

Rob MARKS

*The Sublime and the Beautiful
in Richard Serra's The Matter of Time*

FIGURE 1—Overlooking Richard Serra's *The Matter of Time*, 1997–2005 at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Spain. Photo by Saul Rosenfield, with permission of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao



FLOATING ABOVE RICHARD SERRA'S *THE MATTER OF TIME* IS neither where I want to be nor where Serra wants me to be (fig. 1). Serra says, "If you reduce sculpture to the flat plane of the photograph ... you're denying the temporal experience of the work...you're denying the real content of the work."¹ In this overhead exercise, however, there is a lesson about the experience of Serra's work.

At the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in Spain, the mezzanine is the only vantage point from which to view the whole of *The Matter of Time* (1997–2005), whose eight sculptures cram themselves into a gallery three hundred and fifty feet long by seventy-five feet wide. It is also the place at which the museum's no-photography rule seems least strictly enforced. Looking up from the gallery floor below—where photography is more carefully monitored—I see flash after flash. If the purpose of a no-photography policy is to protect the rights to reproduction, lax enforcement here suggests that the resulting images are not deemed depictions of the artwork at all. From above, the enormous steel plates seem flimsy and their placement haphazard. This impression obscures both the care that Serra takes in precisely laying out the sculptures and the pathways among them, and the works' immensity, weight, and impact, which is apparent only at eye level and only through movement.

The view from the mezzanine is as if looking through the back end of a telescope: distorted by distance, distant from the immediacy

of sensation. At best, a photograph of *The Matter of Time* is a guide, a memento. Although the photographs I include in this essay may be seductive as images, they can serve neither as illustrations nor as evidence for my assertions, only as virtual markers of the experience of walking through the installation.²

The spatial-temporal nature of Serra's sculptures is one reason that theories of embodied experience such as the philosophy of phenomenology—particularly the ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the phenomenologically resonant Japanese concept of “space-time”—have become primary tools for interpreting his artwork. Yet the phenomenological approach stops short of fully exploring the world of *The Matter of Time*.³ An application of Immanuel Kant's twin aesthetic moments—the beautiful and the sublime feeling—better engages the aesthetic experience that materializes within the walls of the spatial-temporal-corporeal container that Serra so carefully prepares and phenomenology so ably describes.

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VISUALIZE THIS: A VOID. I COULD ADD “TO MANIFEST VOID” TO Serra's famous *Verb List Compilation: Actions to Relate to Oneself* (1967–68), a work that the artist's commentators see as a Rosetta stone for understanding the language of Serra's art. Serra says of his large sculptural works, “I start from the void and form the object from this emptiness. In this way, the material becomes the skin of the void.”⁴ To manifest void, then, would be in good company on the *Verb List*: “to roll; to crease; to fold... to bundle; to heap; to gather...”⁵

Serra's large curvilinear pieces begin by engaging a preexisting space. Within that space, what first “appears” to Serra is a void, which instead of being an absence is the particular presence with which he collaborates. Serra's forms are the surfaces of a void that has revealed

itself to him, a shape invisible until he has sheathed its presence with a skin of steel. Because Serra is successful in collaborating with rather than reconceiving the void, his work is a recognition of space more than it is a fabrication of shape, and the nature of my interaction with the sculpture is structured more by my movement through, about, and with it than by my observation of it.

Now visualize this: a paradox. Imagine a judgment that I “know” to be “true”—it feels as if it must be everyone's experience, must be a universal feeling—but it is, in fact, a judgment that I can prove to be native, to be “true,” only for myself. Worse, this proof is no logical proof at all, but only my subjective assertion of universal—that is, shared—agreement. This state, which feels as if it were a knowing-for-certain what I certainly cannot know—that my feeling must also be yours—is the paradox at the heart of the aesthetic experience as Immanuel Kant conceives of it within his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Kant says that the judgments of the “beautiful” and the “sublime feeling,” his two aesthetic judgments, are, by nature, “singular [that is, subjective], and yet judgments that profess to be universally valid.”⁶ Kant, in fact, asserts that “this claim to universal validity so essentially belongs to a judgment by which we declare something beautiful [and he is also talking about the sublime] that without thinking this it would never occur to anyone to use this expression.”⁷ The expression, itself, Kant suggests, carries the implication of universality within it.

Kant imposes other conditions on the judgments of the sublime feeling and the beautiful. In particular, a judgment must be “disinterested.” It may not be evoked by the capacity of the object to gratify the senses or achieve some practical end, even if, in the moment *after* the judgment, the object that I judge beautiful or sublime might become useful in such ways.⁸ Kant goes so far as to say that the judg-

ment exhibits “subjective purposiveness,” that is, my sense of the unity of the object—its fundamental meaning—is independent of its correspondence with a defined “end.”

The eight steel plates of *Between the Torus and the Sphere* (2003–5; fig. 2), one of the larger pieces in *The Matter of Time*, stand about six feet apart. Each plate is a section of the surface either of a sphere or of the area that faces the hole of a torus, a donut-shaped form. All you need to know about geometry, however, is that a spheric section is familiar and predictable, while a torus section counters intuition. Its vertical arc curves one way, while its horizontal arc curves the other. The sculpture manifests as a form that seems to be fighting itself. As I follow a roller-coaster ride through seven transits among the plates, my psyche and body are thrown from concavity to convexity and back again.

My experience is complicated further by shadow and light (the effect of both consistent artificial light and varying skylight), by the color and texture of the steel (the effect of uneven and unpredictable weathering that leaves the plates colored shades of orange, brown, gray, silver, and black, and with textures varying from smooth to grainy), by movement (my own and that of others wobbling through the sculpture), and by sound (the echoes of my own steps and breathing and the steps and voices of others both near and distant).

As I approach *Between the Torus and the Sphere*, the first of its eight steel plates rises up fourteen feet, extends fifty feet across, and arcs toward me, thus torquing not only the material of the steel but also the material of my body. Time and space invite me to engage in a relationship with the piece and in an activity, a dance. I can view a Serra sculpture from the outside—be a “viewer” or a “spectator”—and I do and I am. I am, however, unavoidably engaged as a “participant” once I step forward into the artwork’s orbit. Here, as in any

FIGURE 2—Richard Serra, *The Matter of Time—Between the Torus and the Sphere*, 2003–5; weatherproof steel, four torus and four spherical sections, each section: 168 x 600 in.; overall: 168 x 600 x 647 $\frac{3}{8}$ in.; plate thickness: 2 in.; Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. Photo by Saul Rosenfield, with permission of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao





FIGURE 3—Entering Richard Serra's *Between the Torus and the Sphere*, 2003–5. Photo by Saul Rosenfield, with permission of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

dance and especially in “contact improvisation” dance, I operate at the mercy of this partner’s movement as much I initiate my own.

I introduce the contact improvisation dance relationship not as a metaphor for the Serra experience nor as a supplement for the Kantian aesthetic judgment, but as a more capable, a more visceral, expression of what it means to be among Serra’s sculptures. While not all dance leads to powerlessness, contact improvisation dance—a form that seeks to manifest movement out of the process of one partner’s body “listening” to the other partner’s body¹⁰—almost invariably depends upon the wresting of agency from each dancer by the activity of the dance. According to dancer and theoretician Cynthia Novack, “Contact improvisation defines the self as the responsive body and also the responsive body listening to another responsive body, the two spontaneously creating a third force that directs the dance.”¹¹ The experience is of the movement, itself, as leader, followed by two actors. Within a Serra sculpture, I feel “manipulated” by the sculpture. The sculpture has no agency—it remains inanimate—yet it has wrested agency from me. Agency now resides in the place between us, as it does between contact improvisation partners, manifesting as Novack’s “third force.”¹²

I enter *Between the Torus and the Sphere* (fig. 3) as I might enter a cave or a slot canyon—warily—which is how I might enter into a

dance with a partner I do not know.¹³ Could it be that this weathering steel plate, whose entrance reveals the contradiction of its shape, is centered enough to stand? Beneath an immense overhang, I feel only the threat that the vast power of gravity will assert itself and topple the plate upon me. This is the first inkling of the sublime feeling, which is not, as it is sometimes characterized, a more intense instance of beauty. It is a sense that the power, the might, hidden within these plates does not reveal the secret of its stability, instead presenting only a paradoxical, an impossible, an unstable stability. It is a something whose form, while undeniable, does not fully reveal itself and, therefore, is as good as formless.

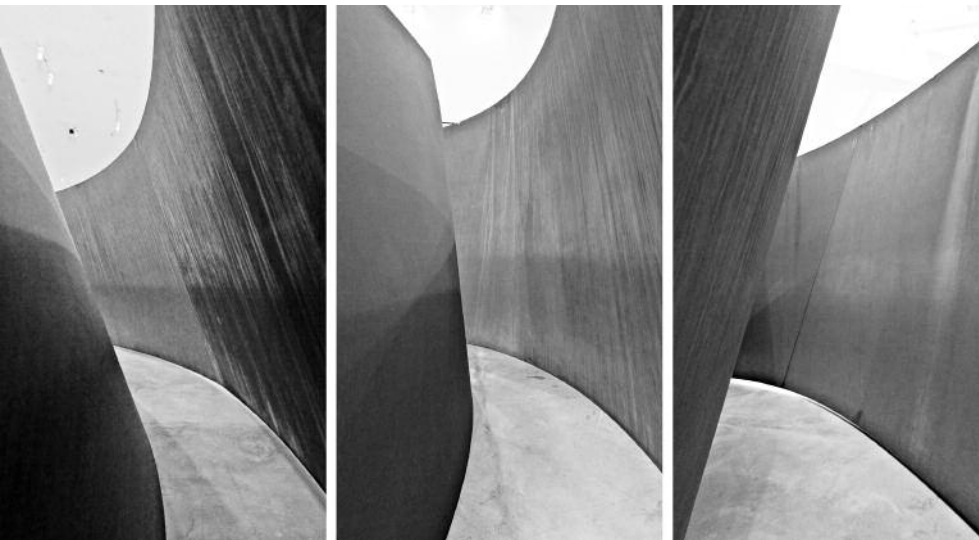
Kant defines the sublime feeling as the aesthetic pleasure that arises in the presence of something—the immense mountain, the mighty ocean—that appears “infinite” in its size or power, an object, Kant says, that stumps my ability to represent its limits in my mind. Kant creates an extensive vocabulary, and his terms diverge from twenty-first-century usage. The words “Imagination,” “Understanding,” and “Reason,” which I capitalize when I invoke Kant’s meanings, describe three active faculties of the mind; and “Intuition,” which Kant considers an essentially “passive” faculty, describes the perceptive activity of the senses. In Kantian terms, the first movement of the sublime feeling—its initial displeasure—arises when my Imagination—the capacity we all have to represent sensory perceptions in our minds, in this way giving mental form to these sensations—attempts, but fails, to formulate the experience of the formlessness of an object’s oversized magnitude or might. In response, my Understanding, the capacity to apply a concept to a representation, has no form to work with. It cannot help the mind name, and thus comprehend, this boundless experience. Neither infinitely large nor infinitely powerful, *Between the Torus and the Sphere* nonetheless appears boundless.

It has the uncanny ability, not simply in its size, but also in its unpredictability, to obscure the endpoint of its magnitude, and not in its literal power, but in its invocation of the immense power of gravity, to obscure the endpoint of its might.¹⁴

I find no comfort in the darkness, in the shadows overlapping shadows, in the unruly passages, walls swerving and evading each other. Their behavior cannot be counted upon, a habit that repeats itself throughout the sculptures that compose *The Matter of Time* and defies my mind’s capacity to comprehend each sculpture’s form (fig. 4) I overhear a ten-year-old girl emerging from one piece saying, “You never know what’s coming next!” Not-knowing, a property of all the Serra sculptures, also evokes the infinite. “Knowing” something not only limits it to a finite definition of what it is, but also eliminates the infinite definitions of what it is not. Just as Serra’s sculptures obscure the endpoint of their magnitude and power, they also obscure the endpoint of my capacity to know.

In his statement about the installation, Serra emphasizes the temporal nature of his work.¹⁵ Indeed, here in the sculpture, time seems to lose its obvious coordinates. It is in the works’ spatial distortion, however, that I find the greatest disorientation, contradicting even my assumptions about the horizontality of the concrete floor. Remember, Kant’s sublime feeling is first a displeasure in the shadow of my Imagination’s incapacity to represent a form that is adequate to my experience. The displeasure of the sublime in Serra’s work, then, manifests as a towering passage that, hiding its origin and the logic of its trajectory and its mass, stumps my mind’s capacity to represent it as a unified object. Further, the passage guides my movement, not like a gentle hand on my shoulder conducting me through a crowd, but like an unfathomable force wresting my agency from me—like a cop pushing a suspect down a long dark hallway toward uncertain de-

FIGURE 4—An unruly passage in Richard Serra's *The Matter of Time—Torqued Spiral (Right Left)*, 2003–4; weatherproof steel, 168 x 555⁵/₁₆ x 515¹/₂ in.; plate thickness: 2 in.; Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. Photo by Saul Rosenfield, with permission of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao



tention. Yet the ten-year-old girl ended her comment, “You never know what’s coming next!” not with “Ugh!” but with “Cool!” Where is the pleasure in this entirely disturbing moment?

Kant says I must, in reality, be safe in order to experience the feeling of danger that is fundamental to the sublime. If I were literally endangered, for instance witnessing an erupting volcano, I would flee or become paralyzed with terror. In any case, I would no longer be able to sustain the “disinterested” distance required by Kant’s aesthetic experience.

There is something ungraspable about this undangerous danger. It is not the caged tiger, for, unless I distrust the cage, I do not feel endangered by the big cat. The sublime feeling’s danger is always about an object far less contained, far less comprehensible, than that. It is about a form made formless by my inability to experience its boundaries. Safety arises not out of my comprehension of this object, but out of a comprehension of myself, out of my recognition of my capacity to reason. Kant’s Reason is simply thinking’s capacity, through inference, to conceive “Ideas.” Kant defines Ideas as thoughts unconditioned by, and independent of, the experience the world gives to the mind: deductions from within the mind. It is this Reason that leads both to a sense of safety and to pleasure, the second part of the sublime feeling’s twofold movement. If the sublime’s displeasure arises from my Imagination’s incapacity to represent in my mind *The Matter of Time*’s various infinities, the sublime’s pleasure arises from my Reason’s capacity to conceive of the idea of “infinity.”¹⁶ In this way, I find a boundary that contains *The Matter of Time* within myself.

In his catalogue essay for the 2007 Serra retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, philosopher John Rajchman calls Serra’s latest work “gigantic steel exercises in thinking, great rusting machines in which the coordinates of natural or habitual perception

are scrambled and undone...oblig[ing] us to discover a new sort of visceral intelligence.”¹⁷ This may also be what Mark C. Taylor means when he describes Serra’s first *Torqued Ellipses*, installed in 1997 at the Dia Center for the Arts, as “thought in experience, which transforms the experience of thought.”¹⁸ It appears that Kant locates aesthetic judgment only in the mind, calling the beautiful dynamic “the mind in calm contemplation” and the sublime dynamic “a movement of the mind.”¹⁹ Rajchman and Taylor, however, require Kantians to consider the thinking capacity of what we call the “body,” to consider the ways in which understanding limited to an articulable verbal process might, in overlooking the body’s nonverbal “visceral intelligence,” fail to fully explain how human beings conceive and assign concepts. Having made this adjustment, it is easy enough to view the progression from a disorientation of thinking to its successful reorientation—Rajchman’s “reinvention of thinking itself”²⁰—as a movement not away from but toward Kant.

At play in *The Matter of Time* is the body that knows something in a way that is distant from the cognitive functioning of the mind. This is a thinking that seems foreign, because it feels as if it were happening in a place different from the place in which I, as a person socialized in a Euroamerican-influenced society, am used to assigning the activity of thought: the behind-the-eyes place in which consciousness seems to reside. The habit of assigning thinking to this head space fails to recognize as “knowledge” that which arises from and remains in the body, that which does not immediately get translated into words, that which, in fact, may be untranslatable. I feel disoriented both in the dance and within the sculpture, because my mind has not relinquished enough control—its verbalized narrative of experience—to share in the storytelling process with another part of the consciousness. My mind is disoriented—but my “thinking body” is not.

In the sublime experience, Kant hones in, not on an accord, but on a discord, a dissensus among the faculties. Understanding abandons the field, leaving only Reason to marshal its creative capacity: the ability to infer, within the body, an articulateness, indeed an eloquence. This is what rescues Imagination’s stuttering attempt to represent the formless. In the face of the absolute, Reason realizes “pleasure” in its capacity to explain what Imagination cannot comprehend.²¹ But Reason also realizes pleasure—and this is what I would add to Kant—in its discovery that the mind can apply the body not simply to sense, but also to “know.” In this way, the sublime experience may lead the participant to re-cognize the body and the self. No longer is the aesthetic judgment a movement purely of the mind. It is, nonetheless, still Kantian; it is still, in this instance, of the sublime. That the body participates in the mind’s capacity to attain an Idea of Reason does not contradict the dynamic Kant ascribes to the sublime. Instead, the thinking body suggests only that the dynamic’s players—Imagination, Understanding, and Reason—play upon a field that expands beyond what Kant conceived.

Indeed, Taylor implies that the mind’s resistance to move in Serra’s work is the result of the body’s stasis, and that the antidote is the body’s engagement. Serra’s breakthrough is to create sculptures that seem inaccessible without movement.²² They force the sedentary viewer—or perhaps aid the viewer, as does a crutch—into active participation and toward the immediacy of sensation that defines the space between participant and sculpture. We may be hobbled indeed without Serra’s sculptures, or works like his, which move us into a relationship of attention, patience, and wonder.

This is the dynamic that unfolds as I walk through a Serra sculpture and find myself torqued one way and bent another. If my dance partner is the “great rusting machine in which the coordinates of natural

FIGURE 5—*Front of Richard Serra's Between the Torus and the Sphere, 2003–5. Photo by Saul Rosenfield, with permission of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao*



or habitual perception are scrambled and undone,” then it is not only my newly capable thinking body that accomplishes the equilibrium. It is also the capacity of my mind to give up control to a cradling “third force.” Instead of being the cop pushing me down the dark hall toward impending doom, it is the parent in whose capacity to carry me safely I have complete confidence. Motion sickness is the result of the mind’s confusion when the body’s movement does not coincide with what visual perception suggests is happening. It would seem, then, that the thinking body that Serra activates learns to know something more true than its sensory apparatus, more true than the phenomenon that Imagination represents and the interpretation that Understanding seeks to impose. In a sense, the sublime feeling evoked by *The Matter of Time* proves the fallacy of the mind-body dichotomy. Neither mind nor body could undertake this journey on its own. Make no mistake about it, it is not Rajchman or Taylor’s re-cognized thinking body alone that accomplishes this feat: it is the Kantian sublime feeling, itself a hybrid of displeasure and pleasure, that inscribes this experience into the psyche.

When I say that *Between the Torus and the Sphere* evokes the sublime feeling in me, I am saying that it confounds the capacities on which I normally rely to engage in both everyday cognition and the aesthetic experience of beauty: Intuition perceives, Imagination represents that perception in the mind, and Understanding applies a concept to that representation. I am saying that this experience cannot be formed into something comprehensible based on existing concepts, that only something else from within me, which is not already in the world, can work with this material. During this process, it is the disorientation of knowledge and selfhood, which will not resolve in stability, that evokes the feeling of danger. What does resolve, instead, is a mind that grasps through its body both an expanded capacity to think and an expanded self—and these Ideas are sublime.

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ONCE AGAIN, I APPROACH *BETWEEN THE TORUS AND THE SPHERE* (fig. 5). But now, instead of dancing with the plate, I experience something else: a moment of pause that seems to interrupt the passage of time and the expanse of space. I become a “viewer,” standing outside the piece, apparently beyond the sculpture’s influence.²³ The play of light reveals a scene similar to the one I see in a Claude Monet water lily painting (fig. 6). Here, in steel, are layerings of shadow and light, color—orange, rust, olive, black, gray—and brushstroke—streaking, striating, etching, smudging (fig. 7).²⁴

It does not matter that the patina on a Serra sculpture results from a collaboration among Serra’s design, the fabricator’s process, the natural and unpredictable weathering of this particular steel alloy, and the conditions of humidity and light within the museum itself. Nor does it matter that Serra asserts, “I wasn’t particularly concerned with what the skin looked like.”²⁵ What matters is that I experience more than space bounded by the steel skin. I experience, bound within the surface of that skin, “images” that initiate the dynamic that leads to Kant’s other aesthetic experience, the declaration, “this is beautiful.” In Kantian terms, I call an object “beautiful” when Imagination, which generates representations of sensory experience, and Understanding, which matches these representations with concepts, engage in an open-ended “free play.” This open-endedness is neither fragmented nor formless: Imagination always represents the object as unified. But Understanding does not define this representation with a particular concept—“spiral” or “steel,” for example. Instead, with every iteration of the free play, the mind affirms that the object is defined only as “beautiful.”

Although Serra’s primary engagement is with the temporal and the spatial, he does not foreclose the possibility of the “pictorial”



FIGURE 6—Claude Monet, *Le Matin, avec Saules Pleureurs* (detail), 1916–26; oil on canvas, three panels, each 78¾ x 167⅞ in.; Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris

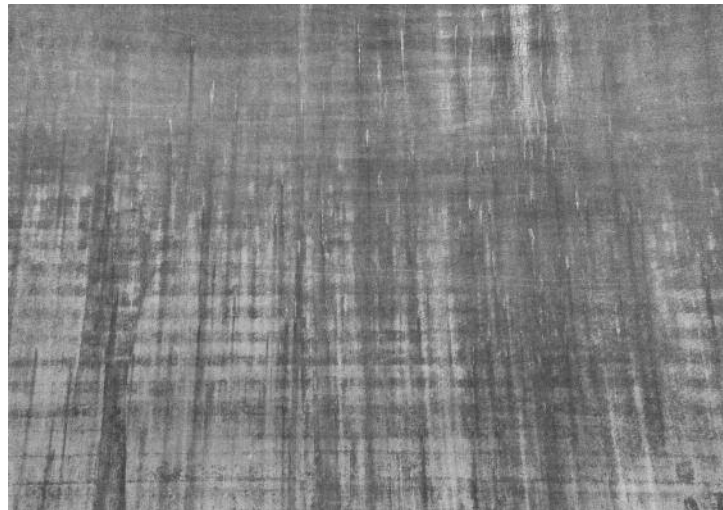


FIGURE 7—Front plate of Richard Serra's *Between the Torus and the Sphere*, 2003–5. Photo by Saul Rosenfield, with permission of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao.

experience unfolding within the temporal construct he fabricates. As he makes clear in his commentary on *The Matter of Time*: “The meaning of this installation does not exist independently from the viewer’s experience; therefore each person will become the subject of the installation. There is an unlimited range of individual experiences.”²⁶ Within this temporal-spatial framework and Serra’s art historical lineage, it does not seem strange that Serra never mentions the beauty of his surfaces.²⁷ Art historian Hal Foster frames this lineage as a shift “from ontological questions (of the essence of the medium) to phenomenological conditions (of a particular body in a particular space as the ground of art). . . . Like his peers [Serra] wanted to defeat pictoriality, especially as it underwrote Gestalt readings of art.”²⁸ In a sense, rusting steel—which Serra chooses for its engineering properties—seems the least obtrusive material, the most likely substance, to disengage the participant from the “ontological questions” of its materiality. Since the steel weathers according to atmospheric conditions and does not stabilize for years, its ontological specificity can, in a sense, never become a focus. Its very impermanence disrupts the capacity of the surface to characterize its nature enough to articulate “the essence of the medium.”

Yet something unfolds on the surface of the Serra sculpture’s skin: a tattoo, a bloom, a tan, a blush, a rash, a coarsening. This some-

thing has an impact on the viewer, and it deserves interpretation, even if the artist and art history might find themselves silent about these effects. It is not a regress to the pre-Minimalist ontological engagement with “medium” that fuels this necessity; it is, in fact, an extension of the phenomenological engagement with spatiality and temporality. In a sense, the very ephemerality of the surface seems to parallel, if not precisely reflect, the relationship that Serra seeks to elicit in *The Matter of Time*’s participants: “The perceptual fragmentation, the multiplicity of views, the discontinuity in the process of viewing contribute to the fact that neither the installation nor any singular form can be reduced to one retainable image.”²⁹ It seems strange, then, that few commentators discuss the nature of these surfaces, and none offers a systematic analysis of how beauty—or even the visual—functions within Serra’s recent sculptural work.³⁰

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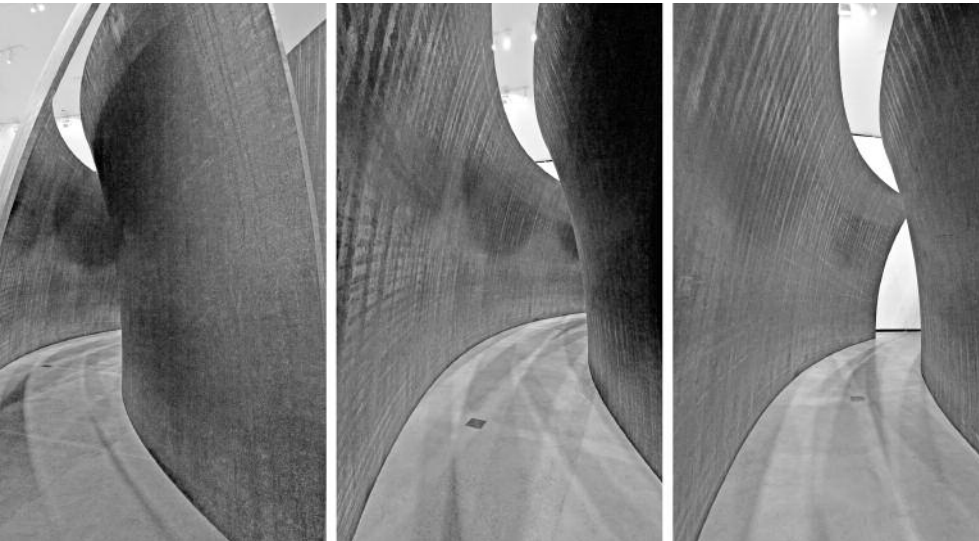
IF SERRA HAS CREATED WORKS THAT ARE INACCESSIBLE TO THE sedentary viewer, the converse is also true. As I walk into and about the sculptures, the forms call upon me to stop. This is not because I am overwhelmed by the sublime nature of the passage, but because I am frozen by the images that appear before me. Stillness is the one word in the matter of the temporal that Serra himself does not seem to mention. For the artist, time flows, even if it is “nonnarrative, discontinuous, fragmented.”³¹ Yet an equally essential quality of time is that it can appear to pause, even stop, and it is during these moments of apparent pause that the aesthetic experience manifests as the beautiful.

I find dozens of instances of this beautiful when I (or they) interrupt my procession (fig. 8). A blaze of gold and orange streaks across *Double Torqued Ellipse* (2003–4). Dark brown stripes punctuate the orange field of *Torqued Spiral (Right Left)* (2003–4). Engulfing

FIGURE 8—Stillness forms image in *Double Torqued Ellipse*, 2003–4; weatherproof steel, outer ellipse, 168 x 449 x 480 in.; inner ellipse, 168 x 244 x 384 in.; plate thickness: 2 in.; *Torqued Spiral (Right Left)*, 2003–4; and *Blind Spot Reversed*, 2003–5; weatherproof steel, three torus and three spherical sections; overall: 157½ x 677⅜ x 355¾ in.; plate thickness: 2 in.; all from *The Matter of Time*, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. Photo by Saul Rosenfield, with permission of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao



FIGURE 9—The “cathedral” evoked by the last two plates of Richard Serra’s *Between the Torus and the Sphere*, 2003–5. Photo by Saul Rosenfield, with permission of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao



walls in *Blind Spot Reversed* (2003–5) striate golden against black. In innumerable places, the sweeping arc of an edge, which evokes the sublime feeling when I experience its precariousness, evokes the beautiful when my mind reduces this part of the sculpture to a single frame.

When I move—engage in an active temporal-spatial relationship—the Serra sculpture disorients, disturbs, confounds not only the form-making capacity of Imagination but also my agency as participant. In the stillness of Kant’s “calm contemplation,”³² however, I no longer experience bulges and hollows, layerings of shadow, and carvings out of space as the activities of a physical force operating upon me. Stillness, even for a moment, allows me to step back and form an image—formulate a “form”—from an experience that during movement had remained formless. Imagination steals agency back from the sculpture. It focuses not on the unbounded space and time that the sculpture’s succession of panels compel me to endure, but on the bounded space and time that unfolds within the panels themselves. In this way—in movement and pause; in the sublime and the beautiful—the elements of *The Matter of Time* have the capacity to lead double lives and double the lives of their participants.

The question I might ask Serra, then, is this: isn’t there a temporal-spatial revelation within the two-dimensional space of the sculptures’ panels? Perhaps by exploring movement within three-dimensional space and over time, Serra inevitably evokes their opposites, their “others”: the two-dimensional and the immobile. The “thinking on your feet”³³ that Serra values is not impeded by this engagement with the surface—perhaps it is even extended; in any case, it cannot be controlled. By focusing on the representation of experience in the mind (and in the thinking body), a Kantian analysis provides the observational and interpretative tools to chart the path that the Serra experience blazes.

The final plates of *Between the Torus and the Sphere* evoke the sense-memory of silent chapels (fig. 9). It is a memory untinged by the religious—or, for the moment, the sublime. It is, instead, simply the sense of being cloistered within the monumental. A graceful apse materializes: the arcs rise to a point, the light flows from the center, the shadows gather at the edges. The walls, instead of barreling me back and forth as they do in other *Torus and Sphere* transits, cradle me.

It is possible to see this “chapel” as a space that a contemporary critic with no interest in Kant might refer to as “sublime” in order to mark a beauty that seems to overflow the word “beautiful.”³⁴ The experience of beauty, however, may sometimes burrow into the deepest part of the self and recover those associations whose meaning is most profoundly resonant for the individual. This experience is not Kant’s sublime: it is not about Reason’s intervention to conceive the formless. Indeed Imagination, far from stuttering, is fluent; and Understanding, far from recognizing its limit, expands to precisely fill the space of the mind. When I reviewed the photographs of this space (fig. 9), they seemed unconvincing. My memory of the experience, however, matched by my contemporaneous notes—“So beautiful I could cry. Meditative.”—recalls to me the “truth,” the impact, of that moment. My eyes welled in this space not because I was overwhelmed by the sublimity of it, unable to contain the experience, but because my Imagination and Understanding—without the aid of Reason—precisely represented that experience as whole and harmonious to myself.

I stand convicted, then, as I might be accused, of suffusing my commentary with subjectivity, yet imputing your universal agreement. There is no way to escape the nature of the aesthetic judgment—and Kant had no desire to escape it. It stands, as I do, upon personal experience. Yet here “we” are, standing in a place that reminds me of every silent light-filled joyous place I have entered,

trying to communicate to you, with the word “beautiful,” that this joyful meditation—evoked by this space whose banding recalls both the facade of Florence’s Church of Santa Maria de Novella and Canyon de Chelly’s etched rocks; whose light recalls both the nave of New York’s Church of Saint John the Divine and Arizona’s Antelope Canyon; whose curves recall Utah’s Little Wild Horse Canyon; and whose resonance carries the two-voiced chanting I overhear emanating from another passage—will be self-evident to you as “beautiful.”

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THE FEELINGS OF THE SUBLIME AND THE BEAUTIFUL NEED KANT no more than the feeling of love needs Shakespeare. Kant’s explication of the aesthetic judgment, however, reveals a layer in Serra’s work that is inaccessible to a solely phenomenological analysis. When I experience a thing in itself as being so completely of itself that the thing becomes the feeling of this completeness—Kant’s “subjective purposiveness”—it is almost as if nothing else is necessary. This, in fact, becomes a feeling of self-completeness that seems to suspend time; a function, perhaps, of the desire that the feeling never end. The desire to share the feeling, however, to realize my universal claim that you, too, ought to agree, takes me outside of my self and forces me to be both subjective and universal at the same time. This seems an impossible space in which to be, were it not the only place where “I” am truly “myself.” Ultimately, judgment is never truly subjective nor truly universal. It is not the culmination of self-expression but rather a negotiation among selves. This process situates the aesthetic judgment firmly in the realm of the interpersonal, returning it to its natural place—one that encompasses the political and the ethical—which is where we need it to be.

Notes

- 1 Yve-Alain Bois, "A Picturesque Stroll around *Clara-Clara*," in Hal Foster with Gordon Hughes, ed. *Richard Serra* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000), 59. Serra made this comment in response to an aerial photograph of Robert Smithson's Utah land installation *Spiral Jetty* (1970). Serra does acknowledge in Foster's catalogue interview with him, "When you look at the pieces from overhead, you can read their plan and better understand their structure." Richard Serra and Hal Foster, "Richard Serra in Conversation with Hal Foster," in Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, *Richard Serra: The Matter of Time*, trans. Alfred Mac Adam (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl Verlag, 2005), 39.
- 2 In June 2010, the Guggenheim Museum gave my partner Saul Rosenfield and me permission to photograph *The Matter of Time*. He and I took more than seven hundred and fifty images and videos of the installation. My instruction was to create images that would attempt to record the experience of the eyes as they were carried and manipulated by feet, legs, torso, shoulders, head through the sculptures. We both violated this injunction, but I have sought not to emphasize the images that flatten the sculptures but rather the images that represent, as much as two-dimensional space can, the experience of three-dimensional space and time that comprise the essence of the works. We were well-supported in my efforts by the Guggenheim staff, in particular, Ana López de Munain and Alba Fatuorle, and I thank them.
- 3 Notable examples of phenomenology-influenced Serra readings are three essays in Foster with Hughes, *Richard Serra*: Rosalind Krauss, "Richard Serra: Sculpture," 99–145; Douglas Crimp, "Redefining Site Specificity," 147–73, and Foster, "Un/making Sculpture," 175–200. See also Mark C. Taylor's "Learning Curves," in Dia Center for the Arts, *Richard Serra: Torqued Ellipses* (New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 1997), 33–59.
- 4 Taylor, 55.
- 5 Richard Serra, "Verb List," *Writings, Interviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 3.
- 6 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 128.
- 7 Kant, 99.
- 8 It is important to note here also that Kant does not mean "uninterested," as in unengaged, when he speaks of "disinterestedness."
- 9 Kant, 107.
- 10 Contact improvisation dance pioneer Nancy Stark Smith informally defines the form as: "an exploration of the movement that's possible when two bodies are in

physical contact, sharing balance... getting to know the physical forces involved: gravity, momentum, inertia, friction." Kristin Horgan, "Teacher's wisdom: Nancy Stark Smith," *Dance Magazine* June 2006, accessed March 14, 2009, <http://www.dancemagazine.com/issues/June-2006/Teachers-Wisdom>.

- 11 Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation in American Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 189. Contact improvisation is a practice that constantly, implicitly and explicitly, addresses power dynamics (including those arising from gender) and creates significant obstacles within the form, itself, to the uneven expression of power. It may be that the empowering of the "third force" is the source of this de-powering of the subjects who might otherwise contest agency. See also Novack, 11.
- 12 Novack, 182–83.
- 13 According to Novack—and her impression is matched by my own experience with the dance form—contact improvisation depends not only on my capacities, but also on similar capacities in my partner. Novack, 151–53.
- 14 It is notable that most of Kant's examples of objects that evoke the sublime feeling—the raging ocean, the hurricane, the towering mountain—while larger or more formless than a Serra sculpture, are not often actually infinite. They only *appear*, and this is the crux of Kant, to be infinitely large or powerful, because we cannot perceive a boundary or limit. As Kant says, "the sublime... is to be found in a formless object insofar as *limitlessness* is represented in it." Kant, 128.
- 15 Richard Serra, "Notes on The Matter of Time," in Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, *Richard Serra: The Matter of Time*, 141.
- 16 Kant, 138.
- 17 John Rajchman, "Serra's Abstract Thinking," in Kynaston McShine and Lynne Cooke, *Richard Serra: Forty Years* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 64.
- 18 Taylor, "Learning Curves," 41.
- 19 Kant, 131.
- 20 Rajchman, 72.
- 21 Kant, 142.
- 22 Yet some do resist or find alternate ways of occupying their attention. I have known people to walk away from the sculptures, not because they found them ugly, but because, I suspect, they did not foresee the embodied experience that might result from a visceral interaction with them.
- 23 I have separated my two "approaches" to *Between the Torus and the Sphere* in this narrative, because this is what happened to me in response to the sculpture. I was first engaged by the plates as manipulating my body, and then, only after I returned, engaged by the "images" within the plates. By narrating this bifurcated interaction,

- I am able to introduce the sublime feeling and the beautiful in a linear way. In many of the other *The Matter of Time* sculptures, and in other parts of *Between the Torus and the Sphere* (and even in my return to this plate), the shift from one engagement to the other was not linear and certainly it was not deliberate (although I can “focus” my attention in a certain way). It was, however, always separate, evoking the sublime feeling in one moment; the beautiful in another; and never both at once.
- 24 While the comparison between Monet and Serra can claim no art historical foundation, it is notable that the pictorial should emerge within Serra’s non-pictorial frame, and emerge as an evanescence that recalls Monet. This implication of the pictorial—in a work that towers over me, torques my body, compels me forward—is an *event*.
- 25 Lynne Cooke and Michael Govan, “Interview with Richard Serra,” Dia Center for the Arts, *Richard Serra: Torqued Ellipses* (New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 1997), 13.
- 26 Serra, “Notes on *The Matter of Time*,” 141.
- 27 In distrusting the reduction of the sculpture to the “flat plane of the photograph,” Serra seeks not to legislate the viewer but to guide his own hand toward creating an object that defies the viewer’s capacity to form a “retainable image.”
- 28 Hal Foster, “Un/making Sculpture,” 177.
- 29 Serra, “Notes on *The Matter of Time*,” 141.
- 30 Several Serra commentators include what amount to parenthetical comments about the silky texture or warm color resulting from weathered steel, for example, Charles Molesworth, “Richard Serra at MoMA: Placing the Surfaces,” *Salmagundi*, no. 157 (winter 2008): 41–42. The essays in the catalogues for the three major installations of Serra’s curvilinear sculptures—Dia (1997), Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (2005), and the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2007)—focus most of their attention on fascinating explorations of the spatial-temporal aspects of the work, and none focuses much, if any, attention on either the pictorial aspect of the work or its beauty.
- 31 Serra, “Notes on *The Matter of Time*,” 141.
- 32 Kant, 131.
- 33 Richard Serra, “Questions, Contradictions, Solutions: Early Work,” in Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, *Richard Serra: The Matter of Time*, 54.
- 34 Although there has been a resurgence of interest in the two aesthetic judgments over the past fifteen years, many contemporary art critics and theorists seem to conceive of the sublime as merely a more profound experience of beauty, and common usage of the terms often conflates the two aesthetic experiences as one under the rubric “beauty.”