

## **Richard Serra – Thinking on Your Feet**

### **A film by Maria Anna Tappeiner**

The first big documentary film on the American sculptor Richard Serra (b. 1939 in San Francisco), focuses around his work "The Matter of Time" which was a \$20-million commission by the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. The artist set up there a space-encompassing, site-specific installation which is composed of eight big steel sculptures the overall weight of which is 1208 tons. This is the biggest sculptural commission that was developed as yet for a concrete space. These sculptures reach the limits of what is feasible as concerns size, form and technology. The film accompanies their emergence from the first idea, over the production process until the installation itself in May 2005 in Bilbao. The group of sculptures was fabricated in Germany, where Richard Serra has many of his works manufactured.

The installation in Bilbao is tied to his 1999 temporary presentation at the same place and develops further forms and elements within his "Torqued Ellipses, Spirals, Toruses and Spheres" series which were created over the last years. These works amalgamate with Frank O. Gehry's spectacular architecture of the museum. There are certainly a number of parallels between Serra's sculptures and the architecture, such as the use of material, the sheer size or the necessary statistical calculation – but still, his works are not subordinated to any functionality. They constitute much more a criticism of functionality, they challenge it by a comparable dimension and reveal their imperfection. Beside the physicality of space, they also open up a room that creates a strong psychological impact on the viewer since the movement of the spectator plays a central role. The forms appear to be unstable and consist mostly of curved and bent forms which seem to move toward the spectator. At the same time, they move away from the viewer creating thus a feeling of insecurity and potential danger. Despite of their material and monumental size, the sculptures appear to be elegant and light.

Beside the works he conceived for interiors, Richard Serra has also realized many outdoor installations. One of his most controversial sculptures is "Terminal" which he created for the "documenta"

exhibition and which in 1979 was moved to its final location at the Bochum Central Station. Like many of his former works, "Terminal" consists of vertical, geometric steel-plates which press on from one to another and create an open and accessible space. His sculptures do not have anything in common with monuments or memorials. They neither have a narrative element nor do they represent anything else but the context and themselves. The specific characteristic of the place is crucial for Serra's outside sculptures. However, he explicitly disapproves "Furnishing public places with modern art". For him, in most cases, those modern art pieces are but "First drafts designed in the studio and adapted to the location". Each of his own drafts is preceded by an in-depth analysis of the space. If the installation is disassembled later on, then in Richard Serra's view it is destroyed. This happened in 1989 with "Tilted Arc" on the Federal Plaza in New York when the installation was removed owing to massive public and political pressure.

The film observes how the huge work commissioned for Bilbao comes into being. At the same time, it looks for points of intersection with former works. The film includes a detailed interview with Richard Serra, and also statements and comments from people he has closely worked with. Among them number his longtime rigger Ernst Fuchs, his companion and gallery owner Alexander von Berswordt as well as the composer and fellow student Philip Glass.

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Richard Serra – Thinking on Your Feet | A film by Maria Anna Tappeiner | Camera: Jürgen Behrens | Sound: Henning Schiller | Editing: Brigitte Warken-Könings | Commissioning Editors: Reinhard Wulf, Inge Classen | Format: Digi Beta 16:9 | Running Time: 93'25" | Produced by Westdeutscher Rundfunk as a co-production with Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen 2005

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