

Francesco Spampinato

Richard Serra: Sculpture, television, and the status quo 2015

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15196>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Spampinato, Francesco: Richard Serra: Sculpture, television, and the status quo. In: *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, Jg. 4 (2015), Nr. 2, S. 31–49. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15196>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://doi.org/10.5117/NECSUS2015.2.SPAM>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Keine Bearbeitungen 4.0 Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial - No Derivatives 4.0 License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

Richard Serra: Sculpture, television, and the status quo

Francesco Spampinato

NECSUS 4 (2): 31–49

DOI: 10.5117/NECSUS2015.2.SPAM

Abstract

While he is appreciated primarily as a sculptor, Richard Serra also made several films and videos in the 1960s and 1970s which have a pivotal role in both the history of avant-garde film and the development of early video art. This article takes into account this ‘collateral’ production, suggesting that Serra’s work is not merely formalist or materialist. Rather, as his video work suggests, his larger sculptural works and conceptual approach require a re-interpretation as commentaries on social and political issues. This essay focuses on the artist’s videos, reading them as an extension of both his films and his sculptural production, but which takes a more explicit stance than either. The essay will also take into account the similarities between Serra’s stance and that of the contemporary Guerrilla Television movement, trying to position them within the articulated history of the relationships between contemporary art and mass media.

Keywords: art, politics, conceptual art, Guerrilla Television, minimalism, performance art, Raindance Corporation, Richard Serra, Rosalind Krauss, sculpture, television, video art

1 Introduction

Richard Serra emerged in the 1960s in association with minimalism and land art – two conceptual art movements that speculated on the potentialities of sculpture to affect the space (and therefore the context) in which the work of art is installed or for which it is specifically conceived. Similarly to other conceptual artists (e.g. Lawrence Weiner, Robert Smithson, Robert Morris), Serra’s sculptural research is based on the exploration of ‘process’,

'repetition', and 'serial progression', employed as allegorical features of modern industrial production and communication.

While he is appreciated primarily as a sculptor, Serra also made several films and videos in the 1960s and 1970s which have a pivotal role in both the history of avant-garde film and the development of early video art. This article will take into account this 'collateral' production, suggesting that Serra's work is not merely formalist or materialist. Rather, as his video work suggests, his larger sculptural works and conceptual approach require a re-interpretation as commentaries on social and political issues.

A sort of manifesto to introduce the artist's conceptual approach to sculpture is his early *Verb List* (1967-68), a simple list of 108 transitive verbs in four columns that suggest a series of actions to be performed in order to modify natural and artificial materials: to roll, to fold, to bend, to cut, to curve, to hook, to bundle, to heap, etc. Indeed, most of these actions are at the base of Serra's site-specific artworks, which range from splashes of lead against the wall of a studio or exhibition space to heavy and abstract accumulations and structures made of wood, stone, and in most cases steel and lead.

When performed at galleries or museums, 'to splash' lead was an act of reclaiming authority over the way art is presented and usually given intellectual and commercial value; the same could be said for the following and more monumental props, spirals, and walls that radically alter the viewer's perception. The social implications of this sculptural production are more evident in Serra's open space installations. To invest the public sphere with art means to affect the life of everyday people and challenge a much larger series of conventions and functions associated with the city and its infrastructures.

To Encircle Base Plate Hexagram, Right Angles Inverted (1970) consisted of a 26-foot wide (8 meters) steel ring embedded into a derelict street in the Bronx, a neighborhood recognised at that time as a symbol of decay and abandonment. The piece was an act of urban intervention, calling attention to a figurative 'hole' in the city which stood for the lack of civic responsibility over gentrification. Another controversial and more popular public art project was *Tilted Arc* (1981), a 100-foot long (37 meters) and 12-foot high (3.7 meters) steel wall, slightly tilted, which disrupted the function of a federal plaza, pointing at social and economic inequalities that were being performed through the activities of the state employees working in the surrounding buildings.

The social discourse implicit in Serra's site-specific interventions, particularly those in the public sphere, is made explicit in his moving image

works. These could be divided into two groups: 16 mm films mainly concerned with sculptural issues, and videos that explore the influence of mass media (more specifically, television) on society. The first group includes *Hand Catching Lead* (1968), *Hands Scraping* (1968), and *Hands Tied* (1968), whose titles alone are illustrative of their content. Defined by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh as 'sculptural films', they explore the nature of sculpture as a process based on repetitive movements. With this group we can also associate *Railroad Turnbridge* (1976) and *Steelmill / Stahlwerk* (1979), a film that focused on construction and industrial production, seen from both a material and a social point-of-view.

The second group of moving image works Serra produced includes three videos that comment on mass media as devices of control. *Television Delivers People* (1973) consists of a series of sentences scrolling on a plain background that comment on the power of television to turn its audience into a product. In *Boomerang* (1974) the artist Nancy Holt describes the sensation of displacement she feels while listening to her voice through headphones with a one-second delay. Finally, *The Prisoner's Dilemma* (1974) is a studio-scale production that compares a television game show to a police interrogation, suggesting a subliminal connection between entertainment and surveillance.

After a few thoughts on Serra's 16 mm films this essay will focus on the artist's videos, reading them as an extension of both his films and his sculptural production and which take a more explicit stance than either. Despite the peripheral position they occupy in comparison with the well-known sculptures and site-specific installations, these videos illuminate the ethos behind a production that is mostly abstract and not immediately legible according to social paradigms. This essay will also take into account the similarities between Serra's stance and that of the contemporary Guerilla Television movement, trying to position them within the articulated history of the relationships between contemporary art and mass media.

The revolutionary conceptual feature of Minimalism and site-specificity (in art historical terms) was its theatricality – as Michael Fried famously put it in the 1967 essay 'Art and Objecthood', which attacked Minimalism while at the same time helping to define it. Far from theatre itself, the concept of 'theatricality' refers to the fact that artists like Serra used minimal but also massive abstract structures to expose the strategy of viewership implied in an exhibition space. By inviting them to walk around or through the piece, Minimalist structures suggest that the viewers become more aware of their surroundings, where the surroundings extend beyond the exhibition space to social reality itself.

2 The sculptural films

Serra's first three films are all from 1968 and can be read as a sort of trilogy: *Hand Catching Lead*, *Hands Tied*, and *Hands Scraping*. *Hand Catching Lead* features a single shot of a forearm and hand on a white background. For three minutes the hand tries to catch small sheets of metal as they drop from above, one after the other, temporarily occupying the space of the image. The hand performs the same movement for the whole film, opening and closing the fingers against the palm, again and again, mostly missing and sometimes catching the falling lead. When the hand catches the lead the sequence is interrupted for a moment, until the lead is released.



Fig. 1: *Hand Catching Lead* (Richard Serra, 1968), 16 mm black-and-white film, silent, 3:30 min. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery.

The purpose of the film is not to show a progressive action, and it is definitely not built around a narrative; repetition itself constitutes its content and medium. In her 1977 book *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, to discuss Minimalism, Rosalind Krauss talks about 'repetition as a way of composing'.¹ Among other artworks she mentions *Hand Catching Lead*. To support her argument, Krauss quotes a 1964 essay by artist Donald Judd, where he states: '[t]he order is not rationalistic and underlying, but is simply order, like that of continuity, one thing after another.'²

This idea of 'one thing after another', which we see in Judd as well as Serra, Dan Flavin, Carl Andre, Robert Smithson, and others, is central to understanding the attempt of Minimalism to escape representation and to 'deny the logical importance of the interior space of forms', as Krauss put it, 'an interior space which much of previous twentieth-century sculpture had celebrated'.³ Like the public sculptures and interventions mentioned above, which challenged the preconceptions associated with public art, *Hand Catching Lead* challenges the concept of art-making itself, questioning whether or not in making a sculpture it is enough for an artist to interact with materials rather than achieving a representative objectified form.

Hands Tied is a three-minute single shot of two hands tied together with a cord around the wrists. Twisting and shaking, the two hands untie the knots and free themselves. In *Hands Scraping* we see two male pairs of hands (Serra and musician and renowned minimalist composer Philip Glass) shoveling, sweeping, and wiping up steel filings piled on a wood floor. These two films are based on a similar idea to *Hand Catching Lead*: they show hands performing the same given actions over and over – actions that are also metaphorical of sculptural processes.

Benjamin H. D. Buchloh defines Serra's films as 'sculptural films' because 'they are neither purely sculptural, if this implies the acceptance of certain conventions regarding materials and procedures, nor do they unequivocally obey the specific formal principles of film, a hybrid form combining narrative elements with a photographic image language'.⁴ In other words, Serra's films use the processes and materials of sculpture without becoming sculpture themselves. Rather, we can consider them as sculptures in the form of films – that is, filmed instructions of how to make a sculpture; the pure illustration of a process rather than the making of a product; a logical visual accompaniment to the *Verb List*.

About a decade after this trilogy Serra made other two 16 mm films dealing with sculptural elements: *Railroad Turnbridge* (1976) and *Steelmill / Stahlwerk* (1979). The former is a series of shots taken on the Burlington and Northern Bridge over the Willamette River near Portland, Oregon as it

opens to let a ship pass. The film bears clear influences of Soviet avant-garde directors such as Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov and their fascination with factories, metals, and mechanics. A highlight of the film is its metalinguistic nature derived from presenting the end of the bridge as a framing device for the external landscape – an eye that is the extension of that of the camera, which is also an extension of the human eye controlling it.

Steelmill / Stahlwerk, in collaboration with his wife Clara Weyergraf, is a documentary about the construction of one of his large steel sculptures which was destined for Documenta 6 (1977) and paid for by an art dealer. The film was shot in the steel mill of Hartingen, Ruhr Valley, Germany, right before a massive national steel strike. Serra, who worked for eight years in a steel mill in California to pay his undergraduate studies, and whose father had worked in a factory for his whole life, deeply identified with the lives and stories of the workers featured in the film and the sense of alienation, hopelessness, and disinterest in the products they produced.



Fig. 2: *Steelmill / Stahlwerk* (Richard Serra, 1979), 16 mm black-and-white film, sound, 29:00 min. Collaborator: Clara Weyergraf.

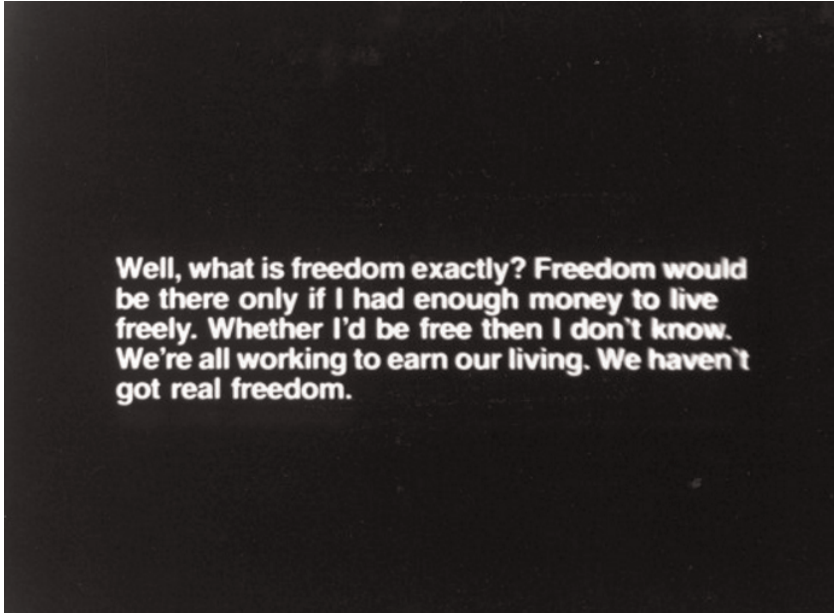


Fig. 3: Steelmill / Stahlwerk

The result is a political operation as well as a work of institutional critique. 'I wanted to take a more explicit look at where I stood in relation to a museum commission for a piece which people kill themselves to make',⁵ Serra said to Annette Michelson in a 1979 interview for the journal *October*. The first part of the film consists of interviews with the workers while the second part focuses on the industrial environment and its sound. The making of a massive steel sculpture is presented as a fascinating material process, but the film also shows the contextual labor conditions that make possible the construction of a 'work of art', thus putting the cultural and social implications of art itself into crisis, as well as the role of the artist as a mere passive facilitator in a self-celebratory system.

The trilogy of films from 1968 represents a clear attempt by the artist to move from sculpture as product to sculpture as process. Serra had opted for process over product since his early 'splashes' of lead. However, the splashed lead solidified, and what remained after the performance was the objectified memory of the act. With the films the process is not only enacted but also reenacted over and over without ever reaching a productive stage. Although assuming a documentary format, *Steelmill / Stahlwerk* achieves a similar dysfunctional goal: it shows materials and procedures, also the inequalities and exploitative labor conditions that enable industrial production as well as the artwork as a commodity.

3 Searching for feedback

Following Krauss' and Buchloh's essays or reading the interview between Serra and Michelson could lead us to interesting thoughts about Serra's films as an extension of his sculptural practice; also to trace analogies with other artists working in the same years with similar concerns but in different media: installation (Robert Smithson), performance (Joan Jonas), music (Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Terry Riley), film (Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, Andy Warhol), and dance (Yvonne Rainer). However, it is worth lingering with the elements these interpretations leave out: Serra's concerns for social issues (politics, economy, and mass media) as they emerge from the videos he produced in 1973 and 1974.

To start, we should again quote Krauss, this time her 1976 essay 'Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism', one of the most influential essays to interpret early video art. Here Krauss presents the video performances of artists like Vito Acconci, Peter Campus, and Lynda Benglis, as well as Serra's *Boomerang* (1974), a video realised in collaboration with artist Nancy Holt. Krauss interprets these video works through the lens of narcissism, borrowing the thought of the mirror as a mechanism of self-construction from French psychoanalyst Jaques Lacan.

According to Krauss, the specificity of video as a medium is its simultaneity, which allows artists to use its apparatus (a camera connected to a screen) as a mirror. In *Centers* (1971), Acconci points his finger at the center of the camera in order to center his own reflection simultaneously broadcast onto a screen. In *Now* (1973), Benglis interacts with a previously-recorded image of herself on a screen. By doing so she enacts a multiple set of relationships between her, her live media image, and her pre-recorded media image. An infinite series of interactions could be imagined, questioning the position the real Benglis occupies, what is live and what is objectified, and whether it is enough for a human being to be embedded in a media apparatus to lose perception of his/her real self.

Both Acconci and Benglis here deal with a virtual representation of themselves searching (as if in front of a mirror) for feedback from their objectified selves. Interestingly enough, both of the works deal with the equation time/space, suggesting that media devices alter the natural coordinates we rely on in order to orient ourselves. Both videos show an attempt of the artist to control the media apparatus. Acconci seems to be more concerned with space – to point at the center of the screen means to search for a balance between real and virtual space. Benglis is more interested in time – each action and interaction between the performing

images is accompanied by the reiterated word 'now', symbolic of the search for a correspondence between the present time of the real performance and the present-less 'now' of the media reality.

In Serra's *Boomerang* the search is similar, but achieved through the audio component of the video apparatus. In this case we do not see Serra himself but instead the artist Nancy Holt, who describes the disorienting feelings of listening to her delayed voice through headphones. The video does not explore a moving image but rather the sensation of displacement that audio/video devices produce. Therefore, Holt says,

I have the feeling that I am not where I am [...] I feel that this place is removed from reality [...] I am throwing things out in the world and they are boomeranging back [...] I am surrounded by me and my mind surrounds me.

The gap between the simultaneous image and the echo of her voice produces displacement. The performer feels her body as an external object.



Fig. 4: *Boomerang* (Richard Serra, 1974), single-channel video, color, sound, 10:00 min. Collaborator: Nancy Holt.

Like Acconci's *Centers* and Benglis' *Now*, Serra's *Boomerang* is representative of that specific moment in which video devices become more pervasive in Western society – particularly in the United States, where Serra and most of the artists under discussion are from. Closed-circuit systems of surveillance started to become widespread inside banks, federal buildings, and airports, while television between the 1960s and early 1970s was a permanent fixture in the house of every American, in most cases already for more than a decade. To investigate the effects of displacement produced by video devices is a way for these artists to question the strategies enacted by political and economic power systems to produce consensus and achieve control.

However, Krauss' interest in psychoanalysis and the metalinguistic mechanisms of art production provoked her to overlook the social implications of these early video performances, as stated 30 years later by the younger American theorist David Joselit. Through a series of articles and the book *Feedback* (2007), Joselit reframed these works within a larger context that gave full consideration to the increasing role of CCTV and television in Western society at that time. Regarding Acconci, for instance, Joselit writes that '[h]is narcissism – if that is what it is – is a thoroughly social act that interpellates the spectator as an object and an other.'⁶In other words, according to Joselit, when Acconci centers the camera he is not pointing only at himself but also at the presumed spectator of the screen, who in most cases is also a spectator of television.

With this revisionist approach, Joselit reintegrated phenomena that had been overlooked, forgotten, or kept apart from this early video art phase of art history – phenomena like the underground movement known as Guerrilla Television. The intentions of artists like the New York collective Raindance Corporation, indeed, were not so different from Acconci's or Serra's. Inspired by the words of Marshall McLuhan and Umberto Eco, and with more accessible cameras in hand (like the Sony Portapak), the Raindance Corporation talked about 'feedback' in the pages of the magazine *Radical Software* and in the book *Guerrilla Television* – two influential publications edited by the members of the collective.

Serra realised his video works in the same years of Guerrilla Television. As an underground movement that was part of a larger countercultural revolution, the activists involved in collectives like the Raindance Corporation did not define their productions as artworks but rather as forms of alternative journalism or experiments in communication. Conversely, Serra's films and videos were born and interpreted from an avant-garde art perspective, which diminished their social and political value. It is mainly

for this reason that Serra, as he had already done with his public installations, looked for a generic audience for one of his videos. His work *Television Delivers People* (1973) was broadcast by the stations WNET in New York and WTTW in Chicago.

4 You are the product of television

One of the main ideas put forward by the Guerrilla Television movement was the difference between *process* and *product*. According to the filmmakers and activists behind the movement, like the Raindance Corporation, information is a process in which the user should have a part and not just be a product. This is why they try to film a more objective reality than that proposed by television networks, shooting in the streets, interviewing random passersby, and going behind the scenes of media events like presidential election campaigns and massive youth gatherings like the Woodstock music festival.

According to Krauss' interpretation, certain early video performances are narcissistic because the performer looks at his/her own image live on a screen without recognising him/herself, looking for feedback that never arrives. It is like the Greek myth of Narcissus, who saw his own reflection in the water of a river and fell in love with it, not realising it was merely an image. The aim of the people behind the Guerrilla Television movement is very different: to address the members of the audience directly, helping them to actually see themselves and take responsibility as the protagonists of a process.

Serra made *Television Delivers People* a year before *Boomerang*, in collaboration with Carlota Fay Schoolman; a series of messages in white Times New Roman font scroll on the screen, on an electric blue background, accompanied by a lounge music soundtrack. The first message is 'The product of Television, Commercial Television, is the Audience', which reflects the same stance as the Raindance Corporation. They both agree that television, like advertising, has developed a strong set of strategies to control and manipulate its viewers. This includes the use of specific sounds, colors, content, and language.

'Mass media means that a medium can deliver masses of people', Serra's video states. 'You are delivered to the advertiser who is the customer...he consumes you.' Also, 'You are the end product.' The terms 'consumer' and 'product' are used in an unusual way. Their relative positions and relationship to each other is turned upside down. The audience is not even pre-

sented as an audience of ‘consumers’, as it normally is, but as the end product of a process of brainwashing through which education, information, and entertainment are packaged and presented as an advertising campaign – not, however, to sell products, but to wrap up the ultimate product: the audience itself.

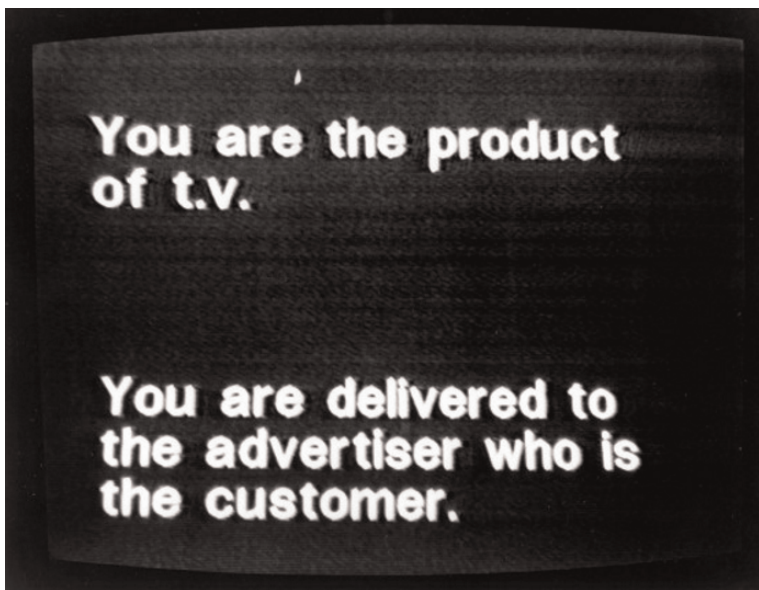


Fig. 5: Television Delivers People (Richard Serra, 1973), single-channel video, color, sound, 5:55 min. Collaborator: Carlota Fay Schoolman.

Another point of convergence between *Television Delivers People* and the Guerrilla Television movement is that both suggest that there are hidden relationships between entertainment and the status quo in the United States. Another statement in Serra's video is 'The NEW MEDIA STATE is predicated on media control', where the 'new media state' is very similar to the concept of 'Media-America' developed by the Raindance Corporation. 'In Media-America, our information structures are so designed as to minimize feedback',⁷ we read in the Guerrilla Television book. Serra's video continues with 'Commercial television defines the world so as not to threaten the status quo', suggesting that commercial television serves the interest and logic of the government, which uses media as a propaganda machine.

A more recent and advanced understanding of the role of television as an instrument to maintain the status quo emerges from Jonathan Beller's *The Cinematic Mode of Production* (2006), in which the media theorist proposes an illuminating reading of the act of looking as labor. 'Cinema and its suc-

ceeding (if still simultaneous), formations, particularly television, video, computers, and the internet, are deterritorialized factories,' he asserts, 'in which spectators work, that is, in which we perform value-productive labor.'⁸In other words, whereas Serra and the Raindance Corporation acknowledged that the audience performed the role of a commodity to be sold by broadcasters to advertisers, 30 years later, in a much more articulated and pervasive media system, Beller states that the audience produces commodities and consensus even just by looking at the screen.

At the base of Serra's, the Raindance Corporation's, and Beller's statements there is the same acknowledgment of television as an instrument of physical and psychological manipulation. It is physical because it forces the audience into a position of passive immobility, becoming the center of that apparatus of control that is the house. Once the viewer is reduced to a passive position television operates on the psychological side through soporific formats, images, and sounds that induce almost psychotropic states of mind in the audience. Exemplary in this sense is Serra's use of Muzak as the soundtrack of the video – a genre also dubbed 'easy listening' or 'lounge music', normally conceived as background music for television or non-places like airports and shopping malls.

Searching for a way out of this coercive apparatus, in the pages of *Guerrilla Television*, we read, '[o]nly through a radical redesign of the information structure to incorporate two-way, decentralized inputs can Media-America optimize the feedback it needs to come back to its senses.'⁹Both Serra and the *Guerrilla Television* movement suggest that the audience should become more aware of the processes behind media information and entertainment, possibly taking part in them, and more or less explicitly invoke a decentralisation of media. A slow process of decentralisation is what supposedly begins in the 1970s and 1980s with the multiplication of channels via cable television, and later on with the ultimate decentralised production and distribution system: the Internet. However, as Beller suggests, after an initial utopian phase, with the rise of the Internet 'perception is increasingly bound to production'.¹⁰

Serra reminds us of the social aspect of his films and videos on many occasions. In the same interview with Michelson quoted above, he establishes an interesting comparison between *Television Delivers People* and *Steelmill*:

[...] in neither film was I worried about the self-reflexive quality, the material as such. I decided that there was something worthwhile to say directly to people, and I just chose devices for presenting the material that I thought could reach a large audience. I thought that the easiest way to do that was the most

direct way [...] With some work, I have decided to use the medium to communicate explicitly. I have used that form when I've felt there was something politically valid to say.¹¹

Television Delivers People was made in the New York studio of WNET, who also broadcast it. The video was also shown in Chicago on WTTW, receiving reviews by the generic press. Even though it did not disrupt television, it certainly changed its usual mode of operation for roughly seven minutes, enacting a metalinguistic intervention of counter-information. In the hands of Serra, as in the operations of the Guerrilla Television movement, video assumes the position of an anti-establishment medium. However, Serra's operation does not go so far as to put the camera in the streets or to idealise an alternative to television; nonetheless, it explicitly exposes the structure of commercial television.

Recalling the artist's public interventions, like the steel ring embedded into a derelict street of the Bronx of 1970 and later the *Tilted Arc* (1980), they are in direct association with the manner that *Television Delivers People* was conceived: as a way to use art to convey a social message directed to a generic audience of consumers, to make them realise they are under control of a series of power systems and to make them understand their potential and responsibility as agents of change. The filmmakers and activists behind the Guerrilla Television movement were doing exactly the same.

5 Television, games, and surveillance

Television Delivers People could be easily linked with the steel mill film that was connected with the sculptural films earlier on in the essay, as Serra himself suggests, but also with the video performance *Prisoner's Dilemma* (1974). Michelson goes even further, suggesting that the three works constitute a sort of trilogy which reflects Serra's concerns for social issues more explicitly than his other works. 'They seem to have a particular status within your work that has to do with document, that has to do with engagement with concrete social issues in a way which is less elaborately mediated by formal concerns than in your other work',¹² she observes.

Prisoner's Dilemma is a video in two parts: the first was pre-recorded and the second consists of a performance filmed live at 112 Greene Street, a non-profit art space in Soho, New York. The space was transformed into a television studio and divided into two parts by a light cardboard wall, with

the audience watching the monitors on one side and the artist and his crew (three cameramen, technicians, and the performers) on the other side. The cardboard wall produced a sort of imaginary boundary between what the audience heard coming live from the other side of the wall, and what it saw mediated on the screens.

The 40-minute long *Prisoner's Dilemma* was based on game theory, mixing elements from commercial television and criminal interrogations, where a prize or punishment occurs depending on whether the subject answers A or B to specific and often ambiguous questions. 'What I did in *Prisoner's Dilemma* was to use a particular game theory as a way to direct a situation which was close enough to commercial TV to be able to expose its format at the same time',¹³ Serra confessed to Liza Bear in a 1974 interview for the performance art journal *Avalanche*.

The first part of the video is an imitation of a criminal interrogation, which recalls contemporary police television shows. Before the beginning of the live performance an audio documentary on the methods used in criminal interrogations (made by Serra's older brother Robert Bell) was played to the audience, followed by the broadcast of the video. Both the audiotape and the videotape exposed the methods used in criminal interrogations, which are based on the coercive power of authorities to make a suspect confess a crime despite his potential innocence.



Fig. 6: *Prisoner's Dilemma* (Richard Serra, 1974), black-and-white, sound, 60 min. Collaborator: Robert Bell.

The dilemma is the suspect's, to confess or not to confess, but also the spectator's, who would take a position and judge the questioned subject – a position the spectator takes both in front of a real police interrogation, or trial, and a television program. 'What's interesting on American television is that you don't know whether the moral sympathies of the country go one way or the other',¹⁴ Serra says in the same interview.

The artist's crew included friends and colleagues like actor Spalding Gray, actor and future performance studies theorist Richard Schechner, film directors Babette Mangolte and Robert Fiore, and producer Mark Obenhaus. Schechner and Gray – both later associated with the avant-garde theatre collective Wooster Group – were the protagonists of the first pre-recorded part of the video, which was mainly scripted and even had a separate title: *Cops and Robbers*. Gray and another performer take on the role of suspects asked to implicate each other, while Schechner plays the district attorney. 'It says here, "I confess to the killing of Mr. Angelo" [...]', observes Schechner. 'Oh no wait a minute, this isn't my handwriting', replies Gray. 'Now, if you sign this, you'll turn state's evidence, you'll be free to go', insists the interrogator.

The second part of the video was filmed live at 112 Greene. 'The ambience is festive and self-knowing', observed Pamela Lee in a recent essay, and 'is more user friendly [in comparison with the first half of the work], for the interactions between its participants are less scripted'.¹⁵ Here the two performers are the art critic Bruce Boice and the renowned art dealer Leo Castelli. Serra put them in front of each other as the candidates of a television quiz show, suggesting a comparison between a quiz show and a police interrogation that is a comparison between television and governmental authorities. 'Tonight we're going to play the game you've just seen in the video tape', announces Serra's brother in the role of the television host/interrogator. Considering the roles the two performers played in real life, Serra also suggested a sort of confrontation between art as idea and art as market, which is also an ethical fight that every artist faces at some point. Neither Boice nor Castelli decided to rat on the other, so they were sent to the basement for four hours as a symbolic punishment.

The whole project was based on the idea that television, like governmental authorities during an interrogation (policeman or district attorney), has the power to manipulate our choices, to make us take positions that we would not necessarily take outside of that specific situation, to confess crimes we would have never committed, to answer 'yes' to questions we would normally answer 'no'. In other words, television has the power to produce consensus, and that power is in the hands of the govern-

ment and a few corporations that endorse the interests of television's moguls in exchange for control.



Fig. 7: Prisoner's Dilemma

It was already mentioned that during the 1980s Serra was at the center of a massive controversy following the public installation of *Tilted Arc* in front of the Jacob Javits Federal Building in Manhattan, which was removed after eight years. Serra used art to comment on politics even more explicitly in the 2006 Whitney Biennial, where the artist exhibited a drawing representing one of the shameful photographs of torture at the Abu Grahیب prison. The drawing was paired with the message 'Stop Bush'. Although very different from each other, both these works reflect the same social and political concerns Serra expressed through his videos.

As mentioned before, the theatricality of Minimalism consisted in exposing the strategy of viewership implied in the exhibition space. Through the videos discussed in this article, Serra suggested that our daily environment, like the exhibition space, is controlled by systems of power (politics, economy, mass media) which manipulate us and make us their product. Another message from *Television Delivers People* is 'Popular Entertainment is basically propaganda for the status quo', which suggests that media entertainment is a strategy adopted by governments and corporations to control the citizens of a given country.

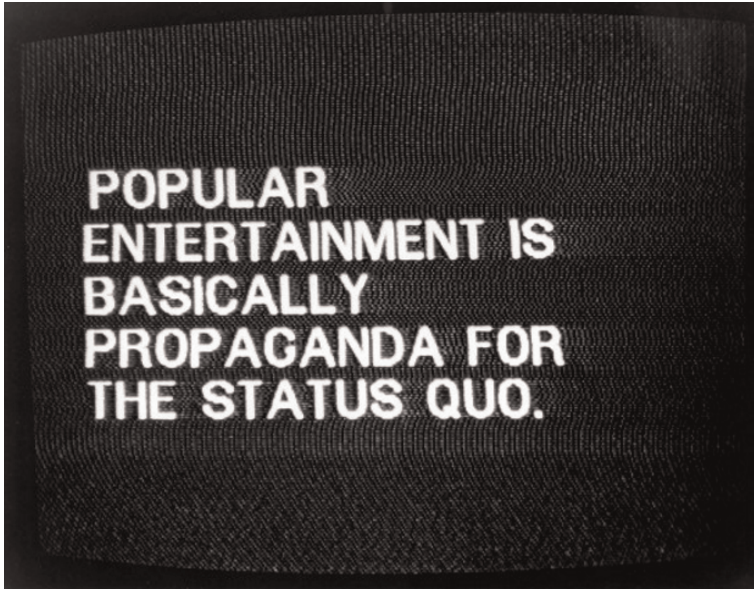


Fig. 8: Television Delivers People

Despite the natural inclination to read conceptual art practices as self-referential or metalinguistic – which is intellectually-valid within the specific history and theory of modern and contemporary art – Serra's videos require us to re-interpret even the massive site-specific abstract structures he is known for as commentaries on social and political issues. As shown by both activists and artists between the 1960s and 1970s, video constituted a counter-medium that allowed them to redefine both mainstream media and art, initiating a process of decentralisation and liberation from disciplines and genres in the name of the civil rights that they put above everything else.

References

- Beller, J. *The cinematic mode of production: Attention economy and the society of the spectacle*. Lebanon: Dartmouth College Press / University Press of New England, 2006.
- Buchloh, B. H. D. *Process sculpture and film in the work of Richard Serra* in *Richard Serra: Works '66-'77*. Tübingen: Kunsthalle, 1978.
- Joselit, D. 'Tale of the Tape: Radical Software', *Artforum*, May 2002: 152-155; 196.
- Joselit, D. *Feedback: Television against democracy*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007.
- Judd, D. *Specific objects*, *Arts Yearbook* 8, 1965.
- Krauss, R. 'Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism', *October*, Vol.1, #1, Spring 1976: 50-64.

Krauss, R. *Passages in modern sculpture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977.

Lee, P. *Game show: Richard Serra and the Prisoner's Dilemma in New Games: Postmodernism after contemporary art*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Michelson, A. 'The Films of Richard Serra: An Interview', *October*, Vol.1, #10, 1979: 68-104.

Serra, R. 'Interview by Liza Béar: Prisoner's Dilemma', *Avalanche*, #9, 1974: 26-29.

Shamberg, M. and Raindance Corporation. *Guerrilla television*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971.

About the author

Francesco Spampinato is a New York-based contemporary art historian and writer. He is Adjunct Professor at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and Ph.D. candidate in Arts et Média at Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris. He is the author of *Come Together: The Rise of Cooperative Art and Design* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2015) and *Can You Hear Me? Music Labels by Visual Artists* (Eindhoven: Onomatopee, 2015).

Notes

1. Krauss 1977, p. 244.
2. Judd 1965, p. 82.
3. Krauss 1977, pp. 251-253.
4. Buchloh 1978, p. 1.
5. Michelson 1979, p. 45.
6. Joselit 2002, p. 196.
7. Shamberg & Raindance Corporation 1971, p. 12.
8. Beller 2006, p. 2.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
13. Serra 1974, p. 20.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
15. Lee 2013, p. 192.

