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Artigo

Sônia Salzstein*

Juxtaposition, repetition, dance[1]

Justaposição, repetição, dança

* Diagramação de Marcelo Berg.

keywords:
Richard Serra; contemporary art; sculpture; installation

This essay, approaching Richard Serra's works exhibited at Instituto Moreira Salles in Rio de Janeiro, in 2014, discusses the remarkable interplay between sculpture and drawing in the artist's production, this interplay having frequently resulted in drawings marked by such sculptural qualities as solidity, mass, weight, lightness, fluidity and, converselly, in sculptures and installations addressing architectural and structural issues. The text also points out to the cezannesque procedure which mark several drawings of Serra, where two dimensional surfaces usually basculate in steep angles, favouring a continuous switching back and forth between horizontals and verticals, flat and receding planes. From this relationship to drawing, as is argued, derives the crucial role gestures and action on materials play in this work, assigning to it a bodily plasticity.

palavras-chave:
Richard Serra; arte contemporânea; escultura; instalação

O ensaio aborda os trabalhos que Richard Serra apresentou em exposição realizada no Instituto Moreira Salles, no Rio de Janeiro, em 2014, e discute o trânsito notável entre desenho e escultura presente em sua obra, do qual frequentemente resultaram desenhos marcados por qualidades escultóricas, tais como solidez, massa, peso, leveza, fluidez e, inversamente, em esculturas e instalações ligadas de modo decisivo a questões estruturais e arquitetônicas. O texto aponta, igualmente, o procedimento cezanniano que marca diversos desenhos de Serra, nos quais superfícies bidimensionais usualmente basculam em ângulos agudos, favorecendo o trânsito contínuo entre horizontais e verticais, entre a bidimensionalidade das superfícies e os espaços em profundidade. Desse enraizamento no desenho, conforme se argumenta, deriva o papel crucial que os gestos e a ação sobre os materiais desempenham nesse trabalho, conferindo a ele uma plasticidade corporal.

1. This essay originally appeared in the publication Richard Serra: Desenhos na Casa da Gávea [Rio de Janeiro: Instituto Moreira Salles, 2014, p. 7-16].

* Universidade de São Paulo [USP].

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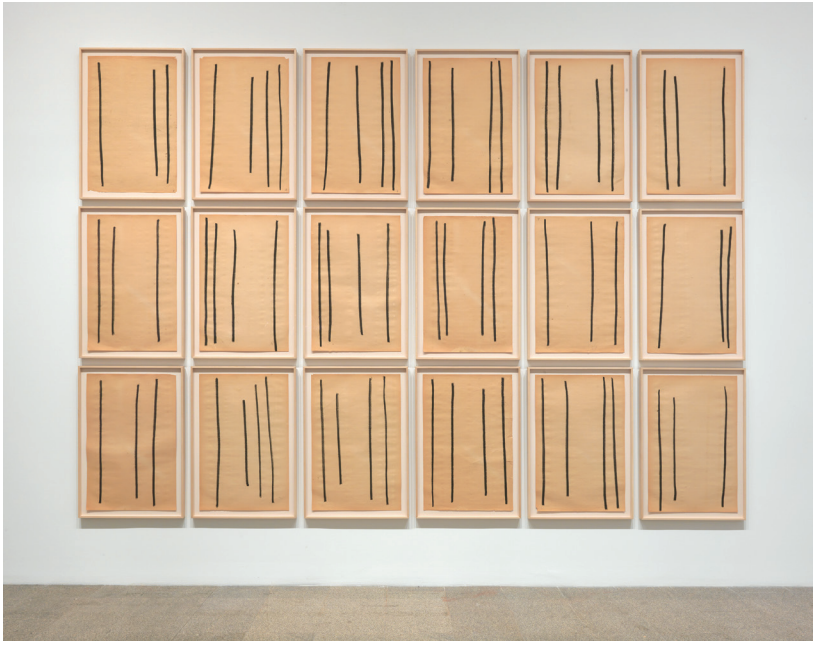
In his first exhibition in Brazil, in 1997, Richard Serra proposed to Centro de Arte Hélio Oiticica an installation of drawings, black circles made of paint stick applied directly on the walls, crowning the building's inner arches, and on the ceiling. Seventeen years later, the artist's second exhibition in the country once again features drawings, a large selection of works spanning significant moments of his career, chosen specially for the Instituto Moreira Salles'spaces in Rio de Janeiro.

Instead of addressing the architectural scale and, ultimately, the urban environment, as occurred in the previous project, the exhibition planned for IMS' headquarters in Rio de Janeiro, an elegant modernist residence built in 1951, gives preference to a more introspective atmosphere, of concentration and absorption. Opposing the spatial fluidity, the interplay of transparent glass surfaces and the linear fluency of the old residence of the Moreira Salles family, the current set of drawings is more restrained, suggesting spaces for concentration and gravity, but also speed and circulation – a discontinuity of times, in tension with the gracefulness of the architectural space enclosing it.

The artist leaves aside the iconic impact of elementary geometric shapes presented in large scale and chooses, at IMS, to emphasize the inner events of the works, which in turn are of a more intimist scale, organized in rooms according to a horizon of common themes. There



Drawing after circuit, 1972. Painstick on paper, 24 sheets, 91,4 X 61 cm (each).

is no sense of overview in this selection of works of different periods, most of which recent, with one single old series, *Drawings After Circuit*, 1972, a time, by the way, in which Serra began to produce his black drawings on canvas. In this exhibition, the works were organized in sub-groups, each of which bringing forward decisive aspects of the artist's production and presenting, like installations, environments articulated internally, where the idea of body as rhythm, mobility, and transformation emerges in a striking manner.

In the aforementioned series *Drawing after Circuit*, for instance, which early has signaled the spatial and topographical dimension which would consolidate itself in Serra's drawing – the succession of vertical lines of the series was produced based on the circumnavigation of the sculpture named in the title[2] - the peculiar way in which he operates line as cut, a limit, a force of attraction or repulsion is remarkable. The recent transparencies in Mylar which he displayed in an exhibition organized by the Courtauld Institute in London (2013) obtained through "blind" printing procedures, of the contact of sharp tools against the back of surfaces covered with thick layers of paint, brings to the fore the importance of the gesture, which in Serra does not concern expression, but a methodic and rhythmic procedure, the unique and interminable process of self-creation of space itself. *Weights* (2008) seems to bring forward an experience of space as passage, so crucial in his drawing as in his sculpture- the understanding of the body as maximum concentration of density, but also as lightness, evanescence, and displacement, against the grain, let us say, of notions of axiality and weight, inherited from sculptural tradition.

2. It is timely to describe, in comparison to the drawings of the series, the work *Circuit* (1972). As the artist states in his "Notes on Drawing", it consisted in placing "four [steel] plates into the four corners of a square room. The edges of the plate, functioning as lines, and the spatial quadrants, resulting from the placement of the plates, converge towards a central core. The open square of the central core becomes the perceptual intersection of lines, planes and volumes, creating the simultaneity of a centrifugal and centripetal effect. After *Strike* and *Circuit* I became involved with sculpturally structuring a given context and thereby redefining it." "Notes on Drawing", In SERRA, Richard. *Richard Serra: Writtings, Interviews*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Weights, 2008. Painstick on handmade paper, eight parts, 77,4 X 55,8 cm and 55,8 X 77,4 cm.

Drawings, installation, drawings-sculpture (or sculpture-drawings…) - it is of no importance the way one would like to call Serra's production in both of his Brazilian exhibitions. Both bring together works that immediately summon up the entire volumetry of the space, all dynamic forces which confer its depth and multidirectionality, as is also characteristic of his two-dimensional production. In the current show at Instituto Moreira Salles there is something new: Serra radicalizes the tension – which characterizes his entire output – between the anonymous and impersonal dimension associated with the wall drawings and the complexity of unique gestures, accomplishing a methodical process which can only be decided in the spot, according to each case. From this perspective, this exhibition requires, as noted, a more internalized focus from the visitor.

Constituting, since the beginning of the seventies, an autonomous segment in this body of work, also with decisive repercussion in Serra's sculpture, the practice of drawing very likely brought him a certain way of operation. The artist even declared his appreciation for the silent activity of observing, of never underestimating or neglecting a thing[3], and, of course, the habit of embracing, in the close record of drawing, this immense visual constellation of permanently available variables, of inspecting with sobriety all powers at play there, would come in handy to an observer with such susceptibility to the very little. Not coincidentally, drawing emerged in Serra's production as a privileged place which led him to a non-hierarchical view of space, in which everything has its own relevance and intensity: a view, therefore complex, multifaceted, and contradictory.

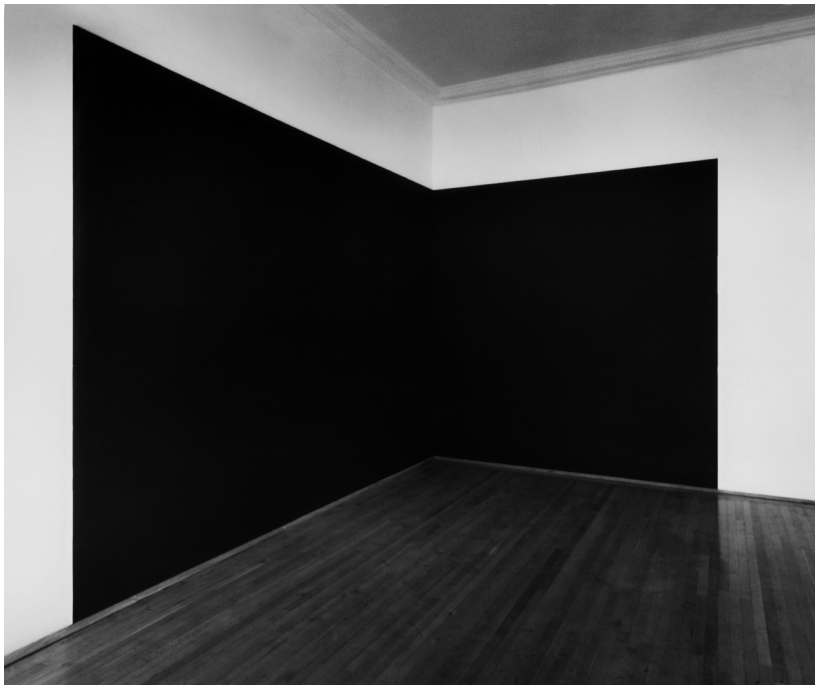
It was in 1974 that Serra experimented for the first time with large-scale drawings, to which he referred later as "installation-drawings", a composite expression in which the first term, significantly a noun derived from a verb, underlines the action of spatial positioning to which the artist exposed these works, as if one needed to differentiate them from those he usually exhibited.[4] The fact that one had to "install" them, rather than "exhibit" them indicates not only an emphasis on the environmental scale of these drawings, a reference to the immediate connection they established with the whole architectural space of the exhibition; the strong use of the term also signals the artist's intervention on the deconstruction of the monolithic body of the objects, of the functional relations to which

3. According to an interview given by the artist to Gary Garrels: "I remember that time in Johns' studio clearly. He was working on a green target painting, and at the same time he'd be turning on Joe Cocker and he'd traipse across the floor, mix some paint, put one stroke on the painting, and sit down and talk. It seemed to me that Johns concentrated on all those activities equally. He did everything with equal intensity. (...). You have to pay attention to everything all the time. A lot about what art is about is paying attention." ROSE, Bernice, WHITE, Michelle, and GARRELS, Gary. *Richard Serra Drawing: A Retrospective*. The Menil Collection, Houston. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2011, p. 68.

4. See the artist's interview to Gary Garrels: "The first drawing exhibition was a show at Castelli's of two large scale drawings on canvas, *Zadikians* and *Shafrazi*. Until those Installation Drawing on Canvas, drawing wasn't yet truly an autonomous activity for me; it was something I was doing parallel to making sculpture." *Ibid.*, p. 71. In the testimony above, the artist refers to the exhibition *Richard Serra Drawings* (Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, October 12-26, 1974, *apud ibid*, p. 216).

they are usually exposed. From then on objects were introduced – as autonomous, although mutually implied parts – in an indeterminate formal status, they began to ask for consideration of their uniqueness and, thus, forced a repositioning of all viewpoints at play.

It is worth remembering, finally, that drawing carved out its own place in Serra's works work over the years, as a practice strongly anchored in bodily *performance* – drawing as a kind of mapping of the plasticity of the body, but also of the resistance it faces in the realization of this plasticity. Not surprisingly, the vast production on paper and other two-dimensional supports employed by the artist is marked by simple and straight-forward gestures and, in equal measure, by discipline and restraint.



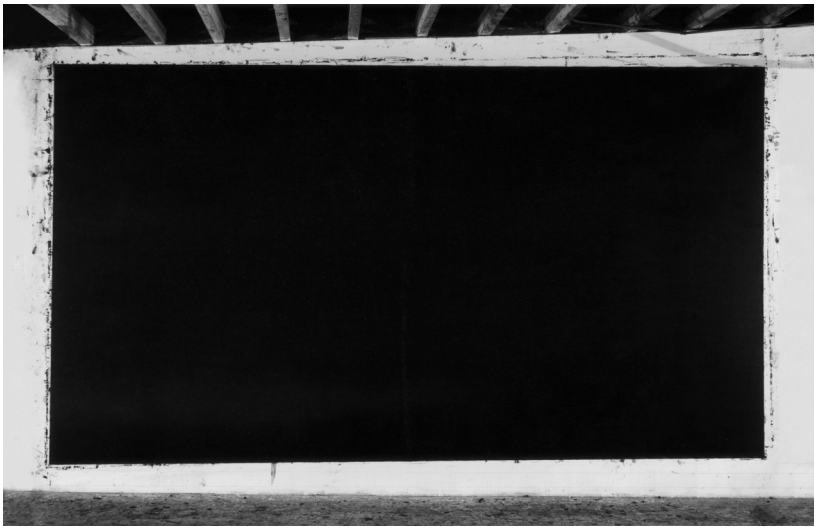
Pacific Judson Murphy, 1978. Painstick on Belgian linen, two parts, 2,8 m X 4,4 m and 2,8 m X 2,7 m.

The course of a five-decade-plus career – in which, alongside sculptures dialoguing with architecture and the urban space, also gained prominence the installations Serra produced with large scale, two-dimensional works, sort of architectural drawings – leaves no doubt, however, about the special status that a way of thinking based on drawing acquired in his career, and about how much, in it, drawing and sculpture are mutually implicated. The kind of

drawing that has taken over Serra's production throughout all these years is, thus, far from relating to a segment alternative to a work formed mainly by sculptures – indeed, it added to the totality of his work an exploratory intelligence ever more radical, grounded in the privilege of practice. This relevance of tactile and sensory aspects, which connects immediately the line in Serra to a bodily experiment, reveals, moreover, how much his drawing moves away from the rationalism underlying the project-based nature with which the line appears in the modern tradition.

In the end, it seems, drawing was what decisively revealed to the artist the existence of contradictory objects in one single plane, so he understood how heterogeneous objects, at first unconnected, could share the same space and join a stream of relations – the logic of juxtaposition, the inexhaustible plasticity of a dynamic and contextual space. Works like *Pacific Judson Murphy* (1978), *Abstract Slavery* (1974), for example, embrace spatial incongruities which disorient and influence the way the observer moves through the environment. The intelligence of drawing, this porous and permanently extendable border, took Serra's work beyond formal compositional issues. It allowed him to find a place in a transitional space, between the internal logic of the work and a contextual space.

Pacific Judson Murphy and *Abstract Slavery* deal with the experience of spatiotemporal continuity, paradoxically based on



Abstract Slavery, 1974.
Belgian linen, 289,5 X 538,4 cm.

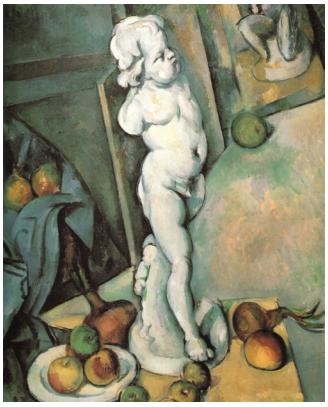
discrete and disjunctive surfaces, since we are looking at drawings made through a procedure that is sheer discontinuity : the repetitive friction of paint sticks on Belgian linen, in dense successive layers. Notwithstanding the literalness of the procedure, the fact is that the drawings produce immersion. They require absolute involvement from the body, urging the body towards an experience of proprioception.

And in both, curiously, it is the procedure of juxtaposition – in principle, a merely virtual operation on the flat surface – which gives rise to a dense environment and imposes the space in all its volume. Besides, the fact that Serra gives some of his works titles with names of famous blues men, like Willie Dixon and Huddie Leadbelly, suggests the connection that the notion of juxtaposition may have, in his work, with notions of rhythm and repetition, with dance, or, more generally, with the disciplined construction of bodily lightness.

The apprenticeship of the complex spatiotemporal experience which informs the juxtaposition procedure in Serra certainly also has something to do with the impact of Cézanne's presence on some deep substrate of his work.[5] One cannot disregard, before so many twisted parallelograms, which populate his drawings, the refracted memory of Cézanne's enigmatic still lifes. In those works, as we know, quite tangible objects, modelled with the well-known sculptural density he conferred to painting, appear devoid of gravity, not resting on the plane, but disconcertingly juxtaposed with tabletops tilted to the point of being almost parallel to the plane of the picture. It is therefore irresistible to associate Serra's twisted planes – featuring the impossible conciliation between the inexorably flat and frontalised condition of vision and the tactile appeal of space as depth – with these visual impasses consisting of the twisted tabletops in Cézanne's painting.

Serra is probably interested in the fact that Cézanne – together with having provided this strange form of continuity through discontinuities, the shift between objects sharing mutually excluding representational orders – is the anti-demiurgic artist par excellence, tormented by doubt, willing to go on an arduous journey which could result in the radical denaturalization and desentimentalization of vision. And the fact that he is the modern artist who most ruthlessly put under pressure the assumption of transparency of vision, and who eradicated doubt from the metaphysical level of philosophy, plunging it into the drama of practical life, and into the questioning of the status

5. Authors such as Richard Shiff and Barnaby Wright established this association (respectively, in *Drawing The Back Of The Mirror Transparencies. Richard Serra Recent Drawings*. Craig F. Starr Gallery, New York, October-December 2012. Exhibition catalogue; and *Richard Serra Drawings for The Courtauld*. The Courtauld Gallery, London, September 2013-January 2014. Exhibition catalogue). It is the artist himself, though, who declares his interest in Cézanne, as he did in an interview to Gary Garrels, when referring to his drawings on double panels, *No Mandatory Patriotism* and *The United States Government Destroys Art*: "The comparison of the diptychs with Cézanne may be a stretch, but no one else comes to mind who deals so physically with mass and weight. No one talks about the weight in Cézanne, but there's a manifestation of weight there that's not in Picasso, not in Matisse, barely in anyone who follows. Cézanne is obviously interested in gravity and in the relationship of weight to plane. Take *Still Life With Plaster Cupid*, in the Courtauld, where he punches a hole in the space, and you think the apples and onions are going to roll off the table. The only thing holding them in place is their weight. They have the weight of cannoballs."ROSE, Bernice, WHITE, Michelle and GARRELS, Gary. *Op. cit.*, p. 79.



Paul Cézanne, *Still life with Plaster Cupid*, 1894 c.

of art and its institution in modernity and about the place it gives to the constitutive work of vision. The pragmatic and anti-expressive character which marks Serra's drawing certainly has some elements from the desentimentalizing saga of the Cézannian stance.

Cézanne – just like Serra in his own way – sought the tectonic and structuring work of vision; it is in the artist from Aix en Provence that drawing becomes independent from the protocols of the artistic genre, making explicit the structural intelligence of painting, and gaining an experimental dimension in art, a disposition for deconstruction and the tabula rasa until then unknown in classic tradition. There are, as we can see, several aspects which allow a glimpse into the kind of synchronicity between a "historical" work and the work of the contemporary artist. Desentimentalization and, ultimately, dehumanization of vision (because it sees itself, in modernity, disconnected from the principle of empathy, just like Worringer understood the mimetic tradition of Western visuality), the aspiration to the encounter with a synesthetic dimension of vision and, more radically, with a way of seeing emancipated of an intellective training are well known issues of modern art , envisioned by Cézanne's painting, reconfigured, subjected to new historical and cultural requirements in Serra's work.

However, although certainly mobilezed by the memory of art history, his work does not seem particularly interested in problematize art history, nor in recognizing itself in it. There are no evident comments or citations, there is no underlying "concept" of art history, there are no metadiscourses in the production of this artist who, on the contrary, seems to strive, in each new work, for a genetic movement,

the annihilation of the remembrance of previous experiences and their subjecting to new and untested processes.

We have observed that Serra's work provides unusual connections, creating a suggestive context in which there are only discontinuities. One of its most remarkable aspects, as we have seen, is its permanent "transitional state", despite the feeling of gravitational rest that those massive surfaces covered with layers of black pigment or pieces weighing many tons may convey. One moves easily from the tenuous to the ultra dense (and vice-versa), and it is always likely that that massive body – although perilously supported – will be suddenly dissolved, restituted to the spatial indeterminacy of a constellation of discrete elements, indifferent to the meaningful arrangement in which the artist places them. Once again the presence of the kind of hoarse and syncopated rhythm of jazz, in Serra's work, comes to the surface, a rhythm which frees the body from its own weight, allowing it to be light, in repetition and exhaustion.

Taking into account the public and monumental appearance of a large part of these works and, finally, the antinomy suggested there between the affirmative character of its apparent public dimension and the deep immersion brought by the interstices, the gaps marking the whole, it seems plausible to think of a discrete mixture of humor and stoicism in these plays of construction and deconstruction, weight and evanescence. This unexpected and subtle hint of desublimation prevents the volatilization of the elementary geometric shapes into iconic essences, for it underscores their materiality and organicity. It is also this immanence and pragmatism that discourages a purely optical grasp upon the work, as it deflects our attention towards the responsibility of the process associated with it, to the multiple consequences of its small physical events.

In sculpture as in two-dimensional works, what ensures the uniqueness of each work, its intrinsically processual nature, is the way the artist deals with lines. This has nothing to do, as we have seen, with an idea of drawing as an essential protoform of the work, because in Serra – against the grain of the constructive rationalism of which he is inevitably heir, although somewhat insubordinate – the line is understood not as the ideal limit of all bodies, the form of forms, but as a cut, a region in ferment which permeates and irrigates them, compressing or dilating space.

Although Serra's work presupposes a logic of parts – this is also what it means to deal with line as a cut –, it is not derived from systematic thought, in which the form could loom abstracted from the physicality involved in every process, and be passively subsumed under procedures of anticipation or sequentiality, as occurs with the constructive lineage or, more specifically, in minimalist production, radicalized by Serra's generation, which gave it an unexpected turn.

Strictly speaking, moreover, the terms 'series' and 'sequence', which the constructive tradition, with its project of rationalization of form, helped universalize, barely apply to the artist's work: in it if indeed these terms describe anything, it is a process of repetition which only establishes itself in the expectation that it will thus provide the occurrence of the dissimilar. In this work, a comparative view is essential; to weigh up small accidents in texture in order to understand the transparency or opacity they can give every surface, to consider the compact or loose character with which the dark material of the paint stick or lithographic paint adds to them, the volatizing or densifying function which voids and interstices may have in different works.

In Serra, the line is therefore indissociable from practice: it immediately intervenes on the materials, resulting in their organic, functional nature, which always appears as an extension of the body, a vibration which can be more or less direct or remote, but which will always be responsive to its displacements. It will never be about the line which generalized and internalized in the materials, which is abstracted in a mold or pattern. Resisting dematerialization in the metaphysics of the contour-continent, line presents itself as direction and flow – but sometimes also as an constraint –. ensuring, in both cases, the dramatic dynamism of the whole, its belonging to an amplified force field, to the city, to a cultural context.

In her study of the Picasso papers[6], Rosalind Krauss showed how the apparently conventional drawings he produced in the second half of the 1910s did not negate the Cubist experience. By confronting several orders of representation in one single plane, these works caused them to mutually denounce one another, which ultimately relativized them. Indeed, they demonstrated to have internalized this experience and taken it to a new level of complexity.

If, due to the conventions of language, drawing cannot escape the enunciation of a figure against a background, despite the fact that

6. KRAUSS, Rosalind E. **The Picasso Papers**. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998.

this enunciation is – as it was in Picasso's drawings from the mid-1910s and in modernism in general – a self-declared and ostensive procedure, explicit from the inside out of the work, in Serra, the line establishes the undecidability between one instance and another, between what belongs to the formal regime of the work and what extends beyond it. Line, thus, or the way the artist deals with it, is what pushes the work always beyond its formal determinations.

But naming the result of Serra's work as 'drawing' or 'sculpture' adds little to the understanding of it: as a technique, these works prove too generic and unspecific to be subsumed by the tradition of drawing or sculpture or, in broader terms, in the very categories of art history. The artist favors basic materials and blunt, almost brutal procedures – something occurs with his work which is like a methodical de-specialization of technique, the progressive voiding of well-known humanist assumptions, of the history of technique as *poiesis*, a repertoire of abilities naturally conducive to the *telos* of an action. In Serra, as we will see, action stands on its own, causing the properties of each material to come to the surface, according to the exactitude of the procedure to which this material is subjected; action requires a dense and composite time: action admits the advent of antagonistic forces, being therefore a kind of action backed by a reflexive dimension.

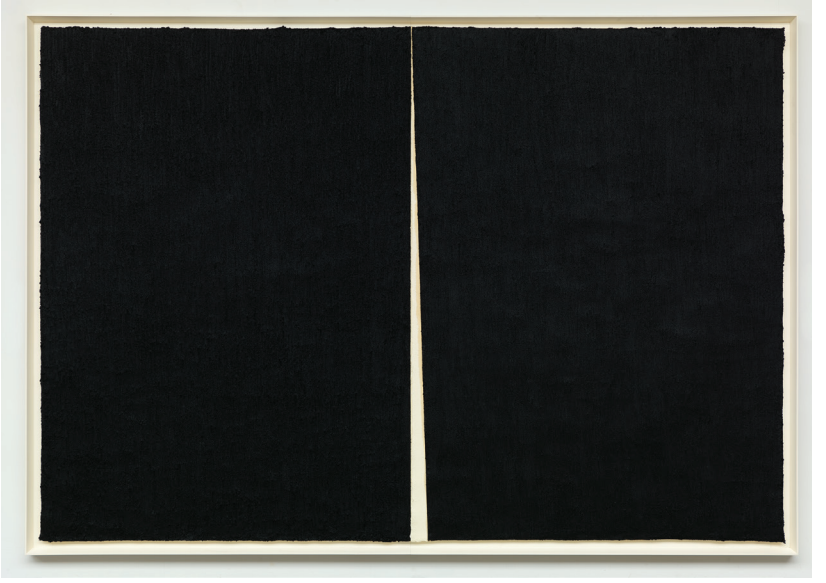
Regarding Serra's two-dimensional production in particular, It appears that over the years it progressively acquires a tactile, topographic quality, so to speak, indicating the peculiar accent he imposed on the language of drawing. The elementary shapes he favored squares, circles,

Cambuhy, 2012.

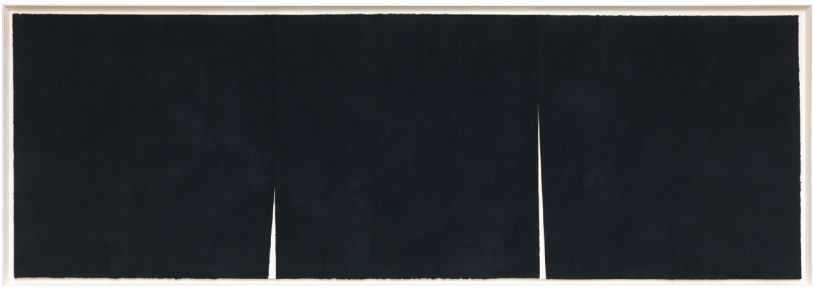
parallelograms that may subtly tilt in relation to the plane – clearly show the interest of the work in retain the spatial coordinates governing the body-space relation, but, like an improbably dramatic Mondrian, propelling the body out of the idealities of the plane, urging it to permanently reconfigure itself in relation to the environment.

In recent drawings, like those produced with lithographic crayon on transparent Mylar surfaces, Serra underlines the relevance of the action itself, dilating it to the maximum, revealing a whole internal complexity, so that what would be the last destination of this action, a predication inevitably external to the very process in question, reveals a magma of small actions significant in themselves. That is, the action resulting from these drawings is not the instrument of an intention that could precede and escaped it. In these transparencies, the only thing left is action becoming a meditated process, permanently deconstructing the finalism of ordinary actions, hostile to the relations of cause and effect regulating them.

The drawings on Mylar exacerbate like never before the doubtful elements of Serra's production between an anonymous and an impersonal nature – which, in addition, always made it possible to identify the public scale as an outstanding feature of Serra's work – and the imponderable telos of a practice which does not strive for a climax, which reveals interminable, self-disciplined as it is, in the toils



Rift # 1, 2011.
Painstick on handmade paper,
290 X 420 cm (with frame).



Double Rift # 6, 2013. Painstick on handmade paper, 214 X 611,5 cm.

of trial and error, still subjected to the fluctuations of volition and the affections. Blind drawings, which for this very reason perform an aspiration so present in the entire work, of deconditioning the automatic association between the gesture of hands and eyes. "There is no way to make a drawing – there is only drawing."[7]

Perhaps one could say such doubtful intelligence of drawing is what allowed the artist to make the most of the tradition of sculpture, to circumvent the abstract and instrumental character of the constructed spaces into which our bodies are continually thrown, and reach a unique experience of space, space as a game, a continuous permutation of viewpoints: "I did not want to accept architectural space as a limiting container, I wanted it to be understood as a site in which to establish and structure disjunctive, contradictory spaces."[8]

And, similarly, perhaps it was the physicality inherent to sculptural work which made Serra reach a notion of line as cut, force field, a zone of tension able to lead to both adherence and repulsion. The line, which besides, is also a compressed space, a space within a space, might thus either establish proximities between disparate objects or separate supposedly continuous objects into autonomous elements, which it continually rearranges into new orders of relations.**

7. SERRA, Richard. *In* ROSE, Bernice, WHITE, Michelle and GARRELS, Gary. *Op. cit.*, p. 59.

8. "Notes on Drawing". *In Ibid.*, p. 137.

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Sônia Salzstein teaches History of Modern Art and Theory of Art at the Department of Visual Arts/School of Communications and Arts/University of São Paulo.