



ART Sculpture (and Nerves) of Steel



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

Workers placing a steel plate in MoMA's second floor gallery. Each plate needs to fit snugly with those it will be touching.

By RANDY KENNEDY Published: May 20, 2007

RICHARD SERRA tells a story from his youth, one that begins to take on the contours of a Greek hero-and-mentor myth.

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It was the late 1960s, and Mr. Serra was in Jasper Johns's studio, preparing to make a splashed-lead piece: red-hot metal flung forcefully and artfully at the wall and floor. Mr. Johns, who had commissioned the piece, wanted to open the skylight to let out the lead fumes. He got a ladder, climbed it, opened the skylight, descended, put away the ladder, sat down and gulped a shot of whiskey. Then he took up a brush and very

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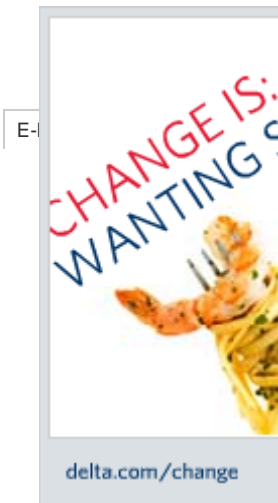
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Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times
Richard Serra overseeing the installation.

deliberately made a mark on one of his paintings in progress.

“I asked him, ‘Did you like doing that?’ ” Mr. Serra recalled.

“And he said, ‘Which part?’ ”

“And I thought, ‘Ooh.’ ”

This anecdote about artistic ritual, related in the catalog for Mr. Serra’s monumental 40-year sculpture retrospective opening June 3 at the Museum of Modern Art, may help explain why Mr. Serra, suffering from a nasty fever and sore throat, could be found early one April morning in a hangarlike open space in the museum. It was chilly inside,

with a huge loading-bay door open to Midtown. Wearing a heavy olive-green coat with a hood pulled down over his head, Mr. Serra looked a bit like a druid as he rushed around a curved plate of Cor-Ten steel that weighed 30 tons and, at this precise moment, was dangling several inches from the floor.

At times he would drop to his knees, intently peering at a yellow tape measure spooled out on the floor, as a group of riggers prepared to lower the orange-rusted plate the rest of the way down. He would nod and wave to the men gathered around an indoor crane called a gantry that held the steel aloft. And then he would push himself to his feet and hurry, in his characteristic headlong gait, to another part of the sculpture. Over the last two decades as Mr. Serra’s work has become more and more sought-after by institutions and collectors, these kinds of installation scenes, worthy of the [Army Corps of Engineers](#), have played out countless times around the world, with sculptures arriving by boat and truck at sites from Seattle to Spain to Qatar.

They are never without danger — two serious collapses have occurred — but the whole highly choreographed operation has been repeated so often that it has become a kind of science, if a noisy one, with chains, cranes and grunting.

Mr. Serra, 67, says that as far as he knows he has missed only one of these installations, last year, thoroughly against his will, while recovering from knee surgery. It genuinely puzzles him when people ask if he always feels the need to be involved in the moving and placing of his pieces.

“Some painters don’t even hang their own shows — I never understood it,” he said dismissively in a recent interview at the Modern, sitting near a group of undulating models for the three sculptures, all new, that would soon be adding about 550 tons of art to the

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museum's second floor. As an artist whose work grew directly out of the near-religious devotion to process that arose in the 1960s, he said he still considered every step associated with his sculptures — from the models to the molten steel poured in a foundry in Siegen, Germany, to the long, complicated heavy-lifting finale — to be part of his art.

Such obsessiveness is partly an expression of Mr. Serra's dominating, master-of-all-details personality. But it is also philosophical, a lesson he said he learned by osmosis from Mr. Johns and other mentors like John Cage.

"If you're going to watch the process, watch it all the time, because it's always bespeaking something that's of interest," he said. "And I don't think that's Duchampian. I think that's more Eastern. That's more Suzuki."

That may be true, but there is nothing in the least Zen about the final thunderous acts of Mr. Serra's process, the thudding down of a work where it belongs. And the job at the Modern, which specifically had Mr. Serra in mind when it created 20,000 square feet of open space on its second floor during its recent rebuilding, was among the most daunting ever undertaken by the small group of specialized steel riggers whom Mr. Serra has relied on for two generations. It is also never cheap. (The exact cost of this particular moving job is not known; [MoMA](#) won't disclose installation budgets.)

The difficulty was increased because the retrospective includes a new sculpture that Mr. Serra describes as the most complex he has ever made. Called "Sequence," it is a kind of double figure eight, a sinuous fun house composed of a dozen individual plates of steel.

(The other day, after it was fully assembled, Mr. Serra showed it off to a reporter, positioning himself at one entrance to the piece. "I'll meet you back here — maybe," he said, smiling fiercely. The reporter quickly got lost inside and had to circumnavigate the exterior to find Mr. Serra again.)

Appropriately, perhaps, for an artist whose work forcefully engages the world, the world often rudely intrudes when it is installed. The first two sculptures delivered for the retrospective, made in the 1990s, were hoisted into MoMA's sculpture garden. On a sunny Saturday in mid-April the second of these, "Intersection II" — four curved plates that sit roughly parallel to each other — arrived on four flatbed semis, closing down a block of West 54th Street for the crane that would lift them.

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Published: May 20, 2007

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Everything seemed to be going as planned until word came by radio that the police were ordering two of the trucks to be moved from Avenue of the Americas because the ninth annual Tartan Day Parade was about to head their way, dispatching platoons of men in kilts and glengarries down the avenue. No sooner had this happened than word came that a passing delivery truck had rammed one of the massive plates while it sat on its flatbed.

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Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times Moving the plates into the museum.

Mr. Serra and a clutch of museum people hurried down the street to survey the damage, which turned out to resemble a small Abstract Expressionist paint smear. A rigger guarding the piece reported that he had informed the delivery driver of the cultural import of his accident: "I told the guy, 'Guy, you know you just ran into two million dollars worth of art?' I think he was so freaked out he parked his truck up the street and ran away."

To the untrained observer the installation in the garden appeared difficult enough. But the man who has long served as Mr. Serra's indispensable installer in America, Joe Vilardi, said, "It felt like a day off, a vacation," compared with what came next.

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What came next took three weeks and often seemed more like a multi-ton logic problem than a rigging job: How can all these pieces be hauled in through a door on the museum's second floor so that none obstruct the others, and every one is in exactly the right place to be plucked out when needed?

[Work in Progress](#)

Plate by curved plate, workers from Mr. Vilardi's Long Island company, Budco Enterprises, hoisted each piece from an empty lot on the museum's west side to a makeshift two-story-high platform, slowly lowering it onto three humble hunks of metal with rollers, called skates. A forklift then nudged the plate, roller-skating it into the building to its next appointment, with the gantry. Dangling from the gantry's cross beam were cables with two crablike steel claws that grabbed the plate and hoisted it into the air. The gantry then glided down the room with the plate, which appeared strangely weightless, like a velvety orange sail being wafted by a breeze.

Finally, as the gantry began to lower the plate, Mr. Serra and Mr. Vilardi and his crew converged at the bottom to ensure that it came to rest exactly where it should, so that it fit snugly with the plates it would be touching. Often this requires a group of riggers to employ old-fashioned elbow grease at the very end, leaning their considerable collective weight against the sides of the plate to force it the final inch.

Mr. Vilardi, a deliberate, soft-spoken 38-year-old, who is Budco's vice president and whose father also worked for Mr. Serra, said that for the figure-eight sculpture, "Sequence," it took him a day and half in Germany last year just to make the detailed measurements of the piece that he would need to reassemble it inside the confines of the museum. He even sketched out the pieces and has stared at them for almost a year on the wall of his office.

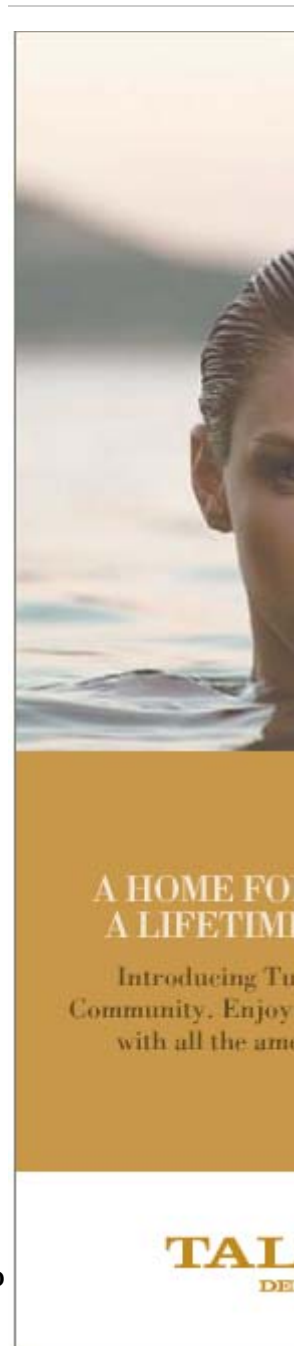
"Instead of looking at a photograph of a pretty place all day," he said, "that's what I'm looking at."

Yet even with all that planning it took a week of extremely long, nerve-racking days to install the whole piece, with two more sculptures still to come.

"To put it mildly, this is not like a painting show — move it up two inches, move it over two inches," said Kynaston McShine, the Modern's chief curator at large, who organized the retrospective with Lynne Cooke from the [Dia Art Foundation](#). "Everything is planned down to the smallest fractions. It's meticulous. It has to be."

During the weeks in which his works came together, Mr. Serra, who has a reputation for being fearsome in his exactitude and opinions, appeared to be fully in his element, happy, magnanimous, always in motion. As a man who earned his first salary working summers in a steel mill in California, he seemed to relish the chance to spend time again in a crowd of familiar hard hats, talking not about art, really, but about brute facts.

"This interests me, it excites me, it makes me extremely nervous because we have to stay on top of everything all the time," he said at one point, adding, "You never know what cow's going to knock over the fence."



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And the fence has unexpectedly fallen before. In 1971 a propped piece being dismantled in Minneapolis fell, fatally injuring a worker. The fault was later determined to be that of the piece's fabricator and of the local rigging crew. In 1988 two workers were injured when another piece, weighing 16 tons, fell when a set of heavy-duty jacks failed while it was being removed from the Leo Castelli Gallery in SoHo.

Despite some delays in the name of caution and planning, everything came off exactly as planned at the Modern, and all three sculptures were in place inside the museum by early May, obliterating any sense of how the room had looked before. Mr. Serra said he had never worried about the outcome.

"I trust these guys implicitly," he said of Mr. Vilardi and the small corps of men who show up time and again to help him complete his works. He couldn't resist another story, about how he came to choose them, by way of their elders, Mr. Vilardi's father, Ross, and the father of Joe Vilardi's cousin, Ray LaChapelle, who were his first riggers.

In 1977, when Mr. Serra's pieces had begun to grow so large he needed expert moving help, he had no idea where to turn. But one day, shortly after a highly publicized accident in which a helicopter toppled on the helipad atop the Pan Am Building, sending rotors and other debris flying, he saw in the newspaper that a rigging company had agreed to take on the extremely risky job of lowering the jagged pieces of wreckage down 58 floors.

"That's a hell of a tricky job," Mr. Serra said, seeming impressed even all these years later. "I mean, there's no handbook in terms of rigging on how you do that one.

"So I just got in my car and I went to see them. I said to myself, 'Now these are the guys I want to work with.' "

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