

Richard Serra: A Case Study

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A close inspection of [Richard Serra](#)'s sculptural oeuvre, based on consultation with the artist himself, reveals that issues relating to replicas and reproductions have relatively little applicability for his practice.

While Serra's sculpture has ranged widely in form over the past forty years, it can nonetheless be loosely subdivided into four principal groupings, each determined by the materials employed.¹ The first covers a brief, early phase, in which Serra employed live and stuffed animals in habitat groups; it resulted in works that were exhibited in the mid 1960s but are no longer extant. Serra neither includes these in the catalogue raisonné of his sculptural work, nor does he agree to allow these assemblages to be reconstructed.

Identifying his mature work with his relocation to New York City in 1966, Serra considers the earliest significant works in his oeuvre to be the wide-ranging group of sculptures made in various kinds and states of rubber in 1966–7. Among this, the second group of works, several have deteriorated to varying degrees; for example, the two *Trough Pieces*, 1966–7, now in the Ludwig Collection, in Cologne, which were recently restored. Serra accepts the effects of aging and time on such works, allowing the now fragile *Trough Pieces*, for instance, to be exhibited lying on the floor, instead of leaning against the wall as originally shown. In the artist's opinion, only one work in the entire group of rubber pieces, the sculpture entitled *To Lift*, 1967, could conceivably be replicated in the case of loss or extensive damage (but whether as an exhibition copy is doubtful), and this could only occur if a similar sheet of vulcanised rubber could be located. (The reasons underpinning his position become very clear in light of his stance, outlined below, on the question of the restoration of both the group of lead prop pieces and the subsequent steel sculptures.)

The third body of works is comprised of lead pieces executed between 1968 and 1969. Among these, the material used in the plates that comprise the prop pieces in particular frequently suffers from fatigue. Individual elements in these works are consequently replaced as necessary. Today, the replacement sheets usually contain a lead-antimony mix which ensures greater material stability in each element than in those originally employed. When introduced into a sculpture with multiple plates or a lead roll, a new component may be artificially aged so that it conforms in appearance to its siblings. While slightly thicker sheets of lead would enhance the gravitational stability of these works and thus mitigate the kinds of damage that can occur when a piece topples, this is a step that the artist is reluctant to undertake, arguing that issues of equilibrium are at the heart of this series of sculptures. Switching out individual components in any piece from this group does not constitute a case of refabrication: thus, even if all the components in a work were eventually replaced this would not make the resulting sculpture a replica. Similarly, if all the parts of a piece needed to be replaced at the one time, the result would not be considered a reconstruction.

The fourth and last group of Serra's works is comprised of steel sculptures. Steel is employed in two ways: rolled into plates, and as forged material. As with the prop pieces, sculptures composed from sheet steel may be remade in the case of damage, loss or destruction. This occurred, for example, with *Equal-Parallel: Guernica-Bengasi*, 1986. There are, however, a few cases involving early works, notably, *Shift*, 1970, and *Five Elevations*, 1972–4, where Serra would like to have the piece refabricated were the opportunity to arise. With respect to *Shift* this would mean replacing the concrete components with counterparts made from steel. In the case of *Five Elevations* a thicker sheet, one measuring 3.8 cm, would be substituted for the original, 2.5 cm plate. Constrained by budget issues on each occasion, the artist was unable to realise the work in its ideal form. In each of these instances, formal, that is, aesthetic considerations rather than reasons relating to

structure or durability determine the proposed changes. In a few, very rare, cases, a work has been remade with different dimensions in order to accommodate a different set of circumstances. *Circuit*, 1972, is the prime example. First conceived for *Documenta 7*, in 1972, *Circuit* was realised at Kassel in a square gallery, whose walls measured thirty-six feet in length. When planning his retrospective at MoMA in 1987, Serra was unable to accommodate this landmark piece in the museum's spaces and so reworked it, creating a second smaller version calibrated to the dimensions of one of the institution's galleries. (A third variant now exists in Bochum: slightly different in dimension, it was again tailored to the specifics of the room in which it was to be installed.) In the case of *Intersection I* and *II*, which have very similar forms of slightly different dimensions, *#I* was conceived as a site-specific commission for the city of Basle, while *#II*, made for gallery and museum presentation, gained its dimensions from more purely formal considerations. Anomalous though these works are within his oeuvre, none of them constitutes a case of replication or of reconstruction per se.

With respect to Serra's forged sculptures, in the unlikely event of loss (damage is virtually unimaginable) any sculpture could presumably be remade according to the specifications of the original. In short, a replacement with identical dimensions can always be fabricated for any, or all, components of Serra's steel sculptures.

Serra conceives his sculpture by working with models rather than through sketching. The engineering drawings and computer programs that constitute the blueprints from which an individual work is fabricated are not considered art works, and no sculpture ever exists in the form of a diagram or certificate. Fabrication is a requirement: Serra can only know whether a piece succeeds, whether it is resolved, after it has been built to scale. Once a work has been fabricated and accepted into his canon of works, its individual components may be replaced or substituted as needed. Since there is nothing unique about the specific plates first used to construct a work, in themselves they have no aesthetic value. Consequently, if, owing to damage or loss, a work needs to be completely remade, the result is never considered a replica or a reconstruction.

Notes

¹ This classification is mine, not the artist's. There are, in addition, several works no longer extant from these early years, which could, theoretically at least, be reconstructed, such as the large scale *Sawing Device: Base Plate Measure*, 1970, which the artist installed at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1970. Serra currently expresses no interest in remaking this piece, however, arguing that a related work, *Cutting Device: Base Plate Measure*, 1969, addresses the same issues more successfully.

Tate Papers Autumn 2007 © Lynne Cooke

This paper was written as a short discussion document for the Inherent Vice: The Replica and its Implications in Modern Sculpture Workshop, held at Tate Modern, 18–19 October 2007, and supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Other papers produced for this workshop can be found in [issue no.8](#) of Tate Papers.