed that the gallery was heightened and the floor was reinforced. The result is an exciting contrast between the straight museum walls and the undulating walls of the artwork. And although 'Open Ended' is exhibited inside, it is by no means a static environment. Because one of the gallery walls is made entirely of glass, a dynamic relationship with the museum's natural surroundings is created. In addition, daylight from above produces a play of light and shadow in and around the work.

WHY THE AMERICAN GOVERNMENT DESTROYED A WORK BY SERRA

The placement of a work by Serra doesn't always proceed harmoniously, especially when it concerns an outdoor sculpture. Urban planners and architects expect sculptures to serve the public space. They think the work ought to enhance a situation, emphasize buildings or make squares look better. But Serra refuses to make concessions: his sculptures are completely autonomous and never serve any other purpose than simply to be themselves. The sculptures do not function as decoration, but rather cause friction and sometimes even block the way a little.

Serra is often referred to as one of the greatest sculptors of our age. Therefore, you might think that it is not that difficult to find a location for his work, but this does not seem to be the case. The artist clashed with architects, governments and other stakeholders and as a result plans are cancelled. More than once, actual anti-Serra pressure groups have even been set up.



Richard Serra, Tilted Arc, Federal Plaza New York (1981)

An absolute low was the affair surrounding Serra's artwork 'Tilted Arc' (1981), an arc spanning almost forty metres that was placed at Federal Plaza, a square in New York surrounded by government buildings. Many people considered the sculpture to be an unwieldy obstacle as they had to walk all the way around it to cross the square. Its rusty colour was also not decorative enough, according to some. The protests became fiercer and fiercer. The matter was eventually taken to court and in the end a jury determined that the artwork had to be removed. Serra appealed to a higher court, but to no avail. In 1989 the work was removed by the same local authorities that had placed it. As 'Tilted Arc' was a site-specific work made for Federal Plaza and therefore not suitable to be relocated, its removal equalled its destruction. Many years later, Serra was still angry about it: *"It really pissed me off."* Despite later requests, he never accepted an art commission from the government again.

CHAPTER 3.

Purposely useless

Richard Serra, Belts (1957-1966)

EXPERIMENTS, DRAWINGS AND VIDEOS

Before making the crucial decision to start working in steel, Serra carried out many experiments with other materials such as animals, liquid lead and a tent made of rubber. And aside from producing his enormous sculptures, the artist has never stopped drawing. The binding factor in his work is the artist's vision that art should never serve a practical purpose. Unlike design or architecture, art is purposely useless.

The seeds for Serra's early artistic experiments are sown in Europe. In Paris he is not only deeply impressed by the work of Brâncuși, but also with that of Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966). Giacometti, who is generally regarded as the personification of modern sculpture, regularly dines at café La Coupole, the plaster still in his hair. *"Every evening we would stare at him from a distance. We were like groupies!"* says Serra, describing himself and his good friend Philip Glass (1937), who is then also staying in Paris.

Brâncuși, Giacometti and 'Las Meninas' combined give Serra a new understanding of freedom. He feels an urgency to break away from old

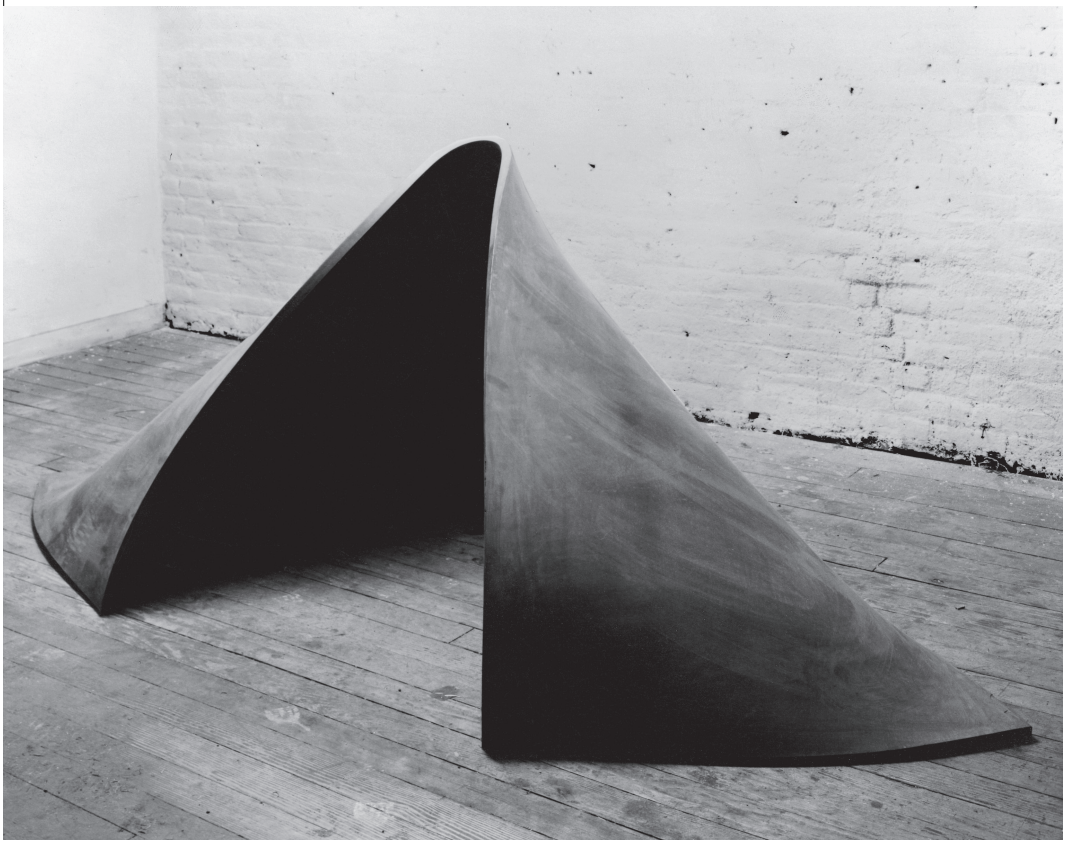
structures and academic thought. In 1966, at Galleria La Salita in Rome, he set up an exhibition using a mix of live and mounted animals. Although he does not consider it to be serious art, the experiment does help him to step away from painting and embrace new media.

A HUNDRED TONS OF RUBBER

He takes this attitude back to New York. When he is walking along Broadway one day, he witnesses how a large quantity of rubber is being put by the side of the road. It turns out to belong to a company that has gone bankrupt. Serra manages to contact the owner and is allowed to take as much rubber as he likes. *"It was like winning a materials grant."* Tons and tons of rubber fill his loft in downtown Manhattan. But now what?

Serra takes two sheets of paper and writes down a long list of verbs: to roll, to fold, to tear, to cut, to stretch, to wrap. This 'Verb List' (1967) determines Serra's early work. [p. 38] The list can be interpreted as an artistic manifesto,

Richard Serra, Verb List (1967)



Richard Serra, To Lift (1967)

but also, very concretely, as a list of instructions, almost as a recipe. All verbs describe actions that can be applied to rubber in order to research its behaviour. Serra's systematic implementation of the verbs results in an extraordinary group of rudimentary artworks. One of them is 'To Lift' (1967), a rubber mat that is raised in the centre to form a kind of tent. [p. 39] In true process art fashion the action that was necessary to create the work is highlighted by using it as its title.

Serra soon expands his research by using other materials, such as lead. The verb *To Splash* produces a series of works of the same name that would later become very well-known. To make them, Serra splashed molten lead in spaces between the wall and the floor of a room, where the material cools down and hardens again. These actions are well-documented in black

Richard Serra installing 'Measurements of Time' (1996)

and white photographs in which the artist can be seen wearing a gasmask while using large gestures to hurl the boiling hot material in the corners of buildings. In sculpture, casting is traditionally seen as an intermediate phase during which liquid matter is poured into a mould. Only then will it take on its final shape. But in the 'Splash Pieces' the action of casting is the artwork itself.

Jasper Johns (1930), already a well-known name, commissions Serra to produce one of his 'Splash Pieces' in his own studio, a great compliment to the young artist. During the installation of this work, a large plate of lead blocks the way. Serra puts the plate aside, placing it upright in a corner. He then notices that the plate is supported by the two walls in such a way that it is unable to fall down and divides the corner exactly in two, producing a new spatial experience. The idea for 'Strike', Serra's first metal sculpture, is thus created in Johns' studio.

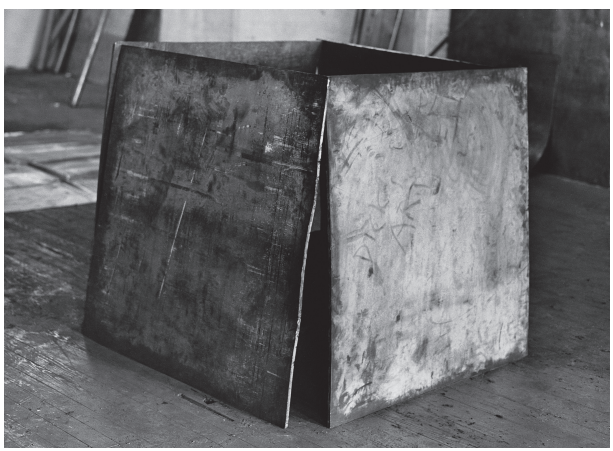
WEIGHT, VOLUME, GRAVITY

While experimenting, Serra discovers the qualities of lead. It is not only well suited for casting, but also for rolling, folding, bending and stacking. This research leads to the 'Prop Pieces', a series of artworks in which Serra works

with the three elements that will turn out to be decisive for the rest of his work: weight, volume and gravity. A key work from this series is 'One Ton Prop' (House of Cards) (1969), a work consisting of four lead plates leaning against each other in a delicately balanced square formation. [p. 41] If a single element is moved only a fraction, the entire sculpture will tumble... like a house of cards.

Serra calls on the help of his friends to install the sculpture. It takes a sort of choreography to balance the heavy elements exactly. Not everyone is an instant fan of 'Prop Pieces'. When his then wife artist Nancy Graves (1939–1995) sees the works for the first time, she doesn't think much of them. She doesn't consider them to be art and, furthermore, thinks they are terribly dangerous. A year later they are divorced.

In 1969, Serra was given the opportunity to work on a larger scale. For six weeks he has an entire steel mill at his disposal to use as his studio. With the help of enormous magnetic cranes he constructs sculptures that are several metres high and doomed to collapse under their own weight, sometimes only keeping their balance just long enough to be photographed. It is this



Richard Serra, One Ton Prop (House of Cards) (1969)

'Skullcracker Series' (1969), named after the shipyard, that decides Serra to switch to using steel.

"If you had told me I would start using steel, I would not have believed you. It was a traditional material for sculptors; think of Picasso [Pablo Picasso, 1881-1973], González [Julio González, 1876-1942] or Calder [Alexander Calder, 1898-1976]. But they relied too much on painting and, in fact, produced three-dimensional paintings. Because of my working experience in the steel mills, I was familiar with the constructive qualities of steel. I was the first artist to use it because of these properties."

TO DRAW IS TO THINK

Serra always carries a sketchbook. From the moment he is able to hold a pencil, drawing is his key to a new reality. It is a way of expressing himself, to research shapes and to sharpen his views. To Serra drawing is inherent to sculpting. Although, as mentioned above, he never produces sculptures on the basis of drawings, the reverse does happen. He can never predict beforehand what his sculptures will look like life-size and in the context of their surroundings. After their completion, he therefore draws them from different angles to fully analyse and understand them. *"To draw is to think"*, he says apropos of this.

Serra's sketches offer us an insight into his mental processes. But to him they are explicitly no more than visual notes and not autonomous artworks. Some drawings by Serra, however, are artworks in their own right. These are not illustrations of his sculptures and are created as a result of a completely independent, autonomous process. But there is still a connection between them and the sculptures. Once you know they were created by the same artist, you will recognize a certain focus on weight and strong fields of tension. Volume, balance and surface area are important elements of both his sculptures and his drawings.

The drawings are produced using a black *paintstick*, a greasy kind of wax pastel containing a lot of pigment. This is why the works tend towards

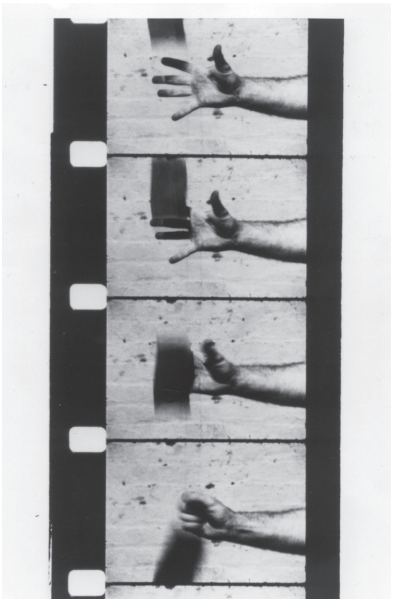
Richard Serra at work (1981)

paintings rather than drawings. They are large sheets with areas that are completely coloured jet black. There is no symbolism or figuration, this art is strictly abstract.

The same goes for Serra's graphic work, which is an extension of his drawings. Here black areas and geometric shapes are also dominant. A good example of this is 'Reversal I – X' (2015), a series of relief prints using paintstick that, together with 'Open Ended', is included in the collection of Museum Voorlinden. [p. 45] It is a series of ten vertically-oriented images. Each image is divided into darker and lighter areas in a different way. It is a quest for equilibrium that is just as much present here as it is in the steel sculptures.

EXPERIMENTS WITH VIDEO

At the end of the 1960s, Serra also experimented with video, a completely new medium in those days. He is inspired by the movies of artists such as Andy Warhol (1928-1987), Yvonne Rainer (1934) and Bruce Conner

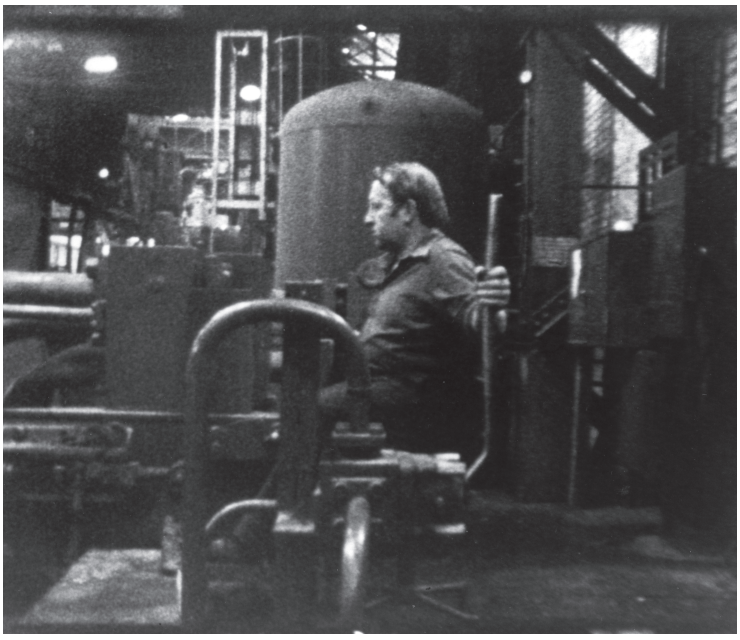


Still from 'Hand Catching Lead' (1968)

(1933–2008). For a series of short videos, he films his own hands while carrying out physical actions that are closely related to the 'Verb List'. The best-known video in this series is 'Hand Catching Lead' (1968), which shows Serra's own wide-open hand trying to capture pieces of lead that are falling into the screen from above. [p. 44] The hand, dirty from working, often misses, but sometimes does succeed in grabbing a piece of lead. Although Serra avoids symbolism, the artist's hand evokes strong associations, for instance with (physical) labour. The artist also once said that he never works through thought, but through actions. That physical approach to the production of art is beautifully captured in this video.

The film 'Steelmill/Stahlwerk', made by Serra in 1979 with his wife, art historian Clara Weyergraf (1957), resembles a documentary. [p. 46] It follows the industrial production process of Serra's sculptures in a German steel mill.

Richard Serra, Reversal I – X (2015)



Still from 'Steelmill / Stahlwerk' (1979)

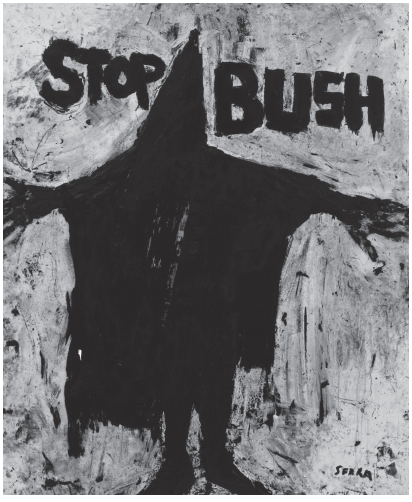
The interviews with the workers imply that they don't feel any connection to the end product of their labour, whether it concerns an artwork or a nuclear reactor. The division of labour has led to alienation. Serra, who worked in the steel mills himself as a young man, now records the tough physical conditions under which his sculptures are produced. The heat and the noise the workers have to endure are extreme. By filming the process, 'Steelmill/Stahlwerk' critically researches the social role of the artist vis-à-vis the working class.

A CRY FROM THE HEART: STOP BUSH

In 2004, Serra produced a drawing that was so different from his other work in so many ways that it cannot be left unmentioned. While the artist usually stays well away from figuration, emotion and politics, this work actually combines all these elements. The drawing 'STOP BUSH' shows a figure with

its arms spread out and a bag over its head. [p. 47] It is an image we recognize from the photographs taken at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq where American soldiers tortured suspects. The drawing was widely circulated, for instance on posters and as a mural. A more direct protest against George W. Bush, the then American president, and his war in Iraq, is hard to imagine.

On 11 September 2001, Serra had experienced the attacks on the World Trade Center from up close. From the windows of his studio he could see the airplanes flying into the Twin Towers. Although the public had already caught a glimpse of his political views in 'Steelmill/Stahlwerk' and in interviews around the time of the 'Tilted Arc' controversy, Serra has always managed to steer clear of them in his artworks. 'STOP BUSH' is an exception to this rule.



Richard Serra, STOP BUSH (2004)

CHAPTER 4.

“I’m like a vacuum cleaner.”

THE WORK OF RICHARD SERRA IN A BROADER CONTEXT

Serra belongs to a group of American artists that took abstract expressionism, the dominant style of the generation before them, as their point of departure. From the 1960s, young artists started to react, each in their own way, to the work of Mark Rothko (1903-1970), Willem De Kooning (1904-1997) and Jackson Pollock (1912-1956). Pollock had become world-famous for placing his canvasses on the floor and splashing paint all over them. The way in which he opened up the art of painting was a great inspiration to the young Serra. *"It challenged me to break the rules in the most fundamental way possible."*

Serra's work is not easily categorized. It overlaps with different art movements that came up in the 1960s as a reaction to abstract expressionism. Take minimalism for example, a movement characterized by rigid, geometric shapes and a cold, detached visual language. It strongly contrasts with abstract expressionism, which is subjective and emotional. Minimalist sculptors such as Donald Judd (1928-1994) and Carl Andre (1935) place their sculptures directly on the floor instead of on a pedestal. And this is crucially important to Serra because it brings the artwork into the *behaviour space* of the spectator, resulting in a closer involvement in the artwork, much in the same way as in 'Las Meninas'. However, minimalism is still not the right term to classify Serra's work as the production process, which is so enormously important to him, is forced to take a back seat in this movement.

Other contemporaries of Serra want to liberate art from the constraints of the institutionalized *white cube*, the seemingly objective white museum gallery. They head out into nature to put up artworks in remote places: *land*

art. One of the best-known examples is the artwork 'Spiral Jetty' (1970), a coiled work built on the shores of a salt lake in the state of Utah in the United States. Serra and Robert Smithson (1938-1973), its creator, are close friends. [p. 52] Serra even lends a hand during the construction of the work. He also regularly puts up works in natural surroundings himself. However, this is only a small part of his art practice and the term land art can therefore certainly not be applied to his entire body of work.

Conceptual art, a movement where artists want to focus attention on the way in which artworks have been reduced to objects of trade, is related to *land art*. In the art they produce, the idea is more important than the physical object. This also partly applies to Serra who considers the process of creating the sculpture and the experience of the spectator on seeing it more important than the work itself. Serra's sculptures are anything but easy to sell, but it would not be correct to label them conceptual artworks as the objects themselves are too important.

Most art historians would classify Serra's work as *process art*, although this is more an attitude than an art historical movement. Pollock's *drip paintings*, that emphasize the process of creation and not the end result, are a good example of this attitude. In Serra's early work with regards to the 'Verb List' this attitude appears in its most literal sense, but it is also a decisive factor in the rest of his work.

SERRA'S INFLUENCES

"I'm like a vacuum cleaner. I'm influenced by everything I've ever come across", said Serra during an interview in 2013. He is inspired by almost anything that crosses his path, a quality that he developed long before he devoured the art historical library at Yale one summer. Serra and his work are also influenced by earlier experiences like the launching of an oil tanker, walks along the coast and jobs at the steel mills. At Yale Serra is instructed by world-famous artists, such as Robert Rauschenberg, Philip Guston, Frank Stella, Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967) and Josef Albers. Each and every one of them is important for the young artist's artistic development.

The descriptions of Serra's circle of friends in New York in the 1970s seem to have been taken from the pages of an art historical handbook. Many of his artworks have titles referring to these friendships: 'Spin Out: For Bob Smithson' (1972-1973), [p. 26-27] 'Running Arcs (For John Cage)' (1992), 'Grief and Reason (For Walter)' (2013). A fruitful cross-fertilization of ideas takes place that goes beyond the visual arts. Poets, musicians, painters and dancers all work together on projects transcending individual disciplines.

This synergy influences Serra's way of thinking and working. For two years he lives with Joan Jonas (1936), who arouses his interest in performance art. Together they produce a number of videos. He keeps in regular contact with the experimental dancer Yvonne Rainer (1934) who is partly responsible for his awareness of the physical relationship between the spectator and the artwork; an awareness that becomes increasingly important in his work. Musicians such as John Cage (1912-1992) and Philip Glass, with whom he maintains close friendships, arouse Serra's interest in the dimension of time in art. It is another element that becomes more and more important in his work in the sense that the observer has to take the necessary time to really experience the sculpture.

And what are the other influences Serra absorbs? Stonehenge, bridges from the age of the Industrial Revolution, a church by Francesco Borromini (1599-1667), the pyramids, obelisks, cliffs shaped by nature and montage experiments from Soviet avant-garde movies to name but a few. But also Japanese Zen gardens that, while he is walking in them, make him realize they are not about the individual objects, such as a tree or a single stone, but about the field of mutual tension they create together. Only by moving through them, this experience in time and space is revealed. A sculpture should also be experienced in this way, according to Serra.

RICHARD SERRA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

On the top floor of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, directly underneath the iconic glass dome, a man is busy using a large gas burner. He is completely dressed in black and a mask covers his face. While a punk

Robert Smithson and Richard Serra at Spiral Jetty (1970)

rock concert is taking place on a floor below and a man in a salmon-pink garment and an enormous headdress climbs up over the railings, a steel spade disappears into a barrel filled with Vaseline. The man in black heats the greasy material in a bucket. As soon as it becomes liquid, he spoons it out with a large ladle, resolutely walks across the now extremely slippery museum floor and energetically splashes the molten Vaseline into the angles between the wall and the floor.

This surrealistic scene features in the third part of 'The Cremaster Cycle' (1994–2002), a series of five mysterious videos by the artist Matthew Barney (1967). The man behind the mask is Richard Serra. Barney was only a baby when Serra first performed his 'Splash Pieces'. A lot happened in the time between these two works. Serra evolved from a budding artist into an established name and acquired an important place in the art history of the second half of the twentieth century. With his enthusiasm for experimentation, he and his contemporaries paved the way for a new generation of artists such as

Barney. It is their task to further build on those achievements and, in true style, subsequently to break away again.

BEING CONSCIOUS OF REALITY

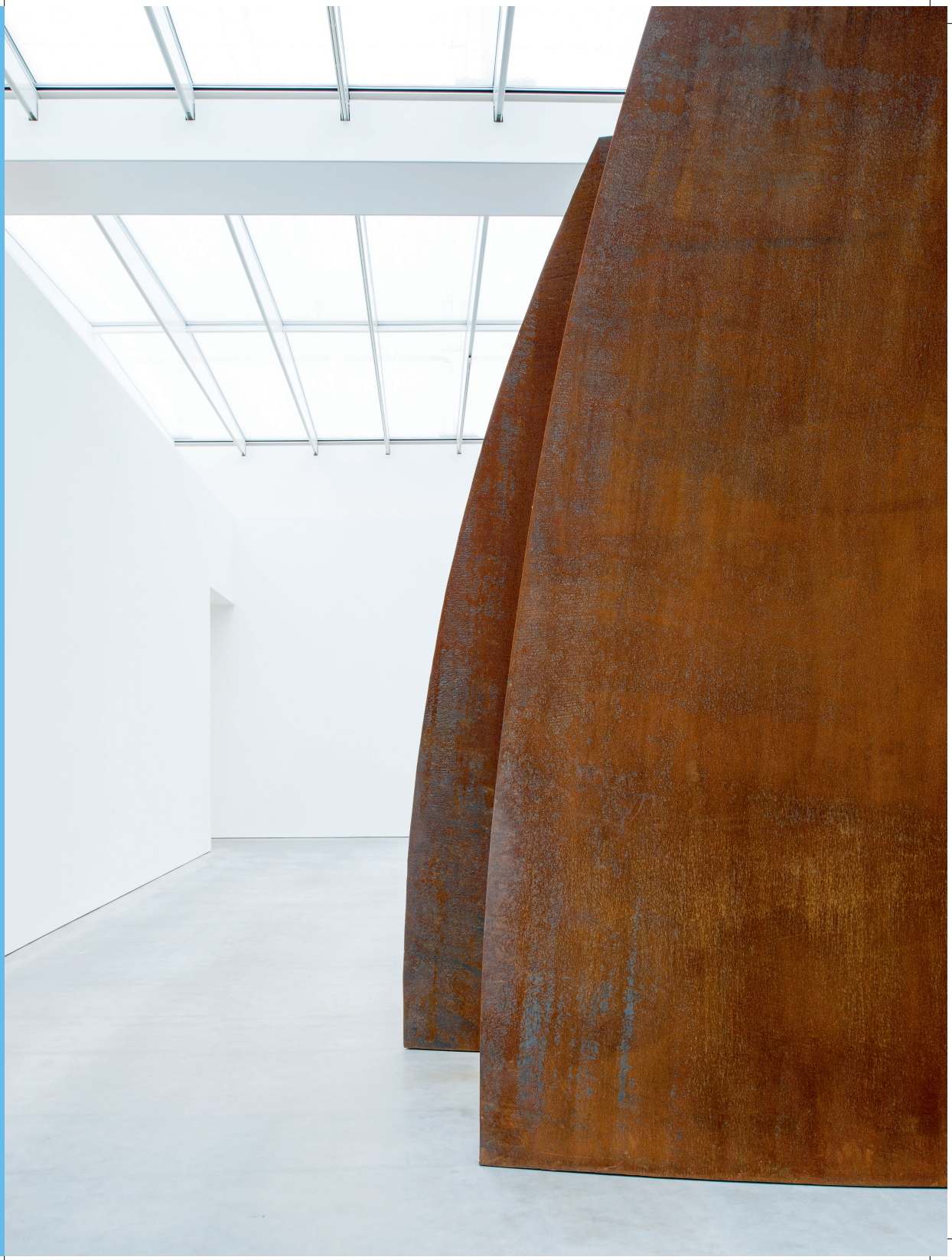
The world has changed a lot since Serra first started out as an artist. The age of heavy industry and physical labour, very much associated with his use of materials, is by now all but over in the West. Shipyards and steel mills closed down and were relocated to continents other than Europe and North America. But Serra's work has stood the test of time. It has taken on the character of a monument, a memory of a bygone age of weight. It is a characteristic of only the very best art that its significance is not limited in time and will remain relevant over the years in new ways.

Purposely useless: an important condition for creating art, according to Serra. *"I don't think my work will change the world. But it might change the way in which people see the world. That may be my purpose: to change someone's way of seeing and thinking."*

And this brings us to the here and now. The world is increasingly dominated by the internet and virtual realities. More and more aspects of daily life are digitized. Artists also respond to this by producing a growing number of artworks suitable for online consumption. But now physical artworks can also be experienced more and more frequently in the digital world, for instance by means of high-resolution photographs, social media, interactive videos and virtual reality.

You may well be able to produce an interesting film by slowly moving a camera between the walls of 'Open Ended'. You might also take photographs that zoom in on even the tiniest chip of rust or install a webcam for a live registration of the changing incidence of light. But in the end, Serra's work still requires the spectator to relate to it physically. It is impossible to experience the feeling of being surrounded by hundreds of tons of steel through a screen. 'Open Ended' offers a strong awareness of the surrounding reality. It is an experience to be cherished.

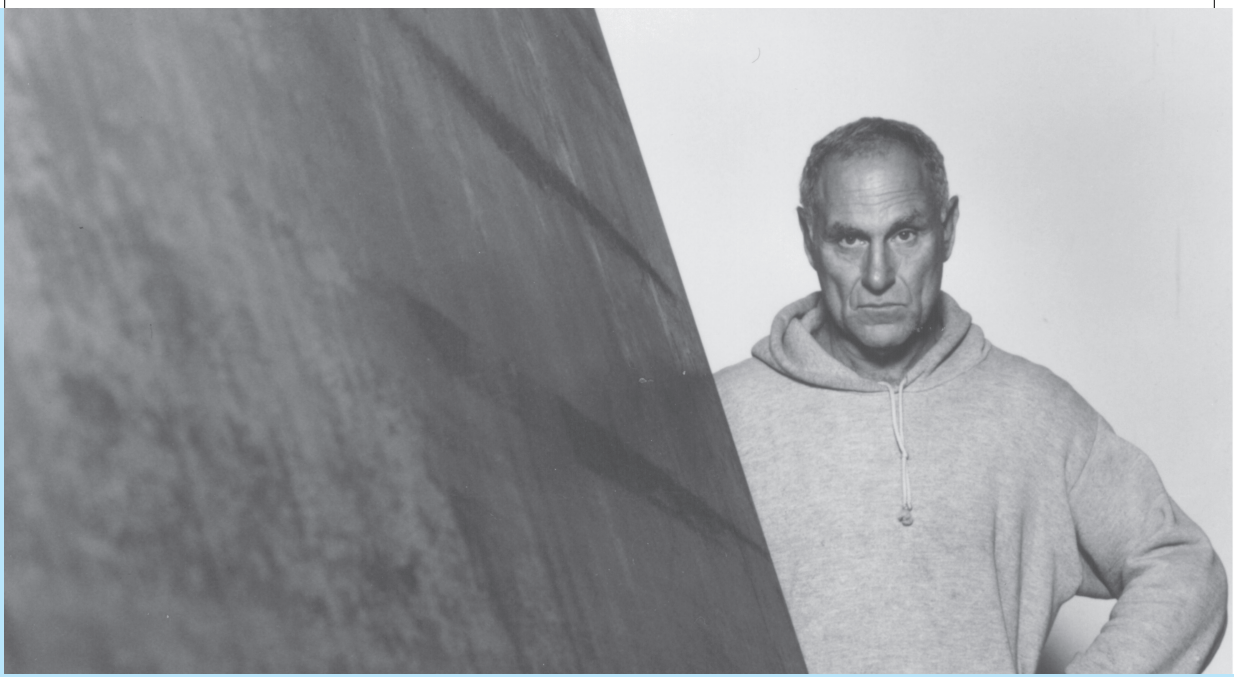
“Weight is a value for me, not that it is any more compelling than lightness, but I simply know more about weight than lightness and therefore I have more to say about it.”



Biography

Richard Anthony Serra was born on 2 November 1938 in San Francisco, California. He studied English Literature at the University of California in Berkeley and Santa Barbara where he received his bachelor's degree in 1961. Directly after that, Serra went to Yale University School of Art and Architecture in New Haven, Connecticut to major in painting, and obtained both a bachelor's and a master's degree in Fine Arts in 1964. During his period at Yale, Serra worked with the artist Josef Albers on his book 'The Interaction of Color' (1963), on the subject of colour theory. By obtaining scholarships and taking part in exchange projects, Serra was able to travel to France and Italy, subsequently settling in New York in 1966.

The first galleries showing Serra's work were Galleria La Salita, Rome (1966), Galerie Ricke in Cologne (1968) and the Leo Castelli Warehouse in New York (1969). In 1970, his first solo museum exhibition, at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, California, followed. Since that time Serra's work has been featured in more than a hundred and sixty solo exhibitions and over six hundred group shows. He has taken part in several editions



of documenta in Kassel (1972, 1977, 1982 and 1987) and the Venice Biennale (1980, 1984, 2001 and 2013).

Serra's work is also well represented in museum collections. Almost all well-known American museums of modern art, as well as the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, have his work in their collections. In 2005, the work 'The Matter of Time' was permanently installed at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. The eight circular sculptures together make up the largest artwork ever made of Cor-Ten steel in the world.

For his contribution to contemporary art, Serra has received many distinctions and awards. In 2015 he was appointed Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur.

Many of Serra's works are made in France and Germany, but he remains based in the United States. With his wife, art historian Clara Weyergraf (1957), Serra lives both in New York and Nova Scotia, Canada. Together they are working on several films, documentaries and publications.

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and walking
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IMAGE CREDITS

cover, p. 2–3, p. 6–7, p. 8–9, p. 10–11, p. 14–15, p. 17, p. 18–19, p. 55:
Richard Serra, Open Ended (2007–2008)
weatherproof corten steel
380.0 x 1822.0 x 739.0 cm
© Richard Serra
Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar
photography: Antoine van Kaam

p. 26–27:
Richard Serra, Spin Out (For Robert Smithson) (1972–1973)
corten steel, 3 plates
250.0 x 1200.0 x 0.40 cm each
© Richard Serra
Kröller-Muller Museum, Otterlo
courtesy: Gagosian Gallery
photography: unknown

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Richard Serra, Blind Spot (2002–2003)
weatherproof corten steel
400.0 x 1650.0 x 990.0 cm
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Richard Serra, Open Ended in the artist's warehouse (2007–2008)
weatherproof corten steel
380.0 x 1822.0 x 739.0 cm
© Richard Serra
courtesy: Gagosian Gallery
photography: Lorenz Kienzle

p. 30:
Richard Serra, Strike: To Roberta and Rudy (1969–71)
hot-rolled steel
246.4 x 731.5 x 3.8 cm
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Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
[Panza Collection]
courtesy: Gagosian Gallery
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Richard Serra, Delineator (1974)
hot-rolled steel, 2 plates
250.0 x 3100.0 x 79.0 cm each
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The Museum of Modern Art, New York
[Gift of Edward R. Broida and Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Morton J. Hornick]
courtesy: Gagosian Gallery
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p. 32:
Richard Serra, East-West/West-East (2015)
weatherproof corten steel, 4 pieces
2 of 1470.0 cm height
2 of 1670.0 cm height
Brouq Nature Reserve, Qatar
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Richard Serra, The Matter of Time, 2005
weatherproof corten steel, installation of 7 sculptures
varying dimensions
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Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao
courtesy: Guggenheim Museum
photography: unknown

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Richard Serra, Tilted Arc (1981)
steel
365.7 x 3657.6 x 30.45 cm
Federal Plaza New York [destroyed]
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courtesy: Gagosian Gallery
photography: Susan Swider

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Richard Serra, Belts (1957–1966)
rubber, neon
182.9 cm x 760.0 x 50.8 cm
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Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
[Panza Collection]
courtesy: Gagosian Gallery
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Richard Serra, Verb List (1967)
graphite on paper, 2 sheets
25.4 x 20.3 cm each
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The Museum of Modern Art, New York

[Gift of the artist in honor of Wynn Kramarsky]
courtesy: Gagosian Gallery
photography: Rob McKeever

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Richard Serra, To Lift (1967)
vulcanized rubber
91.4 x 200.0 x 152.4 cm
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p. 40:
Richard Serra installing 'Measurements of Time', Kunsthalle Hamburg (1996)
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photography: Olaf Pascheit

p. 41:
Richard Serra, One Ton Prop (House of Cards) (1986)
lead antimony, 4 plates
122.0 x 122.0 x 2.5 cm each
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p. 41:
Richard Serra and others installing 'One Ton Prop (House of Cards)' (1986)
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photography: unknown

p. 44:
Richard Serra at work (1981)
courtesy: Gagosian Gallery
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p. 44:
Richard Serra, Hand Catching Lead (1968) [filmstill]
16 mm, b/w
3 min 30 sec
© Richard Serra
courtesy: Gagosian Gallery

p. 45:
Richard Serra, Reversal I-X (2105)
a series of 10 relief prints with hand-applied paintstick and silica on 2 sheets of handmade paper
106.7 x 38.1 cm each
© Richard Serra and Gemini G.E.L
Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar
courtesy: Alan Cristea Gallery, London
photography: unknown

p.46:
Richard Serra, Steelmill/Stahlwerk (1979) [filmstill]
16mm, b/w, sound
29 min
© Richard Serra
courtesy: Gagosian Gallery

p. 47:
Richard Serra, Stop Bush (2004)
lithocrayon on mylar
150.5 x 121.9 cm
© Richard Serra
courtesy: Gagosian Gallery
photography: unknown

p. 52:
Robert Smithson and Richard Serra at Spiral Jetty (1970)
courtesy: Gagosian Gallery
photography: Gianfranco Gorgoni

p. 57:
Portrait of Richard Serra (1989)
courtesy: Gagosian Gallery
photography: Nancy Lee Katz

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Gordon Matta-Clark
Peter Moore
Olaf Pascheit
Dirk Reinartz
Susan Swider

Design
Maikel van Berkel

Printing
Drukkerij Aeroprint, Ouderkerk aan de Amstel

Thanks
Gagosian Gallery
Richard Serra

ISBN 978-90-825686-9-1

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