Richard Serra was a Minimalist for only a few short seasons in the late 1960s, yet literalism—that Minimalist virtue—found a permanent place in his esthetic. So it was literally fitting that three of Serra’s very large sculptures were recently installed on the second floor of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, for this space was designed with the sheer weight of his work in mind. The need for a Serra-proof floor was pointed out by the late Kirk Varnedoe, director of painting and sculpture at the Modern, who began working on a Serra retrospective well before ground was broken for the museum’s new building. When Varnedoe died, in 2003, chief curator at large Kynaston McShine took over the project. “Richard Serra Sculpture: Forty Years,” which closed in September, was an impressive exhibition, all the more so because it overcame a large and obvious problem.

Like Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer and others of his generation, Serra fled the confines of the traditional gallery for sprawling landscapes; he also sought unused urban and industrial spaces. How can a museum present a credible selection of work by an artist whose achievement, in part, was to defy the limits set by art-world interiors? If the museum is the Modern, it can install two of the artist’s immense works from the 1990s in its sculpture garden. In that decade, Serra brought his outdoor esthetic indoors, encouraged, no doubt, by the hangarlike interiors made available to him at the Dia Center for the Arts, the Gagosian Gallery, the Guggenheim Bilbao and elsewhere—including, more recently, the second floor of MOMA, where he installed three works from 2006, any one of which would have caused a building code violation in the absence of specially reinforced pillars and beams. On the sixth floor, McShine and his co-curator, Dia’s Lynne Cooke, installed 21 smaller works from the 1960s and ’70s. They dealt with site-specific works in the only possible way: by illustrating them in the show’s catalogue. With its 326 plates, their Serra catalogue is now the standard reference to the sudden leaps, reprises and parallel tracks of the artist’s career.

The catalogue begins with a conversation between McShine and the artist. A virtuoso of the artist’s statement, Serra tends to overwhelm his questioners. McShine, however, more than holds his own, by dint of his vast knowledge of the modernist tradition and his unflagging sympathy for the artist. So far as I know, he is alone in having guided Serra to the recollection that, as a student in Italy in 1966, he liked Mantegna better than Piero della Francesca.

Piero, of course, was recruited to the ranks of modernist heroes by those early 20th-century formalists who championed Cézanne. Moreover, his tendency to sacrifice depth to flatness made him a favorite of the Minimalists. Serra could see his virtues but, as he tells McShine, “in terms of geometry and weight I admired Mantegna more.”

Serra saw the virtues of Minimalism right off the bat. Or rather, he saw the impersonal facture and geometric clarity of Minimalism as esthetically virtuous. Yet it troubled him that the Minimalist object is “predicated on a gestalt reading,” by which he means that the boxes of Donald Judd and Robert Morris encourage you to stand at a distance and see them all at once, as unified shapes.

That way of seeing is more suitable to the weightless imagery of painting, according to Serra, and so he was never entirely satisfied with the loosely Minimalist “gestalt” of Chunk (1967) and Remnant (1966–67)—two of the earliest works on view at MOMA. The latter is a roughly rectangular slab of vulcanized rubber. Mounted on the wall, it invites you to think of it as a painting and then snarls at you if you do. Remnant is sheer, undorned matter; and the only justification for my anthropomorphizing is to be found in its vertical orientation and approximately
As if by the force of sheer willful intention, the space between the two parts of _Delineator_ seems to have been strenuously torqued.

human dimensions. Six and a half feet high, it is over 3 feet wide—not only tall but also broad-shouldered. _Chunk_ is even more figurative. A thick piece of rubber just over 4 feet high, it slouches against the gallery wall like an incommunicative adolescent.

It is easy enough to ignore these figurative implications. Serra looked for ways to expunge them. More important, he asked himself how he could make the heaviness of his sculptural materials not just perceptible but aggressively self-evident. This is a literalist’s question. The answer was the prop piece: a configuration of metal parts held in place by their own weight. In the best-known variation, a lead pole holds a lead rectangle flat to the wall. Unwelded, supported only by one another, the four large slabs of _One Ton Prop (House of Cards)_ (1969, form an irregular, boxlike enclosure independent of the surrounding walls. With these works, Serra gave the materiality of his sculptures a new and still vivid immediacy. At the Modern, the prop pieces appeared behind Lucite fences. Not that they posed any real danger. Yet you could imagine an insurance company insisting that members of the public not get too close. When these precisely balanced arrays of heavy metal first were first shown in the ‘60s, the audience was free to sidle right up to them. In fact, the prop pieces dared you to approach them. Those who accepted the dare didn’t do so much think about their obdurate weightiness as feel it, with a certain queasiness.

During the late 1960s, Serra acknowledged the moment’s most advanced sculpture (Minimalism), defined one of its traits as backward (the pictorial effect of Minimalism’s “gestalt”) and, following the prop pieces, found a way to eliminate that backwardness and move ahead. Serra believes in esthetic progress, for he is an unreconstructed avant-gardist, on the model of Mondrian (who claimed to have led painting into its true future, where its essential nature became visible) or Ad Reinhardt (who had arrived at his “ultimate,” all-black paintings by the time Serra became his student, at the Yale School of Art). Avant-gardists like these advance by clearly demarcated stages, each one attained by a ruthless judgment on the immediate past. When he saw that his prop pieces permitted “a gestalt reading”—like Minimalist boxes—Serra judged it unnecessary to make any more of them.

To defeat the gestalt, he made _Strike: To Roberta and Rudy_ (1969-70). This work has only one part: a slab of hot-rolled steel, 24 feet long and just over 8 feet high. Wedged into a corner of whatever gallery happens to contain it, the slab is entirely exposed and yet part of it always hides from view. As Serra noted recently, “You had to walk around the room to see the piece. You could not separate the perception of the piece from its site or, in a more general sense, from the continuum of space.” For Documenta 5, in 1972, he multiplied the number of steel slabs by four—one for each corner of the gallery. Titled _Circuit_, this work requires diligent viewers to trace a lengthy path if they want to see the entire work. Making the circuit of _Circuit_, you have ample opportunity to experience the unity of piece and site. The gestalt, which can always be detached from the site where it appears, was defeated. Yet there was still a problem.

Because they conform to the familiar geometry of gallery space, _Circuit_ and other corner-prop pieces can be seen—or understood—as inflections of an easily grasped form: the interior of a six-sided box. Shades of Minimalism. In defeating the pictorial gestalt, these works became conceptual gestalts: forms we can conceive in full from a partial view, just as we can deduce, from across a room, that a cube is cubical. To defeat the conceptual gestalt, Serra had to escape the Euclidean confines of the art world. He had to find his way into the land-
scape. By the time Circuit appeared at Documenta 5, he had already done so.

On a trip to Japan in 1970, Serra visited the Zen gardens in Kyoto. This, as he told McShine, “was a big eye-opener.” For the gardens “are arranged so that you can experience them only in relation to movement. You easily understand the Japanese concept of perceiving space and time, solid and void, as one. The idea of moving through space, of your body, of something unfolding over time, became the foundation for my thinking about landscape.” The image of Serra in the Zen gardens would have acquired the aura of myth by now if his sensibility were not so stubbornly down to earth. He and Robert Smithson were close friends, yet none of Smithson’s speculative fervor—his wild musing about landscape—rubbed off on Serra. Nor is there any trace of James Turrell’s nature-mysticism in Serra’s grappling with wide open spaces. For him, landscape is the realm of width and length, contour and grade—matters that are familiar, even mundane, but, for Serra in 1970, the crucial stuff of sculpture’s future.

When the artist returned from Japan to the United States, collector Joseph Pulitzer commissioned him to build a piece on the grounds of his summer house near St. Louis. The site was a large field with a gentle, irregular slope. There was no chance that Serra would use the field as a frame or foil for a discrete sculptural form—an outdoor “gestalt.” Yet he couldn’t see, at first, what other options he had. Knowing only that he wanted to apply the lessons learned in Kyoto, he studied a topographical map of the site. He walked it, repeatedly, until he arrived at a solution: he would implant large, rectangular sheets of steel in the ground. There are three of them, all on the periphery of the field, and their shapes shift as you walk. “They either foreshorten or rise or expand or sit up like triangles,” says Serra, and thus “they define your relation to the space as cuts within the field.” Rather than offer themselves as objects of static contemplation, the steel plates of Pulitzer Piece: Stepped Elevation (1970-71) prompt you to be minutely aware of being in a particular place. This was a new task for sculpture.

Yet nothing is absolutely new. Even the dullest effigy of a military hero on a pedestal can “activate the space”—to resurrect a bit of early ’70s art talk. Moreover, the sculptors of the Italian Baroque occasionally placed their figures on the floor in postures that send vectors of energy through real space. Bernini’s David (1623-24) watches an imaginary Goliath so intently that his gaze might be called axial, for it divides the space of the Galleria Borghese, in Rome, with a clarity around which spectators instinctively orient themselves. Still, the main point of the piece is David’s heroism, not the effect of his form on ordinary space. At the very least, Serra changed the emphasis. Thinking back on his early landscape pieces, he noted that “the basic content changed from a discrete object in the round to walking in time, which has to do with anticipation and reflection.”
After 1970, Serra's art gives us things to do rather than things to see. Or, if that puts it too starkly, the things he gives us to see are calculated to put us in motion, to send us on trajectories of our own invention, the better to understand what it is to acquaint oneself with a specific place. Narrowly construed, his sculpture is art for the sake of a lively, always shifting awareness of art. Taking a wider view, you might see Serra as a producer of art for the sake of awareness of the larger world with which the sites of his scultpures are continuous. Pulitzer Piece generated variations, the most ambitious of which is Shift (1970-72), an arrangement of six concrete slabs—or walls—in a vast meadow on the outskirts of King City, Ontario.

During the 1970s, Serra often returned to the gallery, armed with all that he had discovered during his escape from its right-angled certainties. Delineator (1974-75) is an indoor piece consisting of two rectangular sheets of hot-rolled steel, each 26 feet long and 10 feet wide. One lies on the floor. The other is attached to the ceiling. It's as if the first slab had cloned itself and floated upward until the ceiling stopped it. As it rose, the clone turned through 90 degrees, coming to rest in a position crosswise to the original. This shift gives the space between the two sheets of metal a powerful charge of something difficult to name. It isn't danger. The audience has no good reason to believe that the upper sheet will come crashing down. Perhaps it is the force of sheer, willful intention. Between the two parts of Delineator, gallery space seems to have been strenuously torqued.

During this period, Serra's metal pieces were usually just one or two inches thick. By the mid-1970s, however, some were as thick as they were wide—in short, boxlike. With these works, the artist ran the risk of backsliding into the realm of the Minimalist gestalt. On occasion, he may have succumbed to it. Usually, though, his massive, boxy chunks of steel, indoors or out, operate as the slabs of the Pulitzer Piece do, drawing members of the audience into a particular space, and through it, along their own paths. Or that is their effect on those who are willing to collaborate with Serra. Mary have been unwilling. The history of his clashes with unfriendly publics, in the United States and Europe, supplies the art world with several of its more memorable cautionary tales.

Of these, the best known is the saga of Tilted Arc, a large piece installed in 1981 at Federal Plaza in downtown Manhattan and driven away eight years later by the manipulations of some bureaucrats in the U.S. General Services Administration, which had commissioned it in the first place. Aided and abetted by a few like-minded judges, the anti-Tilted Arc functionaries were pushing a faux-populist agenda. Serra responded with rage and an argument for insulating art from the judgments of an unqualified audience—and for the sanctity of contracts made with one's government.

Though the artist claims to have mellowed over the years, he used to keep a litany of similar outrages at the tip of his tongue. "In Germany right now," he said in 1980,

my sculpture is being used by the neo-fascists to suppress art. In St. Louis, my piece was dismissed by the architects because it did not satisfy the needs of their urban design. In Washington, D.C., the work was defeated because it did not attend to the notion of elaborating on the democratic ideologies that this country thinks are necessary in terms of the decorative function of art."

If, as Serra says, any use (other than as art) of his "non-utilitarian, non-functional" work is a "misuse," then it is bound to be condemned by those who expect art—especially public art—to perform some clear and widely intelligible service. Because Serra always resisted that expectation, it is remarkable that he has become, in the past decade or so, the popular favorite of a large and largely uninhibited public.

He laid the groundwork for this popularity in 1980, with a move that must have looked, in his eyes, like a strictly formal innovation: the planar slabs acquired curves, as in Waxing Arches (1980), which consisted of two 40-foot-long walls of steel curving through the interior of the
Nothing in our experience of architecture or landscape prepares us for the odd, slowly pulsing volumes defined by Intersection II.

complexities of Intersection II (1992-93), one of the works that stood in the sculpture garden at the Modern during the Serra exhibition. Its four elements are pieces of steel just over 13 feet high and just under 52 feet long. Each is relieved of its planarity by a complex curve derived from the shape of a cone. Standing next to one another, these walls create three corridors that all but the most cautious visitors find irresistibly inviting—and strangely new. Nothing in our experience of architecture or landscape prepares us for the odd, slowly pulsing spaces defined by this sculpture. Nor does surprise entirely vanish with repeated traversals of the work, for its complexities are like those of a Jackson Pollock drip painting; they cannot be memorized.

Corridors became enclosures with the Torqued Ellipses. The first of these appeared in 1996, after Serra managed to “actualize” what he calls his “misreading” of Francesco Borromini’s church of San Carlo in Rome. Walking along a side aisle of the church, he thought he saw the central space turn as it rose toward the ceiling. Errorneous but helpful, this impression gave Serra the idea of curving a surface into a wide enclosure with an elliptical base, and then twisting the top of the form through 90 degrees, to put the upper ellipse at right angles to the lower one.9 Entering the piece through a narrow opening, you find yourself in a space as invigoratingly strange as the corridors of the artist’s earlier works, but far roomier. Though Serra is no imitator of nature, Torqued Torus Inversion (2006) and Sequence (2006)—both of which were on display at the Modern—have the feel of spacious grottoes. Some viewers have told me that these shifting interiors induce uneasiness. This makes sense. As the artist said last spring, “There’s no axis mundi. There’s no vertical to relate your step to. So everything’s leaning one way or the other, and you have to right yourself. And you’re not sure what righting means.”10

Band (2006), one of the three most recent sculptures in the MOMA show, is a series of four enclosures shaped by the sweeping serpentine curves of a strip of steel assembled from several very large sections. A predecessor of this work, quasi-permanently installed at the Bilbao Guggenheim, is titled Snake (1994-97). Works of this labyrinthine kind are the most daunting in Serra’s oeuvre. The artist himself was baffled by one of them, Blind Spot (2002-03). “I was walking back and forth and setting up plates,” he says, “and I got confused directionally. I got lost in my own piece... I mean, you can make models, but it has nothing to do with how you walk through space, and it has nothing to do with time and with intention and memory. And I got lost.”11 Like memory and intention, time and walking through space belong to ordinary life. So does getting lost. What do these familiar things have to do with art? Or art with them?

The artist has been asking variants of this question since the late 1960s, when his transition from Minimalism to the prop pieces was taking him through the heavily populated regions of process art and anti-form. In those days, Carl Andre, Barry Le Va, Robert Morris and others made scatter pieces. So did Serra. Bill Bollinger, Alan Saret and Keith Sonnier made wiry pieces from found and derelect materials. So did Serra, and like Sonnier he sometimes threw neon into the mix. Looking for a way beyond the static clarities of Minimalism, these artists prized disorder and movement. Some, including Serra, made films. Others tried video or made their own bodies their medium. Process art became performance art. And Earth art.

These disparate developments share little but a tendency to shift the focus of art-making from object to action—from the thing made to the process of making it. In the spirit of the times, Serra drew up a Verb List.
A kind of representation lurks in Serra's sculpture. Orienting yourself literally, you orient yourself figuratively as well.

(1967-68). On two sheets of paper, he wrote 108 infinitives, the first of which is "to roll." The last, "to continue," suggests that the list, like action itself, is potentially endless, though of course a list must stop somewhere. Having compiled this one, Serra set about enacting the "verbs in the studio with rubber and lead in relation to time and place. The residues of these activities didn't always qualify as art... I worked through a lot of verbs that remained activities and nothing more." Among the exceptions is To Lift (1967), an early work included in the Modern's retrospective. Having placed a sheet of vulcanized rubber on the floor, the artist gripped space for each to experience along different lines and in different ways." Like the pragmatists, Serra is an heir to Romanticism's doctrines about the primacy of individual experience. Moreover, he is an artist in the heroic mode, prone to grandiosity.

If, as Serra says, his later works provide "no axis mundi," they challenge us to orient ourselves in complex situations. Or, as Rachman puts it, they leave it up to us to figure out "how to occupy... uncentered or limitless spaces in a light and vital manner." Doing so, we can alight to the specificity of particular places. We become more aware of ourselves as perceiving, ambulatory, interpreting creatures. These effects are all to the good, and yet a question remains: why couldn't a vivid experience of a landscape produce as much self-awareness as our experience of a Serra sculpture does? As it happens, certain landscapes have had that effect on me, not to mention certain citiescapes, architectural interiors and so on. But if all manner of things can produce this effect, its production is not enough to qualify Serra's works as art. Something else must do the job.

Here's my proposal: a kind of representation lurks in Serra's sculpture, and this is why it counts as art. I am not saying that he makes the sort of figurative allusions one sees in the sculpture of David Smith and even in the "pure" forms of Anthony Caro. If their art is abstract, Serra's is more so. Yet no artist has ever attained an absolute degree of abstraction, and I see the structures of his large works as representing something. Before I try to say what I mean by that, let me give an example of representational structure.

The language of T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land (1922) abounds with images of dissolution, collapse and centrifugal stress. However, the most powerful images of crisis are in the starzicz architecture of the poem, which dispenses with smooth transitions and nearly every other means of establishing formal coherence. A unified poetic structure represents a world shaped by an ideal of harmony. A discontinuous structure represents the opposite: a world indifferent to the ideal or, possibly, the ruin of the ideal itself. In any case, structure has a representational meaning, however elusive. Barnett Newman's vertical stripes—or "zips"—have no settled relations with the fields where they appear. Thus these works look unresolved, deliberately so. This structural effect is open to any number of interpretations. I see it as representing Newman's insistence on the absolute independence of the self, for he gives the "zips," his figurative forms, only the most contingent contact with their environments. Serra's structures posit a much closer relationship between selves and their surroundings.

Entering one of his later works, intuiting the absence of an overall axis, you find an axis of your own—you "right yourself," in the artist's phrase. Or, in Rachman's words, you figure out "how to occupy" this "destabilizing, disorienting, unnerving" place. True enough, yet I think that there is more to it—that Serra's forms are already shaped by a sense of what it would be for people to have the experience of righting themselves in an unnerving situation. So it looks as if the interior of the work has anticipated you, has tilted and curved in proleptic response to the weight of your gaze and the thrust of your itinerary. The structure of, say, Band represents the effect of experiential pressure even before you bring it to bear. Then you enter and exert that pressure. Orienting yourself literally, you orient yourself figuratively as well—not in real space but in imagination, as you come to see or to sense that the structure of the piece represents a large interior as it might be shaped by its inhabitant's effort of self-orientation. Band gives you an image of this imaginary process—even as it invites you to go through the process yourself, in real time.

These representational effects provide Serra's work with something that landscapes and architectural interiors don't have: a fictional aspect. I know it sounds odd to say that, from a certain angle, we can see these

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huge metal objects as fictions. Yet no work of art is solely a display of facts; glitter for the literalist mill. Nor is it merely an occasion for a learning experience of the sort that even Rachman seems to suggest it provides. Serra, too, stops short with the thought that, if you really get into his art, "it might be a catalyst for thought. To see is to think and to think is to see. If you can change someone's way of seeing, you might change their way of thinking." If old assumptions can be persuaded to loosen their grip, new possibilities for thought—indeed, for feeling and being—might well appear. That would be a praiseworthy result, and yet it doesn't qualify Serra's works as works of art.

Art is not a matter of favorable outcomes, especially not ones that could be produced by things or places that no one would see as artworks—some patch of terrain, for example, that happens to give you a new way of seeing and thinking. Art is a matter of meanings. So is much else, and therefore I ought to add that the meanings of art have the distinctive quality of being indeterminate, impossible to pin down. As I have argued elsewhere [see A.I.A., Nov. '96], it is the fictive nature of certain works that gives them this open-endedness and thereby qualifies them as art. Serra's works meet that standard. There is no end to the readings you can give these sculptures if you see them not literally but figuratively: as monumental representations of an environment shaped by—or to—its inhabitant. Your reading will change at every step, and acquire, with reflection, implications ranging in mood from pragmatist, even Darwinian, to utopian.

It looks to me as if every artist proposes, however obliquely, a utopian ideal. And some utopianism is upfront. Mondrian wanted us to see in his geometries the "equilibriated relationships" that "in dialectically anything is just." By a path he left unmarked, his paintings were to guide us from balanced form to social perfection. Reinhardt's "ultimate paintings" take us from the perception of practically invisible nuance to a place perfected by contemplative detachment. If Reinhardt's ideal is quiescent, Serra's is the opposite, for his art proposes a utopia where your perceptual activity, the more robust the better, puts you in perfect accord with your surroundings.

On the second floor of the Museum of Modern Art, there was often a crowd milling in and out of Band, Sequence and Torqued Torus Inversion. Alone with these works, one might become a latter-day exponent of what John Keats called "the egotistical sublime," that exalted state of being in which the world is (or feels like) a function of the self. Among one's illustrious predecessors would be the solitary personage overlooking the abyss in Caspar David Friedrich's Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog (1818). Another is the minuscule figure of the artist in The Oxbow (1836) by Thomas Cole. Federic Church led the sublime into the 1850s, with images of Niagara Falls and the vastness of the Andes. Albert Bierstadt and others produced flashy variations in the decades just after the Civil War. Invisible for nearly a century, the sublime reappeared in the paintings of Barnett Newman, whose "zips" imply a figure at the scale of—but apart from—boundless space. One thinks, too, of Pollock or of his surrogate self immersed in the fields he opened up with his gesture. Every utopia posits a perfectly adapted inhabitant. Indefatigably alert to nuances of the immediate environment, Serra's ideal inhabitant is more like Pollock's than Newman's.

Though Serra's sublime has its origins in the Romantic era, he sustains it with his devotion to a modernist ideal: autonomy. Elaborating the claim that his art is "nonutilitarian, nonfunctional," he says he has no interest "in sculpture that conventionalizes metaphors of content"—that exploits the clichés of corporate or patriotic iconography. From the beginning, his art has advanced an implicit argument against the conventions and readymade meanings of our ordinary com-

munal lives. Social space is the realm of the consumerist banalities Serra attacked in his video Television Delivers People (1973). Rachman notes that, early on, Serra was attracted to Ralph Waldo Emerson and other American Transcendentalists. So it is fitting that the artist's utopia is founded on—and shaped by—the Emersonian virtue of self-reliance. Alive to the grand, sometimes dizzying fictions of Serra's later work, you are your own best company.

5. Ibid., p. 29.
8. Ibid., p. 100.
9. McShine, pp. 33-34.
11. Ibid.
12. McShine, p. 27.
13. Ibid.
15. Ibid., p. 67.
16. Ibid., p. 71.
17. Ibid., p. 69.
18. Ibid., pp. 64, 69.
19. Serra seems to point to this anticipatory impulse when he says, "You try to invent something that you think is commensurate with the experience you want to have." McShine, p. 34.
20. Ibid., p. 36.

*Richard Serra Sculpture: Forty Years* was on view at New York's Museum of Modern Art [June 3-Sept. 10], accompanied by a catalogue co-edited by the exhibition's curators, Kynaston McShine and Lynne Cooke, with additional essays by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and John Rachman.

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