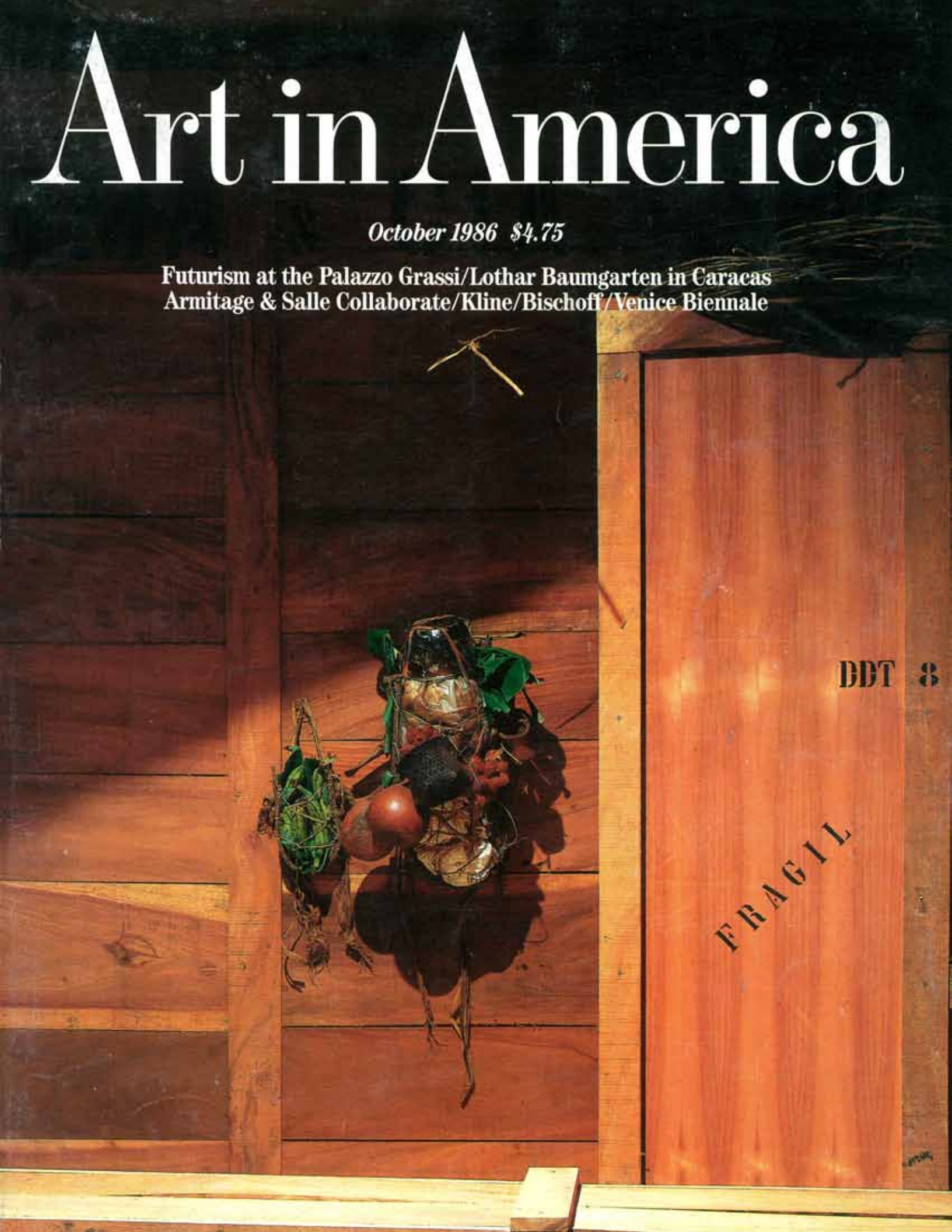
Art in America

October 1986 $4.75

Futurism at the Palazzo Grassi/Lothar Baumgarten in Caracas
Armitage & Salle Collaborate/Kline/Bischoff/Venice Biennale



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Cover:
Detail of Lothar Baumgarten's untitled installation at the Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, Summer 1986. Photo Bill Jacobson Studio, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery. See article on page 126.

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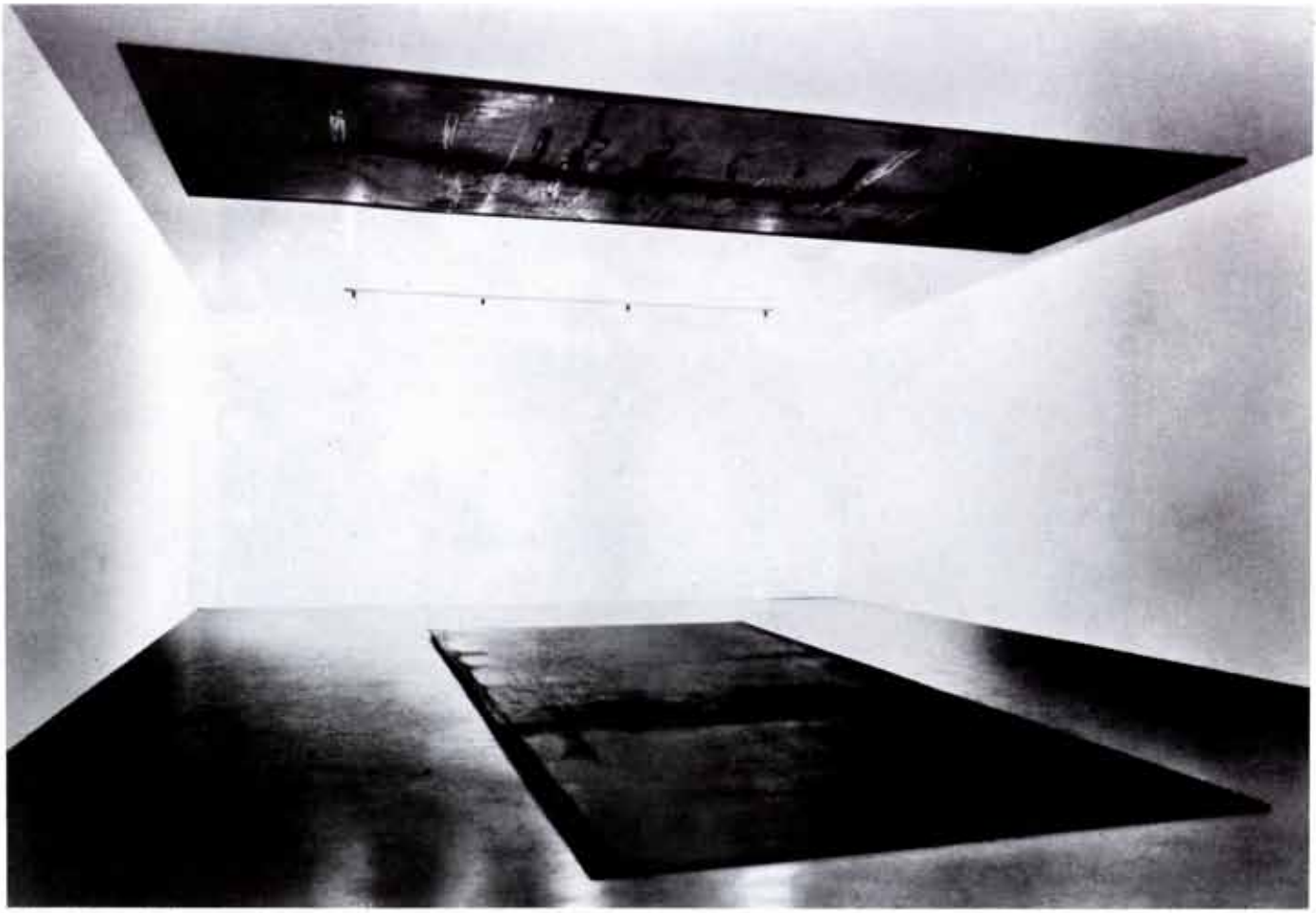


Richard Serra: **Delineator,** *1975, two steel plates, each 10 by 26 feet by 1 inch. Collection the artist and Ace Gallery. Photo Gordon Matta-Clark.*

At Critical Mass

Richard Serra's recent retrospective, along with two ancillary exhibitions, showed him ever more adeptly addressing issues of light, space and energy.

BY WADE SAUNDERS

Since the exhibition of the thrown-lead casting *Splashing* and of the leaning sheet-lead sculpture *Prop* at Leo Castelli's West 108th Street warehouse in December 1968, it's been obvious that Richard Serra would be among the three or four artists setting the standard against which all other work of his generation would be judged. This preeminence was powerfully reaffirmed by Serra's recent triple exhibition in New York—of sculptures and photographs of sculptures spanning the years 1969–86 at the Museum of Modern Art, of recent drawings at Galerie Maeght Lelong, and of recent sculptures and drawings at Leo Castelli's Greene Street Space. Of Serra's contemporaries only Bruce Nauman, Joel Shapiro and the ghost of Robert Smithson have come close to producing sculptures of comparably enduring strength and importance through the 1970s and '80s.

Nor have any sculptors coming after Serra had as yet anywhere near his impact on other artists. This power is the more remarkable because many of his important works have never been shown in New York City. Since Serra's debut sculptors have had to willingly or otherwise cede him any territory he chose to occupy. That we don't work off of, borrow from or even parody Serra, the way we do many other artists, evidences that cession of territory, that recognition of force. Even when Serra himself borrows, it is most often his own work, not its source, that we remember.

Serra has always limited the number and variety of sculptural elements that he uses. At present he works with large square and round steel bars; flat planes; planes formed into sections of cylinders, cones and spheres; planes increasing in thickness until

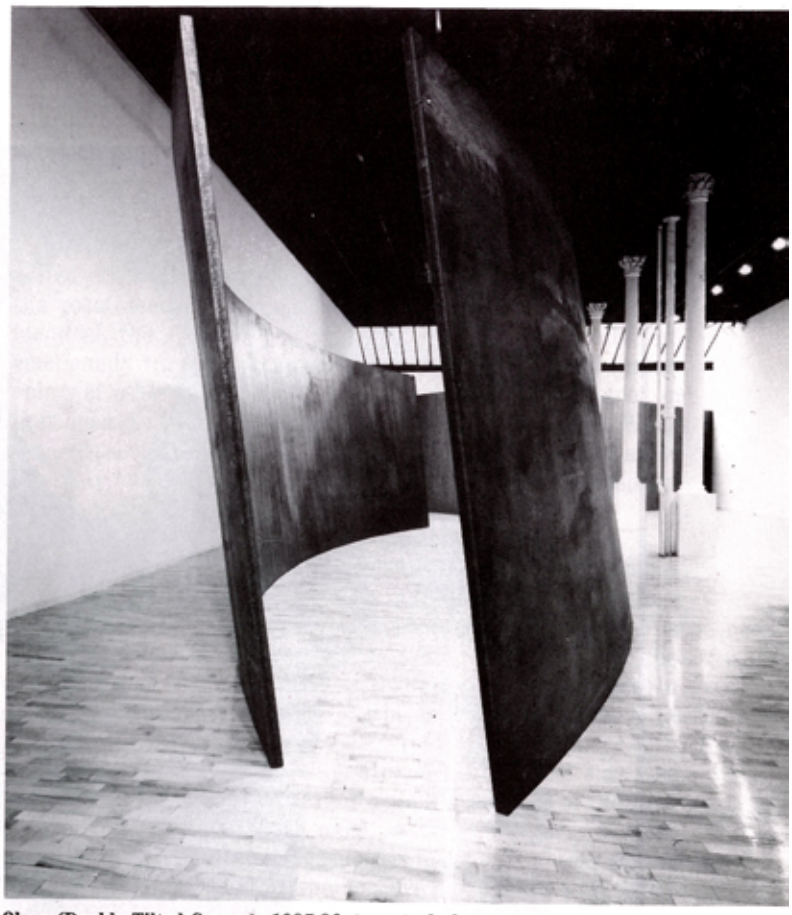
they must be regarded as wedge-shaped masses; and forged, roughly right-angled steel blocks. Absent from his sculpture are hollow volumes, surface markings or applied color, welds or joints (except those necessitated by safety or handling realities) and bases. There are no conventional references or depictions. Despite, or because of, these tight parameters, Serra's work has become ever more subtle and various with time, concerned increasingly with light and space as much as with mass and gravity. Some of Serra's ideas can be thought of as analogous to musical scores; certain pieces come to exist independently of their particular embodiments, not unlike a number of Sol LeWitt's early drawings done from a set of verbal instructions. We may come to understand a Serra piece differently as we see it successively installed.

Originally planned as a retrospective around 1976, the Modern's exhibition was postponed for almost ten years, and I believe the delay shows. While three pieces dated 1986 were included, the period 1976–85 was entirely unrepresented. There was certainly work worthy of inclusion from those years, though many of the pieces were exhibited only in Europe and remain there still. Some choice pieces were simply too physically dense for the Modern's building. For example, *Berlin Block for Charlie Chaplin* (1977) is a solid forged steel cube, 6¼ feet on a side, which weighs 75 tons and generates a floor load of almost 4,000 pounds per square foot, far in excess of the Museum's structural capacity. The Modern sought and received permission to install a sculpture on the Central Park corner of Fifth Avenue and 59th Street, but the approval was then revoked by a city bureaucrat.

The 11 works shown at the Modern included three that Serra had to adapt especially so they could be moved via the Modern's 20-foot-wide elevators. Ironically, by the time of the opening the elevators weren't needed, since a last minute decision had been made to hold the show on the main floor rather than in the basement. But the smaller, elevator-sized steel plates had already been purchased, and Serra was able to make the pieces work extremely well despite this compromise. Although only ten pieces were installed indoors (one more was in the garden), the Modern's show seemed crowded: energy from some sculptures spilled over onto others; rooms that should have had single entrances had instead to function as passageways to other pieces.

The early pieces included in the Modern's show—*Casting, One Ton Prop (House of Cards), Cutting Device: Base Plate Measure, 1-1-1-1,* and *Five Plates, Two Poles*—were all reconstructions of the originals and seemed generally disappointing in a way they hadn't when first seen 15 or so years ago. In the late '60s and early '70s these pieces had the simplicity and clarity of demonstrations. They functioned almost like heuristic devices, allowing us to see Serra thinking through particular issues. In the course of being reconstructed or made permanent for this retrospective, several of the early pieces suffered varying diminishments of intensity.

Casting (1969–86) at the Modern was at least the sixth in a series of pieces that have their source in *Splashing* (1968), which was formed by throwing molten lead into the juncture of the brick wall and concrete floor in Leo Castelli's Upper West Side warehouse. *Splashing* was gruffer than any sculpture I had seen until then. It was utterly specific to its site: rough space, rough action, rough sculpture. Though relatively small in size for the period, it was large in scale. The sculpture made me aware, as none other had, of process as a potential carrier of meaning.



Olson (Double Tilted Curves), *1985-86, two steel plates, each 10 by 36 feet by 2 inches. Leo Castelli Gallery.*

And the piece then seemed to be still in process, still active for maker and viewer: part object, part installation; part set idea, part new discovery.

Like *Splashing, Casting* was made by hurling molten lead into the juncture of a wall and floor. The juncture was filled 12 times, the first 11 castings were pulled out toward the center of the room and flipped over. The last cast remained in place in the improvised mold. The lead elements were silvery, their succession suggestive of ocean swells. The sculpture made me conscious of the way the flatness of wall and floor gave form to the amorphous molten lead, and made me think about notions of orientation: what is right side-up and what upside-down? But *Casting* no longer seemed to lead anywhere. Recreated at the Modern, it lacked its previously strong argumentative presence, looking instead like the restaging of some historical event. The piece was not helped by the museum's decision to protect its new wood floors with a "carpet" of masonite sheets—exactly the sort of accommodation Serra's early pieces had militated against.

In 1969 *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)* was made of four slightly beat up 4-foot-square, ½-inch-thick lead sheets (weighing 500 pounds apiece) balanced on edge to form the vertical faces of a cube. Each sheet caught and held the corner of its neighbor, not unlike the flaps of a cardboard box as they are interlocked before being folded down. The work looked to be arranged a bit informally, as period photographs of Serra's friends helping to assemble it would indicate, and Serra used

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At Critical Mass

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that informality to lighten or subvert the sculpture's otherwise menacing structure. At the Modern *One Ton Prop* weighed two tons. The new, 1-inch-thick lead antimony plates chosen for their greater structural stability were too massive to suggest cards and somehow made the sculpture feel fat.

Actual or implied danger was central to Serra's early work, and, though perfectly safe, many of his best recent pieces still exude a quiet menace. The various early prop pieces were pitched to a small and aware audience; though delicately balanced and potentially as lethal as a set bear trap, these works invited us to approach them and view them closely, if with caution. Since the death of a workman when a Serra piece was incorrectly rigged, safety has perforce taken precedence over threat. At the Modern *One Ton Prop* and the two other prop pieces were roped off, keeping viewers at a safe distance, but to the detriment of both visual and conceptual clarity. Several similar Serra sculptures still stand open and relatively unsupervised in European museums and the effect is consequently much more powerful.

In both *1-1-1-1* (a title which visually suggests the sculpture's four vertical plates and one horizontal bar) and *Five Plates, Two Poles* we could see how Serra developed and used a structural device for a time until he found a less compromised way of getting the same effect. Both these pieces rely on notches cut in round steel bars to catch and lock the corners or edges of leaning steel plates. In *Five Plates, Two Poles* the notching made the piece stable enough for us to walk between the 8-foot-high plates and in a sense enter the sculpture. Our being able to move inside a piece has remained central to Serra's sculpture ever since. But the notching also created subordinate or dependent structural relationships among the constitutive elements, relationships absent in the other sculptures. Further, the notches suggested fabrication of a sort that Serra has otherwise eschewed. These difficulties must have been evident to him, as he dropped the notched bars from his sculptural vocabulary after completing five related sculptures in 1971.

As Serra increasingly came to understand how to use the architecture (walls, floors, corners) of a space to support his pieces, he began to produce sculptures both pure and intense, sculptures capable of evoking awe each time we encounter them. We do more than see a good Serra sculpture; we feel it physically, even viscerally. *Delineator II* and *Circuit*, also shown at the Modern, both possessed this breadth of effect.

Delineator II, an earlier version of which (with longer steel plates) had previously been installed at Ace Gallery in Los Angeles in 1975, consisted here of a 10-foot-by-20-foot-by-1-inch-thick steel plate laid flat on the floor with an identical plate rotated 90 degrees in relation to the first and mounted flush to the ceiling. The roughly 10-foot cube of space defined by the crossing of the two plates was as charged and palpable as any in modern sculpture. That space had its own weather: the air felt cooler and denser; sounds were dampened; viewers moved a bit uncertainly, as though a storm were approaching. I should no more have worried about the 8,000 pounds of steel hovering over my head than about the tons and tons of steel and concrete that had gone into the building continuing above it—but I did. Carl Andre's carpetlike sculptures have sometimes been described as supporting columns of air; in *Delineator II* Serra floated a four-ton steel plate atop that column of air.

Circuit, reincarnated from an earlier, dimensionally different piece shown at Galerie m in Bochum, West Germany, in 1972, consisted of four 10-foot-by-20-foot-by-1-inch-thick plates (identical to those in *Delineator II*) standing on edge along the two diagonals of a square room. The plates stopped short of the center, leaving a square column of open space, 37 inches on a side. I knew that the room was square and that the plates were alike, but what I saw and felt once within the sculpture suggested otherwise. *Circuit* made space disjunctive: the walls of the room seemed no longer to meet at the corners; though identical, the spaces within the sculpture felt physically and emotionally variable, at some moments constrictive and threatening, at others sheltering and protective. Yet when I stood in that open central space the whole piece dematerialized. When seen edge on, the steel plates almost vanished. Such an acute interplay between blunt physical reality and elusive perceptual experience is nothing short of astonishing.

These days Serra has become adept at making quite similar elements function in radically different ways. This adroitness of address is obvious if one compares *Two Corner Curve* (1986), which was at the Modern, with *Olson* (1985–86), the centerpiece of the show at Leo Castelli's Greene Street space. In both sculptures Serra used 10-foot-high curved steel plates. In *Two Corner Curve* Serra bisected a largish museum gallery with a curved steel wall. The viewer's experience of one side was utterly disjunct from that of the other side. The ends of the steel merged into the walls of the room, so it was necessary to walk around through two adjoining galleries to get to the other side of the sculpture. Standing on the concave side of the wall, I felt space expanding away from me, while on the convex side space pressed in around me. In a way, *Two Corner Curve* functioned like two discrete works: it could never be apprehended fully in a single moment or from a single vantage point.

In *Olson,* likely the strongest and certainly the freshest of the new sculptures shown this spring, Serra enclosed an elliptical space, not unlike that bounded by a pair of parentheses (), with two facing curved steel walls. But the walls were not vertical: one leaned in toward the center of the ellipse, while the other leaned out and away. Trying to walk straight through the center of the piece, I felt disoriented—physically displaced toward the outward leaning arc by the pressure of the steel. *Olson* also drew the viewer in toward its center, then squeezed him out toward its ends. The walls both curving and tilting gave one a sense of speed, not unlike the sudden acceleration in the kid's game Crack the Whip. In *Olson* Serra pulled together kinesthetic lessons he's learned from a number of his works to produce a large sculpture with a light, almost lyrical quality, a sculpture that was different—even surprising—from every point without or within it: it profoundly affected both the viewer's sense of space and of time.

If the remakings of the early sculptures at the Modern moved me less than the originals, it is perhaps because I had learned my lessons from them in the past. Serra's work has always been tough, smart and in control: those qualities remain, but the sculpture is becoming increasingly generous, even expressive. My chief regret about these exhibitions is that the pieces, for all their presence, were mostly dismantled with the shows themselves, and that most of Serra's permanent pieces continue to be executed in Europe rather than here in America. □

Author: *Wade Saunders is an artist who writes about art.*