

Art on Trial

Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* was a massive public sculpture installed outside government buildings in Federal Plaza, New York, in 1981. It was, in effect, a wall of steel – 12 feet high and 120 feet long (roughly, 3.5 meters high and 36.5 metres long) – that traced a subtle arc over its length and leaned slightly to one side, one foot off its vertical axis. It had been commissioned by a government agency, and the designs had been scrutinised by a panel of experts, but the sculpture was disliked intensely by many – though not a clear majority – of those who worked in the offices in the Plaza from the beginning.

Federal Plaza was home to new but architecturally undistinguished government office buildings where approximately 10,000 people worked. A panel of experts chose Serra, an artist known for his minimalist steel works, to create a permanent sculpture for the plaza as part of the 'Art-in-Architecture' initiative of the General Services Administration (GSA), the body responsible for new government buildings. This programme devoted 0.5 per cent of the cost of federal buildings to the creation of artworks by leading American artists. Led to understand that the work would be a permanent addition to the site, Serra spent two years planning *Tilted Arc*, during which he studied the routes people took to cross the plaza to ensure that the placement of the work caused minimal disruption to their use of the space.

Serra was honoured by the commission but never intended to create an artwork that would integrate with, or beautify, its surroundings. He understood the relationship of his artworks to their sites as one of criticism and transformation. 'It is necessary to work in opposition to the constraints of context', he said, 'so that the work cannot be read as an affirmation of questionable ideologies and political power.' *Tilted Arc* was not intended to relate sympathetically to the surrounding buildings or their uses, but to 'bring the viewer into the sculpture' and to make him 'aware of himself and of his movement through the plaza'. Depending on a person's position, the arc would be an overpowering visual barrier or, seen from the ends, a gentle curve that on one side suggested enclosure and on the other expansion. Serra later wrote about site specificity:

The preliminary analysis of a given site takes into consideration not only formal but also social and political characteristics of the site. Site-specific works invariably manifest a value judgement about the large social and political context of which they are a part. Based on the interdependence of work and site, site-specific works address the content and context of their site critically. A new behavioural and perceptual orientation to a site demands a new critical adjustment to one's experience of the place ... It is the explicit intention of site-specific works to alter their context.

Unfortunately, nothing was done to prepare people for the arrival of the sculpture: contrary to its own policy, the GSA did not engage in a programme of public information and education about the commission or Serra's work in general before installing the sculpture. The reaction of the office workers to the piece was extremely negative: it was immediately seen as ugly, oppressive and a 'graffiti catcher'. Two petitions seeking the removal of the piece quickly gathered 1,300 signatures. A Chief Judge began a high profile letter-writing campaign against what he called 'the rusted steel barrier' that he said destroyed the beauty of the plaza and its public utility.

The controversy spilled into the pages of the *New York Times* when its art critic Grace Glueck described it as 'an awkward bullying piece that may conceivably be the ugliest outdoor work of art in the city'. Letters written to the Editor, published on 3 October 1981, show how divided opinion was by the different issues posed by the siting of the sculpture in the public space:

To the Editor:

Without question, Richard Serra's sculpture 'Tilted Arc' is one of the – if not the – most sensational public art works in all of New York City. Thank you for the beautiful large photograph of it on the front page of The Times (Sept. 23).

'Tilted Arc' has been hailed as a bold and masterful work by the curators of the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art and by New York City's Commissioner of Cultural Affairs.

That petitions are circulating against the work is not at all surprising; initial public opinion was similarly against the work of the French Impressionists, Picasso and even Michelangelo. Happily, the major controversial works – such as Michelangelo's 'Last Judgment' – were not removed or destroyed. Let's hope that today's masterpieces will also be given the test and chance of time.

DONALD W. THALACKER

Director, Arts-in-Architecture Program, General Services Administration, Washington

To the Editor:

When the feudal lords of old felt their power being undermined by the more creative new order of merchants and craftsmen, they tried to derive some sense of innate superiority by exaggerating sophisticated aspects of their social conduct pour épater les bourgeois, to shock the townspeople and thus expose their ignorance of the finer ways of life. It is ironical that today a government agency should try to achieve a posture of superiority over its fellow townspeople by shocking them with such expressions in art as the 'Tilted Arc,' endowed with a Federal grant of an unbelievable \$175,000. As a lifelong student and teacher of the history of art and also a craftsman trying to carry on some of its traditions, I applaud the 1,300 workers at the site who refused to be mystified by such posturing and signed petitions for removal of the work.

LINCOLN ROTHSCHILD, Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.

To the Editor:

Regarding the controversial sculpture 'Tilted Arc' by Richard Serra, installed at New York City's Federal Plaza, we feel that the General Services Administration and its Art-in-Architecture Program should be commended for providing an opportunity for the construction of an important and challenging work. With its architectural scale, 'Tilted Arc' provides a bold and powerful dialogue with the mammoth structure of the facing Government building.

The piece is a major example of environmental art which awakens a special awareness of the variety, scale and architectural system of the buildings in the surrounding area.

While the sculpture may run counter to many people's expectations of a decorative accompaniment to the building (news story Sept. 25), it is to be expected that good artists will challenge us when they introduce new forms and new ideas in their works to encompass and interpret contemporary experience.

ALICIA LEGG and DEBORAH WYE New York, Sept. 29, 1981. The writers are, respectively, curator and assistant curator of the Museum of Modern Art.

To the Editor:

The front page of the Sept. 23 Times was interrupted by a picture of Richard Serra's 'Tilted Arc,' a steel sculpture installed in front of 26 Federal Plaza and described as being 12 feet high and 120 feet long.

The 'long' doesn't bother me; the 'high' does.

Twelve feet, as the city fathers must know, exceeds the height of the tallest person. The Serra arc has completely hidden the Foley Square panorama from the eyes of all who exit the Javits Federal Building.

After visiting a Federal agency, the view across the plaza when leaving the building was refreshing – a kind of urban Rockies. Now New York's Iron Curtain has intruded, and we are confronted with a rusted, impenetrable screen. The arc has to be the worst matching of sculpture and placement in the entire city.

If ladders or stilts cannot be supplied, at least a few periscopes should be made available at the building entrance so some of us can remember how it was.

RICHARD MADISON New York

The GSA stood firm. The assistant regional administrator commented: 'There are approximately 10,000 employees in the building and if you have 1,300 signatures

against it, there could possibly be 1,300 people who favored it. We wouldn't consider removing the work; we see no need to.'

A few years later, however, the policy of the GSA towards the sculpture changed with the appointment of a new Republican-appointed regional administrator, William Diamond, in 1984. Partly as a result of the Serra affair, the GSA was beginning to adopt a policy of more extensive community involvement in its commissions, and Diamond lent a sympathetic ear to the anti-Serra lobby, though public criticism of the piece had in fact died down. In March 1985 Diamond arranged for a three-day public hearing about the possibility of relocating the work, and, though his own opinions were already known, appointed himself head of a panel of adjudicators, which also included two other GSA employees.

At the public hearing 180 people spoke, including the artist. Serra pointed out that the commission had been for a site-specific sculpture, one that is 'conceived and created in relation to the particular conditions of a specific site. To remove *Tilted Arc* therefore is to destroy it'. He flatly denied that the sculpture interfered with the social use of the plaza: in planning the work he had been careful to leave open spaces for people and events, and noted that before there had only been a disused fountain (some of those leading the campaign against the sculpture had been the ones responsible for this non-functioning fountain, a point that got a laugh from listeners). Importantly, he claimed that the experience of art was itself a social function.

In all, 122 people, including many eminent figures from the art world, spoke in favour of retaining the piece, while only fifty-eight, mainly those working in the nearby offices, testified against it. Despite these figures (and the numbers of letters received in support of the sculpture were even more conclusive), and despite Serra's assertion that the sculpture could only exist as a work of art in the site for which he had created it, the panel voted to relocate *Tilted Arc*.

Serra proceeded to sue the GSA for \$30 million. He claimed that he had been promised that the sculpture would be installed permanently, and also argued that the decision to move the work was counter to his moral rights as an artist and, censoring his work, denied him the right to free speech. For him the proposed removal of his work was 'conduct akin to book burning'. The courts dismissed his arguments, ruling that his contract made the sculpture the property of the GSA, which therefore had the right to dispose of it in order to fulfil its obligations in relation to the public use of the plaza. The judgement also made the point that the American constitution guaranteed the right to free speech but 'not the freedom to continue speaking forever': if *Tilted Arc* lost its artistic value when moved, Serra was still free to express his artistic and political views in other ways. It also dismissed the claim that the regional administrator had prejudged the hearing as irrelevant to the legal issues. The case became famous internationally and marked a turning point in the history of public art commissions in the US. For Serra the outcome represented a victory of property rights over the moral rights of the artist. He wrote, 'If nothing else it affirms the government's commitment

to private property over the interests of art or free expression.’

The sculpture was finally removed on 15 March 1989. The same day William Diamond of the GSA issued a statement focusing on what he saw as the key issue in relation to public sculpture:

There is a difference between private art and public art. In private art you have a choice whether you want to go to a museum and see a piece. In public art, paid for by the taxpayers, you do not have that choice. The people that live here and work here must see and face and go around and be confronted by this piece on a daily basis ... The piece appears to be menacing and overwhelming and has discouraged people from even going on the plaza ... We understand that it is very painful for him [Serra] to have his work of art removed but at the same time it is not the artist's right that counts, it is the public's right.

In response, Serra challenged whether Diamond and his supporters were speaking, as they claimed, on behalf of the majority of the public, a point he regularly returned to when criticised for the apparent elitism of his assertion of the supremacy of an artist's judgements over popular feelings and the right of a work of art to exist irrespective of any aesthetic or spatial infringements or offence it might cause.

The bitter and damaging controversy surrounding *Tilted Arc* led the GSA to review its guidelines for commissions, aiming to give local communities a stronger voice and to be more responsive to the uses and histories of project sites. Cut into three parts, *Tilted Arc* – or, rather, what remains of it – is stored in a warehouse, and the GSA has promised not to attempt to re-erect it elsewhere out of respect for Serra's views that the work could only exist in the site for which it was designed. The artist, however, regards the work as destroyed because removed from its intended site. He also noted that, in considering the work as movable, the GSA made the work ‘exactly what it was intended not to be: a mobile, marketable product’.

Serra's reputation was not dented by the furore over *Tilted Arc*. He continued to produce similar monumental steel sculptures for museums and collectors around the world. But he understood the removal of *Tilted Arc* as an act of vandalism that reflected a broader shift in American politics in the late 1980s against liberalism and cultural elitism. ‘My sculpture had been approved, commissioned, and installed under a Democratic administration. A Republican administration decided that it should be destroyed.’ At the time of the removal of *Tilted Arc* Serra made his views known in a series of polemical statements that served as titles for a series of drawings, including ‘The United States Government destroys art’.

After *Tilted Arc* had been removed, William Diamond of the Government Services Administration declared that a ‘new art form – open space’ would be exhibited in the plaza. A few benches and planters with trees were installed. Some years later when the plaza needed structural repair and renovation, a landscape architect was commissioned to enliven the space through a curling maze of bright green seating that offered workers

the opportunity to meet and eat their lunches in the open air. The social function of the plaza had been foregrounded, but the point made by Serra during the 1985 hearing that the experience of art was a social function had been lost.

Text—
Jennifer Mundy