

Intersubjectivity and Intermediality in the Work of Serra

Rocío von Jungefeld  
*Complutense University Madrid*

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**Rocío von Jungenfeld,**

**"Intersubjectivity and Intermediality in the Work of Serra"**

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**Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Asunción López-Varela,  
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**Abstract:** In her article "Intersubjectivity and Intermediality in the Work of Serra" Rocío von Jungenfeld examines the intersubjective space in which artworks are conceived and the cross boundaries of media in order to construct a general understanding of intersubjective perception in visual and plastic arts and an understanding of the processes that determine works of art, reflective perception, and intersubjective experience. Although the argument is that perception is subjective and untransferable, (i.e., a unique personal experience) influenced by innumerable factors and bound to a specific context, there are some elements of perception which can be understood intersubjectively as they apply to human beings in general. The aim of defining these elements of perception is to examine the intermedial nature of and the intersubjective components of works of art. Richard Serra's work has been selected for the implicitness of intermedial and intersubjective perceptual processes involved in the conceptualisation and materialisation of his artistic creations. Serra's artworks are complex entities with multilayered semantics, and so are the processes and the conceptual definitions of the media used in his creations.

## Rocío von JUNGENFELD

### Intersubjectivity and Intermediality in the Work of Serra

The elements of intersubjectivity in visual and plastic arts are "artwork, artist, and perceiver," and these are essential for the multidirectional communication process to take place (Derrida, *Positions* 23). Art "mediates a dialogue, not between human beings and nature, but among persons in society" (Ingold 351). The said elements are integral in the work of Richard Serra, as his sculptures and films are conceived in the context of process: "the decision to work with 'processes' ... was also behind Serra's early films *Hand Catching Lead* (1968), *Hands Tied* (1968), *Hands Scraping* (1968), *Hands Lead Fulcrum* (1968), *Frame* (1969)" (Buchloh 5). Serra's list of verbs of action, "to roll, to crease, to fold, to store, to bend, to shorten" is sculptural, graphical and time based, all at once (Buchloh 8-9), and these procedural elements locate Serra's work in the context of intermediality. In other words, through written language (i.e., list of verbs) the process, the action in which artist, artwork, and perceiver are participating is made apparent. Rosalind Krauss identifies in Serra's work this constant process as temporal but not narrative "since there is no terminus, no proper destination" (16). Serra's work does not produce growth, progress, or development: "it is a time during which the action simply acts, and acts, and acts" (Krauss 16). In the context of intersubjectivity I agree with Krauss that there is no destination or narrative and that the artwork acts and acts as an intermedial continuum, but somehow this continuous action produces in the perceiver internal growth, a change, so that it actually achieves something, to engage and to reflect, as Jacques Derrida proposes (*Edmund Husserl's* 5-6). Art results from the necessity to communicate and to translate concepts into something graspable within a particular context. The background of the artist influences the resulting creation and so does the context for which the work is produced. Serra's early work is influenced by site specificity and by the sociocultural context for which it is conceived.

In a similar way to spoken and written language, in art the medium chosen to express, explain, or transmit concepts is fundamental to understanding the idiosyncrasies of a particular creation. Walter J. Ong suggests that "human communication, verbal and other, differs from the 'medium' model most basically in that it demands anticipated feedback in order to take place at all" (176). In the analysis of the language of art the term "medium" is used as it "suggests that communication is a pipeline transfer of units of material called 'information' from one place to another" (Ong 176). But, are the different visual and plastic languages of art merely pipelines and channels of transmission? The language of art, like any other language, is adapted to suite new situations and contexts and is reinvented and subverted (Lyotard 17). Following Jean-François Lyotard's notion, I postulate that artists like Serra tend to push the boundaries of media. In Serra's *Hand Catching Lead* and *Frame*, the black and white film is used in conjunction with the framing technique to experiment and explore the medium, thereby creating a different language. In other words, medium and concept need to communicate with each other, but both elements can still be distinguished and analysed separately: the medium is analysed from within in the action in the process of communication. In *Hand Catching Lead* the pieces fall vertically and rhythmically reflecting the filmic medium, the action is perpetual and self-referential, and the medium catches 24 frames per second in a vertical continuum. In a similar way, *Frame* refers to the filmic medium by framing the scene, reducing and compressing the space to a mere window opening in front of the viewer (i.e., perceiver), and converting space and time to bi-dimensional animated images: "At that time I was also making a sculpture called *Base Plate Measure* in which I was using measurement, it didn't seem to be very difficult to go from one measuring device in one material to another device in film" (Serra qtd. in Michelson 32). Thus, in Serra's films the medium is not only a container, but also a participant in the process of conceptualization and materialization. The artist borrows from one medium and incorporates it into another, whereby the medium is not only the container, but part of the message as well because the medium is used as process, as a loop of reflected action.

In relation to Marshall McLuhan's notion that "the 'content' of a medium is always another medium" (23) David Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin suggest that McLuhan conceived the medium as a colator of other media (45). The medium is not only container or means of transmission, but also carrier

of meaning, and this is the case with Serra's films. In Serra's art the media is message and wrapper and the artwork is the product that facilitates sensorial possibilities which reflect meaning. An artwork mediating between artist and perceiver also incorporates other media and thus becomes a "remediator" (Bolter and Grusin 55), subverting and reinventing the language of media. Amongst artists this understanding of media and creative processes is intersubjective, as artists are aware of the constraints imposed by the media. Limitations of media are part of the process of translation and of the language of art itself. In Serra's work, the medium is selected for its inherent qualities to translate and recall the subtleties of the original idea in an almost metaphysical way. With regard to sculpture Serra claims that "if you reduce sculpture to the flat place of a photograph, you're ... denying the temporal experience of the work ... reducing the sculpture to a different scale for the purposes of consumption ... denying the real content of the work" (Foster 159). Serra conceives sculpture as a series of processes where the presence of the individual perceiver is essential for the communication to actually take place. As said, this understanding of media is intersubjective, for choosing a concrete technique or a specific medium that communicates what is intended is almost an innate exercise of tacit knowledge. In the context of verbal and written communication Ong postulates that "communication is intersubjective," "some recipient must be present," and that in the process of creation the artist is confronted by "uncertainties" about who the perceiver will be and by this "fictionalization of the reader" the process becomes more complex (177).

When Serra uses industrial steel plates to create his processual sculptures, he chooses the specific material because of the "fact that the technological process is revealed depersonalizes and demythologizes the idealization of the sculptor's craft" (Serra qtd. in Crimp 158) but also because of the textural qualities the material itself transmits, as for example impenetrability, permanence, and stoutness. By manipulating the material Serra is able to challenge these qualities, bending the strict qualitative definition of the medium and incorporating lightness, elasticity, and mutability into the artwork. Hal Foster suggests that Serra's sculptural work "is not given beforehand but must be forever proposed, tested, reworked, and proposed again" (176). Thus the medium opens the possibility for the message to be transmitted from one individual to another in a process of intermediation. The message is the substance that gives body to the medium, but in the case of Serra also that which reflects upon and measures the medium itself. In visual and plastic arts, just like in verbal communication, the ability of an individual to communicate with others is dependent on and informed by the understanding of the concepts embedded in symbols and in the knowledge of the elements that represent the idea.

In the context of sculpture but also in that of verbal language, let us imagine an abstract concept such as "point." I am able to use the word point because I know the English word to refer to the abstract idea of a spherical minuscule element in space that is part of a line, a plane, and a Cartesian x-y-z space. Point: the word assigned to the concept can be translated into any language, or as Derrida suggests it can be "transformed" (*Positions* 20), since its internal essence and meaning is understood intersubjectively. Metaphorical abstraction is part of the process of understanding the concept of "point" and communicating it through a given language. Signs used in communication processes ought to be known by the perceiver to internalize and abstract the concepts embedded in the medium. The perceptual experience of an artwork is as tight to the emotional capabilities and cognitive abilities of the perceiver as to the ability of the artist to place him or herself in the skin of the perceiver during the creative process. Both, artist and perceiver "will have to possess the means of translating into these languages whatever they want to invent or learn" (Lyotard 4). Although in *The Postmodern Condition* Jean-François Lyotard refers to knowledge and language in computerised societies, this statement fits neatly within the context of art languages as well. Drawing from Lyotard's statement we could extract that artist and perceiver both need to be able to learn to translate in order to share intersubjective understanding.

The artist, in order to transfer the yet un-materialized concept, will select a medium or media. The capacity of the artist to understand intersubjectively the position of the perceiver helps him/her in the "translation" of concepts and the materialization of the work: "how the work alters a given site is the issue, not the persona of the author. Once the works are erected in a public space, they become other people's concerns" (Serra qtd. in Foster 158). The artist understands the autonomy of the artwork and its own power to communicate. Thus, in the process of production the artist reminds himself/herself

constantly that once the first "translation" (i.e., concept to artwork) has taken place, the sculpture will stand on its own and become the subject of perception (i.e., artwork to concept). In light of René Descartes's *Meditations*, while perception takes place, cognitive processes are activated as "I seem to see light, hear noise, and feel heat; this cannot be false, and this is ... called perceiving (*sentire*), which is nothing else than thinking" (*A Discourse* 90). Although it is unlikely that Descartes considered this within the frame of intersubjectivity, it is possible to argue that the notion *sentire* can be conceived as intersubjective amongst individuals: If "I seem to see ... hear ... feel," so can other individuals also perceive through their senses. To sense is to think is an intersubjective notion.

In the process of developing an understanding of the artwork, the perceiver will project himself/herself onto the medium. Closely related to Martin Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* (*Being and Time* 59, *Was ist Metaphysik?* 14-15), Juhani Pallasmaa indicates that "we behold, touch, listen and measure the world with our entire body, memory and identity. We are in constant dialogue and interaction with the environment, to the degree that it is impossible to detach the Self from its spatial and situational existence" (64). In the experience of sculptural language and in languages of art in general, this idea of situational existence, and thus phenomenological understanding of the surrounding, is relevant. The complex physiological, psychological, and cognitive processes in Serra's sculptures involve exploration, translation, and assimilation of the language spoken by the plasticity and visuality of space and place. It is while walking and moving that individuals understand space and their own position within, through a constantly shifting conversation between measurement (*logos*) and experimentation (perception). Charles-Eduard Le Corbusier, "one of the few architects spared by Serra in his general anathema" (Yve-Alain Bois 56), articulates it this way: "it is while walking, moving from one place to another, that one sees how the arrangements of the architecture develop" (Le Corbusier 24). This "while moving" also applies to Serra's sculptures as the artwork can be experienced entirely only while moving around and inside the piece. Jane Rendell describes this as "some lines only speak as you walk them" (183) and, ultimately, Serra's sculptures "talk" in a holistic manner only to the present perceiver.

In traditional visual and plastic arts communication is loaded with iconographic concepts which allow identification and interpretation and this language of art is focused and oriented towards representation. In the case of Serra's site specific work such as *Terminal* (1977), representation is less obvious but still present. *Terminal* was conceived for the city of Bochum, a hub of commuter traffic. The Corten steel plates compose the trapezoidal construction which stands as an implicit icon, as a cultural referent and social symbol of labor and the industrial state (i.e., the German industrial area of the Ruhr). The piece "was initially built in Kassel for Documenta 6" (Crimp 162) and later on relocated to the desired site specific context, i.e., Bochum. Serra's sculptures foster curiosity, intellectual thinking, and cognitive associations. This type of artwork allows the individual to project the self onto the sculpture in order to internalize language and to reflect upon the object of art. Pallasmaa analyzes the artwork as functioning "as another person, with whom one unconsciously converses" (66). Realistic or figurative representation is not required for an artwork to function as projection surface for the self: "emotions and feelings are projected onto the artwork. In doing so individuals are able to project and absorb what the artwork tells them about themselves" (Pallasmaa 66). The artwork with its constituent parts is for the perceiver a holistic experience in which *sensorium* and *intellectus* are activated, interpreting, interchanging and interacting with each other in a complex multidirectional cognitive process: "My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my 'comprehension'" (Merleau-Ponty 273).

In Serra's sculptures the visual and the tactile blend, since in the process of experiencing the artwork the perceiver is unable to untangle the complex matrix that these two senses, in combination with the other senses, create. While walking and embodying movement, the individual measures himself/herself against the sculpture; her/his skin looks and mirrors itself against the surface of the steel, and the "eyes touch" the edges, curves, and projection lines of the sculptural piece (Descartes, *A Discourse* 103). A piece of art, as Pallasmaa argues in *The Eyes of the Skin*, is a living element that functions as another person (66) regardless of the chemical composition of the material used in its construction: the artwork is alive and perceived in a particular context and a variety of factors will influence how the person engages with and perceives space and how he/she "think[s] through" it (Coyne

<<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/SPT/v10n3/coyne.html>>). Serra's *Street Levels* (1987) for the Kassel *Documenta 8* festival was installed in an urban context (Karlsstrasse, Kassel) for the duration of the arts festival. The artwork interrupted the transit of the street as passers-by encountered an unexpected obstruction: an H-shape piece lying horizontally on the street made of five steel plates of 3.37 meters high. This work has become accessible through photographs in catalogues (see Ferguson, McCall, Weyergraf-Serra), but the piece itself is not there anymore. In the photographic image, "being there" in that concrete geographical location and time is lost. As Serra commented before, not *Dasein* (i.e., being there) denies the real content of the work (Foster 159).

Public works of art, as in the case of *Street Levels*, might eventually disappear, but the experience offered by the installed piece will remain in the perceivers' *intellectum* for longer and become part of their personal way of understanding and processing sensorial information, and thus of thinking through the space the artwork once occupied: "for if we remove a stone from the space or place in which it was, we conceive that its extension also is taken away, because we regard this as particular, and inseparable from the stone, itself" (Descartes, *A Discourse* 204-05). If *Street Level* is the body and Karlsstrasse the space, for a complete understanding of the artwork the piece needs to be perceived *in situ*, or this particular quality and inseparable extension of the work is taken away. The feeling of surprise and strangeness triggered by encountering the artwork in the place for which it was conceived will help the perceiver to engage with and to understand art forms in the future. So if the perceiver happens to encounter a similar artwork as *Street Level* at some other stage of her/his life, he/she will be more likely to establish meaningful connections with the artwork and to discover the changes the installation of the artwork has provoked in the surrounding environment. This process of internalized perception is described by Friedrich Nietzsche in a rather strict and harsh way: "no one can extract from things, books included, more than he already knows. What one has no access to through experience one has no ear for" (90). The process of internalization, that of thinking through perception, is more sponge-like than what Nietzsche describes. In the context of "I sense, I think" the individual improvises his/her own understanding of the world through the senses and constructs associations between the current situation and past experiences. The perceiver might not be able to understand a language which he/she has not heard before, but through sensorial contact he/she will be able to start thinking and drawing connections with already acquired languages and concepts thus creating what Derrida calls the *différance*: "*différance* is a systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of spacing by means of which elements are related to each other" (*Postions* 27).

By learning and incorporating Serra's sculpture into the schema of things and thoughts the individual is able to construct intersubjectively and intermedially a mechanism for exploring, embracing, and understanding artistic manifestations. The process of perceptual and creative intersubjective experiences can nonetheless also be considered as two separate concepts, namely "inter" and "subject" whereby "inter" stands for the process of internalization in perception, for the process of absorbing and abstracting content from the medium in order to build on already assimilated and internalized concepts. Inter also refers to the space in-between and to the connections between the "I" and the world. Individual perception becomes shared knowledge and the artwork the facilitator of intermedial processes. Individual perceptual experiences can be compared to unique books within the innumerable books that compose the universal knowledge as Jorge Luis Borge puts it, "there are no two identical books" (69), yet the destruction of one of the books does not affect the global unlimited and periodical, sometimes even ungraspable, possibilities the library contains. When the term "subject" is separated from the process of internalization, perception turns out to be a personal position, an individualized understanding instead of a common, intersubjective one. The "I" experiences the world around through the body. I (subject 1) am able to mirror and introspect the self (subject 2) by experiencing the artwork (subject 3). In Serra's sculpture *Snake* (1996) installed in the Bilbao Guggenheim Museum, the perceiver (subject 1) enters the work (subject 3), and mirrors and measures him/herself (subject 2) against the surfaces of the sculpture. The steel ceases to be opaque and is transformed by the presence of the perceiver into a water-like surface for self-reflection. Henri Lefebvre holds that "beyond each plane surface, beyond each opaque form, 'one' seeks to apprehend something else" (183). This "something else" that Lefebvre refers to could be said to be the projected self. The artwork functions as an intersubjective entity which adapts to individual needs and is not an object but me-

dium and message simultaneously, a subject. *Snake* or *Street Level* and works of art in general can be understood as subjects (i.e., Pallasmaa's notion of architecture as "another person") upon which indefinite conversations can be established and perceptual positions taken.

The aim of a sculptural artwork such as *Snake* is to engage the perceiver in a reflective dialogue. Thus, for this dialogue between steel and perceiver to happen, the artist had to sketch, transfer, "metaphorize," and translate one thing (idea) into another thing (artwork). Serra discusses this process of translation in an interview with Liza Béar, in which he acknowledges that different approaches might be taken depending on the piece, so that "some works are realized from their inception to their completion totally at the site. Other pieces are worked out in the studio" (Serra 72). In another interview with ART:21 Serra claims his artworks are not metaphors. He is saying that through his steel sculptures he deals with physicality, with process but not with images or preconceived ideas. If metaphor is considered in representational terms, then surely his sculptural works are not metaphorical. He starts with process not with drawings (representations) and experiments with volume, plasticity, and movement *in situ* and he defines his process of "translation" as a "continuous hands-on procedure ... allows me to perceive structures I could not imagine" (Serra 72). Nevertheless it could be argued that in the process of translation, of transfer, metaphor still applies to his creative practice. Through volume, elasticity, tensions, and inflection he explores the language of the material, plays with the transformation of steel plates into curved and tilted planes which will later be transferred and scaled up. His creative process is thereby exteriorized and opened to the public and his gigantic sculptures welcome and embrace the perceivers.

In relation to his sculptures at the Bilbao Guggenheim Museum Serra notes that he "was surprised that people who had absolutely no information about sculpture would be able to enter into these pieces and find a certain amount of, engagement with the sculpture in ways that they probably hadn't before" (Serra, "Places" <<http://video.pbs.org/video/1230660017>>). This ability to engage with artworks is what could be described as intersubjective perception. Although he mentions that his work "has nothing to do with architecture, nothing to do with landscape, to do with buildings or mountains" the perceiving subject is still able to draw upon his/her own understanding of the world (Serra, "Places" <<http://video.pbs.org/video/1230660017>>). The perceiver employs the mechanisms developed in other areas (e.g., architecture, landscape) and reinvents them in the context of the sculptures. Through the phenomenological experience of "being there" the individual is capable of participating in the sculptural process. By moving along perceivers are able to measure the sculpture against their bodies. This language of metaphor applies to humans in an intersubjective way, and like in perception, in the process of translation the "inter" stands for the reflexion on the internal and its relation with the context and "subjective" stands for the unique way in which the internal world is made apparent. The "translation" is a dialogue between the inside (idea) and the outside (artwork). This dialogue between the internal and external world could also be analyzed applying Gaston Bachelard's perspective whereby the outside is the physical, that which is "there" for the body to perceive and the inside is the mental world, that which is triggered by the senses (xxxv).

In conclusion, Serra's public sculptures deal with the concepts of permanence and change, with process and action. The delicate and indefinite boundary between artwork and perceiver is changing continuously and exists somewhere between physical space and the body. In Serra's work the threshold between perceiver and sculpture — for example in the Bilbao sculpture — are experienced while walking through the bending and tilted sheets of steel. The subtleties and intricacies of the artwork are embodied and despite individual perception the work is understood intersubjectively. The processes of creation, existence, and perception are tightly interwoven in Serra's sculptures. Similarly, complex interrelations are encountered in contemporary intermedial artworks and installations, as digital communication technologies embedded in everyday life have reshaped the language of art. Further, the recognition of the self in artworks created by digital means and contained in computerized devices diverge from that of analogue in that mind and body perceive, reflect and interact with the piece and context in a different way (Turkle 6). The reflection of the self is that which is not me but is still part of me being able to see myself in it. This intersubjective knowledge of self-reflection, the projected "I," is what transforms the artwork into a medium of communication. In Serra's sculptures the perceiver is not exposed to digital media, although the analogue medium and materials challenge the

traditional understanding of art and sculptural language. His work is not about representation, but about process, movement, measure, *Dasein*, and the phenomenology of place. Although individual perception is not transferrable, it is somehow shared, as the artist in the process of creation positions himself as perceiver to understand the intersubjective qualities of the artwork. This shared intersubjective knowledge does not need to be verbalized, since artists understand the creative processes of other artists and the sensorial experiences of perceivers. Thus, the "subjective" is simultaneously idea, artist, artwork, and perceiver in an intersubjective context. The shared ground of intersubjectivity might reside in the process of translation. Nevertheless, the subjective part of the term plays a major role within the concept of intersubjectivity.

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Author's profile: Rocío von Jungenfeld, a digital design and media scholar, is affiliated with Complutense University Madrid. In her research and practice she focuses on urban studies, digital media, and intermediality. Among her recent projects is *Weaving the City* (2008-2011). E-mail: <[rocio.jungenfeld@gmail.com](mailto:rocio.jungenfeld@gmail.com)>