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Modern Presence: From Minimalism to Phenomenology.

A sculptural method for being-there with Richard Serra's *Te Tuhirangi Contour*.

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
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Abstract.

Mid-twentieth century sculpture underwent dramatic changes in aesthetic content and subject matter. New materials and the cross-pollination of artistic practices placed new emphasis on external surface and site-specificity. This led to a dissolution of the medium-specific categorisation of modern sculpture. This shift was noted by critic Michael Fried in his essay *Art and Objecthood*, that staked out the academic modernist position against minimalist art in nineteen-sixties America. Fried saw the lack of discernible content and ‘theatricality’ of minimalist sculpture as a problematic negation of deep meaning in formal abstract art.

By comparison, Rosalind E. Krauss loosened the hegemonic modernist system of values to usefully critique the avant-garde practices of a diverse range of emerging sculptors. She developed a phenomenological sensibility that enhanced her formal readings of non-mimetic, often large-scale sculptures that were resistant to conventionalised interpretation.

This thesis considers how both Fried and Krauss’ critical responses to the shifting dynamic of modern sculpture are helpful in situating the practice of Richard Serra, one of the major artists to emerge out of the iconoclastic period of the New York art world during the late nineteen-sixties. Tracing Serra’s development as an artist with a strong awareness of art history and involvement with contemporary process-based practitioners gives an account of how, by his incorporation of the traditional with the innovative in praxis, affords an understanding of the changes in sculpture at a pivotal moment in the medium’s history.

Having evaluated the critical response to minimalist and post-minimalist sculpture to reflect upon the importance of Serra’s six-decade long career holds for twenty-first century viewers, I then introduce some key concepts from Martin Heidegger’s philosophy to offer a complementary methodology that synthesises Fried’s modernist rationale with Krauss’ increased sensitivity to phenomenological affect.

Finally, by reevaluating the aesthetics of Cartesian consciousness I demonstrate how sculpture can afford access to ontologically important questions. I explore Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein* (being-there) in a personal encounter with Serra’s largest continuous landscape piece, *Te Tuhirangi Contour* (2000-2002). By combining the intellectual space of modernist theory with the lived experience of phenomenological investigation, I look to provide an account of how profound meaning is readily accessible in being with sculpture in the world.

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Rowan Klevstul, April 2019.

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Introduction.

My knowledge of Richard Serra's sculpture first came during my undergraduate studies at the University of Auckland. In the *Origins of Modern Sculpture* (2014) course, I was introduced to the controversy surrounding Serra's *Tilted Arc*, 1981 [fig.1] – an elongated continuous steel wall that divided the expanse of a public square in New York city, and, as it turned out, divided its citizens as well. A civic work that shares formal aesthetic similarities to the primary artwork explored in this thesis – New Zealand's own Serra sculpture, *Te Tuhirangi Contour*, 2000-2002 [fig.2] – *Tilted Arc* eventually was unceremoniously removed by the municipal authorities in 1989. What struck me the most about the work – beyond the powerful visual statement generated by Serra's trademark juxtaposition of the vertical stoicism of steel sheeting with the grace and simplicity of a tectonic form; and the audacity he showed in imposing a personal creative urge so brazenly into the public space of everyday people – was the dramatic response by those people to the work itself. In particular, by certain figures in elected offices of power who decreed the artwork to be a public nuisance, an eyesore, a threat to national security that must be removed.

I was struck by this as a profound instance of art at work in the real world. I admired Serra's out-in-the-open approach, his ability to show that art was not just a covert intellectual enterprise existing for the gratification of art aficionados, or as a mere offering of distraction from the mundanity of everyday life. The controversy *Tilted Arc* generated after it was installed clearly demonstrated a question that, as a fledgling art historian, I was increasingly concerned with: Just what is the role that art should play in modern society?

The removal of Serra's work from Federal Plaza suggested a viewpoint that art was viewed as being of superficial value in the wider context of the life of real world concerns. Fine if it stays caged in the galleries and museums, but it should not have any serious influence on, or heaven forbid interfere with, people's workaday existence.

To counter this modern tendency to dismiss the value of art to society, I discovered that in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger pointed out there was a time where art fulfilled a deeper ontological need in society. As Anthony Lack relates,

According to Heidegger, as science and reason became ascendant throughout the Middle Ages, art became increasingly defined in terms of subjective feelings and emotions. Science and reason occupied one domain and art was shuttled

into another. While art was seen as significant, it was no longer seen as a vehicle of truth. This task was relegated to science. With this in mind, we can gain a better understanding of Heidegger's possible motivations for writing *The Origin of the Work of Art*. The work can best be understood as a philosophical response to the marginalisation of art. (Lack, *Martin Heidegger on Technology, Ecology, and The Arts*, 37)

Heidegger gives the example of the temple of Hera at Paestum that gave Greek society a ground that revealed its true nature, in that it provided a manifestation of what was valued in life: order amongst chaos, as structured by the meaningful presence of the Gods. As an artwork, the temple had ontological significance, it gave to the Greek the "background" to their world and "the horizon for a people to exist in such-and-such a way and not in another way."¹ As Heidegger eloquently puts it,

It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being. [...] Standing there, the building rests on rocky ground. This resting of the work draws up out of the rock the mystery of the rock's clumsy yet spontaneous support. Standing there, the building holds its ground against the storm raging above it and so first makes the storm itself manifest in its violence. (Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, 167)

Standing outside, withstanding rain and westerly gales, oxidising slowly and turning rust-red in the salt air drifting in from the Kaipara Harbour, it struck me that *Te Tuhirangi Contour* similarly exists in just such a manifest state as did the Greek temple. It fights against raging storms. By no means a wall flower, Serra's serpentine sprawls its girth roughly north-south up an incline, its sinuous form taking manifold shape as it "first brings to light the light of day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of night."²

Whilst this quixotic passage of Heidegger's may seem arcane to modern technologically-advanced subjectivity, to thoughtfully entertain Heidegger's conviction that the temple gave Greek society an ontological ground to refer to in their times of existential need, that its "standing there, first giving to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves," is to

¹ Lack, *Martin Heidegger on Technology, Ecology, and The Arts*, 40.

² Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," 167.

understand that the temple functioned as an important site of meaning for cultural beings. I view *Te Tuhurangi Contour* as, for me, a localisation of the question over the value of art in society brought on by the removal of the *Tilted Arc*. This question can be reframed to ask, can an artwork such as Richard Serra's *Te Tuhurangi Contour* function for contemporary New Zealand society as the temple did in antiquity? And if so, how could this be achieved? And what would that show? What is the ground of our current metaphysical understanding of being that guides us, and does art still hold the capacity to influence society at an ontological level?

If modern subjectivity strictly adheres to the tenet that truth is achieved by a process of methodical doubt and reasoned study, then it explains away the essence of wonder in creative and artistic expression as merely subjective accounts. If relaying inherited notions of the beautiful are seen as arcane sensibility and no longer relevant to modern life, then what becomes of art? What becomes of society?

To stand in front of such a verbose and substantial visual statement as Serra's six-metre high, two hundred and fifty metre long steel wall and arrive at the conclusion that it has nothing meaningful to say, nor holds any mystery in its remarkable symbiosis with the topography seems an unfortunate folly. Humans find real meaning in piecing together parts of a chaotic puzzle into a recognisable picture of the world. It is what grounds us in our lives. So how is it that this process of foraging for meaning comes up short when confronted by formalist abstractions, particularly one as explicit as Serra's?

Heidegger seeks to investigate not how we would view the object from a subjective point of view – what he defines as an object appearing to us as “present-at-hand,” essentially a mode where we are forced into contemplating a thing or encounter when it defies our expectations, disrupting our immersion in life's tasks. He intuits that the engaged mode in which we go about our everyday lives, what he describes as our ready-to-hand immersion in existence, is where the essence of what generates meaning for us actually lies. This argues for attentiveness, a curiosity in the face of the unknown that the Greek temple symbolised as a grounding presence amongst the fluctuations of life, gathering around itself “the all-governing expanse of this open relational context [that] is the world of this historical people.”³

Being confronted by unintelligible formal abstraction on the scale of *Te Tuhurangi* offers an experience of both states of being, both present-at-hand appraisal and ready-to-hand immersion

³ Heidegger, “Origin,” 40.

as one walks the work. By overlaying these modes of being onto the encounter with a piece of art, one is encouraged to permit the question: what is it like to be there with the artwork? This is the fundamental question of phenomenology when investigating our being-in-the-world. Existentially important yes, in that we are undoubtedly a thinking thing. As Timothy Stapleton puts it, “For Heidegger, what constitutes the very “am” of “I am” is that being is an issue for it: is a question and a matter about which it cares.”⁴ It is the fundamental existential question of every human to have ever lived. So why should this questioning of existence disappear when we view art? A claim (as I will demonstrate in this thesis) can be made that it is the modern subjective viewpoint that makes us forget such ontological questions when viewing art – one that diminishes the importance of art as a whole, and the particular encounters with art that we come face-to-face with in our own lives. One that detracts, removes us from a closeness with Being.

So, what is it like being there with Serra’s work? *Dasein* – Heidegger’s name for human beings, translates into English as “being-there.” And the hyphen is important, denoting the interconnectivity of the state in which our awareness of being (as an existential question) is connected with the “there” of occupying a specific place in space and time. This revised concept of what consciousness is can aid the viewer, in that it “clouds” the subjective lens of expectation based on epistemic assumptions and inherited knowledge, whilst “clearing” a space for *dasein*: an awareness of space and time and your place in it as revealed. Meaning accordingly arises at the interface of the viewer and the artwork, a dialogue ensues. As with all good conversations, both parties play important roles in generating the narrative.

What this affords is an encounter with untrammelled reality, with what Heidegger names as a more primordial encounter with truth than is offered by reasoning and cognition alone. It is decidedly not the conception of truth as correspondence, as championed by evidence arrived at empirically that we use to ground our current scientific understanding of the world. Rather, as Julian Young states, Heidegger takes the position that truth,

As ‘correspondence’ or ‘adequacy’ to the facts – *the* account of truth offered, since Roman times, by the philosophical tradition – actually presupposes a more ‘primordial’ truth which has the task of establishing what kind of ‘facts’ there are to which statements may, or may not, correspond. Heidegger calls this ‘truth of disclosure’ or ‘*aletheia*’ to highlight the idea of the foundation of truth

⁴ Stapleton, *Key Concepts*, 44.

consisting in a coming-out-of-oblivion. (Young, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art*, 22-23).

And that's right, isn't it? Does life not unfold in a series of unexpected and at first incomprehensible events, on to which we try and ascribe meaning? Is this not what we mean when placing such high value on learning, on our capability to learn? To learn about this "thing" we call life. What becomes troubling for the viewer of formal abstract art at its most fundamental level is the arrival of the bamboozling to upend of our current pot of knowledge. In Heidegger's terminology, what he would describe as a revealing of "earth" into our "world." Earth signifying the intrusion of the potential yet-to-be experienced (chaos) into our known, ordered world. World for Heidegger is not just the geographical expanse of the globe and the civilisation that inhabits it, his concept of world also goes to our deepest ontological understanding of the age we live in, our metaphysical sense of what is.

To have the horizons of one's understanding (and one that goes to the very core of the template we use to understand) pushed back to accept an unintelligible, new thing into our world is confronting; think of that universal phrase: "You only fear what you do not understand." I would like to suggest that Serra's work is earnestly trying to be understood. But it cannot be understood in its totality by approaching it by subjective means alone.

Iain D. Thomson describes how it is problematic to confront art via dualistic processing of the world, pointing out that "We do not begin confined to our subjective spheres, temporarily leave those spheres behind in order to experience art objects, only to return back to subjectivity once again, enriched by the "booty" we have captured during our daring adventure in the external world."⁵ It is clear that if art is viewed solely in this way, all that a person viewing art would find is more-or-less what they already knew. At most, the novelty of some new art form appearing before us will reconfigure the pre-existing mind map of the viewer to assimilate this new data under the guise of our aesthetic blueprint for art.

Heidegger does not dispute that this is indeed the way in which modern subjectivity encounters art. Thomson describes that:

[Heidegger's] objection is not that the aesthetic view mischaracterises the way we late moderns ordinarily experience "art." On the contrary, Heidegger clearly suggests that what he characterises as "the increasingly fundamental position

⁵ Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 55.

taken towards art as a whole” does accurately describe the experiences of art that take place... that is, particularly intense or meaningful experiences that make us feel more alive... the aesthetic view correctly characterises our typical experience of “art” in the contemporary world – and for Heidegger that is part of the problem. (Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 51)

To view art from an aesthetic basis of beauty, what Kant coined as the “aesthetic attitude,” the subjective experience becomes one that draws and continually reinforces walls surrounding the already-known. Meaning is mapped onto established knowledge, our epistemology. We focus then only on the formal qualities of a work, forgetting that it is but part of a wider whole of contextualised meaning that is given by the phenomenological interaction of *dasein* with the world in time and space. The issue I take with this is that the experience of art therefore remains in the realm of the cognitive. If, as with the case of formal abstract sculpture which is based on the criteria that an artist and the object they produce reduces the level of conventional intelligibility in artworks down to its essential form, then it becomes increasingly unintelligible as a cognitive tool. And we fear what we do not understand.

Yet, given its sheer scale, *Te Tuhirangi Contour* surely yearns to be understood. It cannot remain as the proverbial white elephant on that rich person’s farm up north. So, how can we come to understand this largescale steel wall seemingly plonked out in a paddock? The answer lies in asking the question not purely in cognitive terms. It is useful, when walking towards Serra’s sculpture, to take a phenomenological approach; to allow oneself to extend the question of “what is it?” to: “what is it like to be here with it?” In doing so a plethora of interpretations arise that defuse the fear of the unknown, a fear of the unknown that, through everyman’s already-always everyday experience of being, becomes not an encounter with chaos and unintelligibility, but an encounter with *self*, an encounter premised on being-in-the-world.

What Heidegger’s philosophy hopes to achieve, as far as I can tell, is a reconnection with the thickness of existence, its nuances, mystery and revelations that afford the individual *dasein* the prospect of finding in their continued existence in the world something truly meaningful. His argument that late-modern subjectivity “enframes” the world to a degree that treats all of life from the position of self-interestedness, a search for meaning premised on resource-based utility, then anything new we encounter, or anything that looms beyond the horizon but is not-yet, becomes evaluated on too strict terms.

So where does this leave art? To view Serra's steel wall on a privately-owned farm in rural New Zealand through the lens of its value as a resource to the individual cuts off at the knees any message it may offer. That a man of Serra's tenacity and skill has wholeheartedly committed the past sixty-odd years to experimenting with the structural and aesthetic qualities of steel as an artistic material and has risen to world renown as perhaps the seminal sculptor of our contemporary times, suggests that *Te Tuhirangi Contour* does indeed have more to say than meets the eye.

This thesis therefore affirms that art indeed plays a positive role in mediating life's struggles. The *Tilted Arc* controversy relates a tale of an artwork that made a tangible impact on the world through its manifest presence. It did not seek to suspend reality; it tackled it head on. So it is little wonder that in those impressionable undergraduate days, I fell under Richard Serra's sculptural spell. Not only for the handsome gravitas of his architectonic gestures, but for making such a directly affirmative stance on the necessity of art in society that, at that point, I had come across. As Harriet Senie relates, "the potency of [*Tilted Arc's*] symbolic narrative of the public versus art revealed a hostility that took many by surprise [...] the art world in the personification of Richard Serra was suddenly, in one fell swoop it seemed, marginalised and demonised."⁶

In re-reading that last paragraph, my intentions for this thesis become clearer. My intuitions about the sculptural object (and art more generally) – driven by sensibility and emotion; interwoven with narratives both personal and art historical; tempered by facticity and the material conditions of reality – speak of an underlying ethical argument for the importance of art at both individual and cultural levels of wellbeing. Art as being of ontological significance to humans, offering profound experiences that make the implicit conditions of ordinary everyday life shine forth in their fuller, more wondrous capacity. What follows is an account of my attempt to understand on a deeper level why I believe this is so.

To do so, I shall deviate away from Serra's works in order to unpack some key points of Heidegger's philosophy that underpin my overall approach to seeing Serra's sculpture from a phenomenological point of view. The modernist theories of Michael Fried and his mentor, Clement Greenberg, along with their contemporary Rosalind E. Krauss are also of relevance to understanding how Serra's work is both innovative and simultaneously medium-specific. What does this mean? As Serra's practice matures, his work becomes increasingly attuned to the

⁶ Senie, *The Tilted Arc Controversy: Dangerous Precedent?* XIV.

structural possibilities of his chosen material: industrial steel. This concentration on a single material generates an interesting result: no two Serra works are visually exactly the same, yet they share the exact same fundamental material properties. This brings to the fore the idea that there exists a contingency within something constant; and art's role in making explicit this tendency of exceeding the boundaries of categorisation emplaced by facts or theories – modernist demagogues such as Greenberg included.

Serra's art brings forth an extra dimension that lies latent within materiality, elaborating through his sculptural enterprise the potential that governs all material, of what one assumes at surface level to be a stable, man-made, mastered and seemingly inconspicuous object – steel. To reframe such a ubiquitous material tests the viewer beyond simple reception and perception and intimates the existence of a realm of knowledge lying outside of the known, scientific facts we premise our technological comportment towards the world on.

By forcing the viewer into an extended interaction, all two-hundred-and-fifty-metres of *Te Tuhirangi* offer an opportunity to open oneself up to an artwork beyond just the cursory glance. Senses open up, time passes, and you move in a rhythm set by the rolling hills, punctuated by the sculpture ducking and weaving before you. To recognise such inherent, somewhat indeterminate non-cognitive aspects to being-there with large scale objects that do indeed have influence upon our experience is relevant to one of Heidegger's main philosophical targets – to thoroughly reinvestigate the question of being-in-the-world by taking a phenomenological approach that asks: what is it like to be a human being?

This thesis is not intended to give an exhaustive account of Heidegger's philosophy, nor an in-depth review of his writing on art. I have chosen key concepts that work well with Serra's oeuvre, and that have proven useful in my own investigations and personal experiences of Serra's work. I hope this in turn will be of benefit to the reader, and viewers of sculpture in general. The addition of Heidegger's philosophy of art is to give ballast to Fried and Krauss's critical responses to the intellectual landscape of art connoisseurship, in particular as a way to further the unthought of their response to minimalism and the post-minimalist, process-based practitioner that Serra develops into.

The ultimate aim is to offer a kind of "users guide" to experiencing large scale, formally abstract sculpture out-of-doors in a phenomenological way that can increase the level of engagement with art and being-in-the-world.

One final note. It seems necessary to anticipate an objection to the possible clash of ideologies my partnering an investigation of the sculpture of Richard Serra, an American of Jewish descent, with the philosophical ideas of Martin Heidegger, a known Nazi and supporter of the early rise of National Socialism in pre-World War Two Germany, may bring. My own feelings are that Serra, who developed a strong client base in Germany after losing professional ground in the United States following the *Tilted Arc* debacle, and has to this day the majority of his work fabricated by German steel mills – and furthermore, who has been married to Clara Weyergraf-Serra, a German art historian, since 1981, has himself reconciled these disparate parts of his cultural identity. Any offence provoked by my conflation of Serra and Heidegger is unintended.

Chapter 1: The Biographical Account.

Richard Serra (*b.* San Francisco, 1939) has over sixty years developed one of the most recognisable styles in sculpture. A 2002 *New Yorker* magazine article dubbed Serra “Man of Steel,” referring to the industrial material that has defined his métier. Serra first came to grips with weathering steel (also known variously as weatherproof steel, or by its trademark name, “Cor-ten” steel) whilst working summer jobs in the steel yards of the San Francisco Bay area as a teenager. “It’s probably why I do what I do” states Serra, reflecting on his working-class roots. “I respect the working class. If you’re making art, you don’t know what class you’re in, but if you work in a steel mill you’re part of the working class.”⁷

1.1 From Humble Beginnings.

Serra used a strong work ethic, combined with a precocious intellect and summer paychecks, to bootstrap his way up through college and university, succeeding as an English major (writing his senior thesis on Albert Camus’ *The Stranger*), and increasingly, in art-based courses. From a young age Richard had been encouraged to draw, and it has given him a sense of self-worth throughout his life.⁸ A lesser-known side of his practice, Serra draws all his site-specific works after their completion, and in fact has had major stand-alone exhibitions of his drawings – strong abstract geometries, often so thick with the impenetrable black of his preferred oil sticks, that they appear almost three-dimensional.⁹

As seen in *Weight and Measure IX*, 1994 [fig.3], his drawings are pictorial correlates of the resolute architectonic presence that defines his sculpture. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Serra’s drawings capture a sense of volume that influences the space in which they are in and emit a substantiality that belies their two-dimensions.

Drawing for me is a language that allows me to understand the world, an analytical tool. It is a practical means to assign perception to memory [...] The only thing I try to avoid, whether I work with natural or artificial light, is

⁷ Tomkins, “Man of Steel,” 3.

⁸ “Drawing for me was a way to find a language of my own – and to be doted on by my parents. Sometimes my father would go down to the garage with my brother to work on the car [...] I’d follow along and draw all the engine parts. That stymied them: they were intent on putting the engine back together, while I was analyzing the parts. Drawing was something I could always do, and I’ve always relied on it.” Foster and Richard Serra, *Conversations About Sculpture*, 7.

⁹ “[H]e puts handmade paper face down on top of compacted oil stick and then draws through the back of it with a piece of metal, forcing the line into the thick black pigment.” Tomkins, 2.

reflections on the canvas. I don't want the light to change the color of the drawing and interrupt the weight of the field. Black as a color absorbs and dissipates light. That is one reason that the mass, density, and volume of a space can be altered through the installation of a black drawing. (Richard Serra, *Writings/Interviews*, 256-257)

The above quote provides a glimpse of a pragmatic approach to art-making that resonates throughout Serra's oeuvre. A hands-on engagement with the tangible issues of materiality, particularly the technical limitations of steel as an art medium, that he confronts with serious intent, labour and humble curiosity. "I was exposed to steel being rigged and structured all my life so I have a certain deference and respect for the potential of steel."¹⁰ Over his career Serra has slowly accrued a deep working understanding of the principles his sculpture relies upon; how the mass, load and integrity of Corten steel translates through formal structure into a volume that either opens up or encloses space.

Despite his dedication to steel, the main material of Serra's mature practice is in fact space. Space as it exists for oneself. When in the presence of works such as the aptly named *Delineator*, 1974-75 [fig.4], space becomes a palpable condition. Two large steel plates, placed one above and one below the viewer, orientate on a horizontal axis provided by the architecture to give a tangible sense of air compressed between the floor and ceiling. The weight, particularly of the sheet attached to the roof is not so much seen, as sensed. Receiving the presentation of three-dimensions in such a way is best described as a "felt" logic – Serra's sculpture has a way of centering experience for the viewer, of becoming a locus for body and mind.

What I'm interested in is revealing the structure and content and character of a space and a place by defining a physical structure through the elements that I use. (Serra, 36)

In *Delineator*, the viewer is made privy to the intangible characteristics of space as a volume. "You're forced to acknowledge the space above, below, right, left, north, east, south, west, up down. All your psychophysical coordinates [...] are called into question immediately," says Serra of his intentions.¹¹ And whilst purporting that the response of the viewer has never been a particular motivating factor to his work, the phenomenological acumen with which he realises

¹⁰ Serra, *Writings/Interviews*, 40.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

his work nevertheless grant multisensory experiences that increase the awareness of one's physical self in time and space.

Serra downplays his ability to sculpt the experience of the viewer. "Whatever the work is evoking in people, I don't dictate that [...] so I don't know how to account for it."¹² But it is undeniable that, by the imposition of their public manner, Serra's large-scale works generate indelible – and democratic – encounters with art. "I don't want to make any distinctions among viewers. It depends on the work and its context, but my viewer is anybody and everybody. I don't cater to group specificity."¹³

Leaving obvious socio-political objections to such statements aside, it is more useful to trace Serra's aesthetic as a bridge beyond theories that would utilise the phenomenological affect of sculpture to critique institutionalised sites on the basis of perceived difference between viewers. Rather, the train of this thesis focuses on what we all share in common in the presence of his works: an awareness of our corporeality in time and space. It is in the here and now of existence in which the most profound messages of Serra's sculpture are accessed.

1.2 Putting the Personal into Praxis.

How does one become an artist? By sighting beached whales blown ashore by winter storms as a child? Perhaps in seeking an adult's reassurance to usurp sibling rivalry; or fiercely identifying with the self-sufficient lessons of existentialism; walking the sand dunes of San Francisco's Ocean Beach and growing up riding its' waves – all lent themselves to Serra's development as a sculptor.¹⁴ One does see in Serra's mature works a penchant for monolithic weights balanced-out; a strength in the uncompromising affect of dominant structures; and the escapist flow-state that communion with nature brings. Easier to attribute than these personal experiences in his youth, it was moreso the happenstance of time and place, and the cultural milieu Serra found himself amongst as a student and emerging young artist, that ultimately defined the career path of one of the world's most famous living sculptors.

Completing an undergraduate degree in English at the University of California, where he explored the existentialist landscape of Camus, Serra lived the beach lifestyle of Santa Barbara. He also took art classes in draughtsmanship, and was introduced to Mexican mural painting

¹² Tomkins, "Man," 1.

¹³ Foster, *Conversations*, 253.

¹⁴ For biographical information and anecdotes see: Foster, 7-9 and 160-161; and Tomkins, 3.

such as those by Jose Orozco and Diego Riviera – see [fig.5]. Serra hitchhiked to Mexico and was impressed by the way that mural paintings he saw influenced their architectural setting. “Murals completely reconfigured the space [...] it struck me that there might be ways to make art outside the dictates of the time. [...] In comparison, the paintings I was studying and seeing in magazines seemed too contained by their frame.”¹⁵ These early influences helped Serra to see the power of art has to address and influence both the conceptual *and* the real spaces of the world.

In the early nineteen-sixties he applied to Yale’s School of Art and received a scholarship on the strength of 12 drawings and his grade-point average at UCSB. Those next three years earning his MFA degree at Yale “changed my life,” states Serra.

Up until that point I’d coasted along in school, but at Yale there was intense competition among the students [...] Abstract Expressionism was still the dominant language among painters a year or two ahead of me at Yale. They were still slashing around, and so was I. But the discourse had changed somewhat, because even then [Jasper] Johns and Robert Rauschenberg were considered pivotal figures, and Pop was creeping in. What was great about Yale were the visitors they invited: Rauschenberg, Philip Guston, Ad Reinhardt, Frank Stella... it was a rotating door for artists from New York. (Foster, *Conversations about Sculpture*, 11)

For most aspiring young artists at the time in America, the stage had been set by the legacy of 1950s action painting and its accompanying modernist support by critics such as Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss. Ironically, Serra had little experience of sculpture, even during his MFA study at Yale. Of greater influence was the Bauhaus design teachings of Josef Albers, whose courses encouraged a process-based “learning-by-doing” approach that kickstarted an interest in non-traditional materials and multidisciplinary practices for many young artists.¹⁶

Influenced by Abstract Expressionism as much as by Jasper Johns’ exposure of material surface and process that questioned the purpose of representation in works such as *Flag*, 1954-55 [fig.6], Serra’s student cohort “each with a different attitude and different gods” were the next

¹⁵ He also noted the muralists “work had social and political implications as well as expressive and architectural ones.” Foster, *Conversations*, 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

generation of artists in America.¹⁷ Despite the benefits of Yale's hands-on learning and experimentation with new design materials, augmented with studying art history for an extra year of his degree brought to his artistic sensibility, Serra still considered himself a painter as he headed to Paris on a scholarship after graduating in 1964.

1.3 Breaking New Ground in the Old World.

The anxiety one feels walking close to the façade of Serra's *Te Tuhirangi Contour* is brought about through the relationship of its overbearing height and weight in comparison to one's own body (the work rears up six metres out of the ground). As if that physical attribute alone was not enough to garner one's attention, the eastern face also pitches out at an unwieldy eleven degrees past the vertical. In order to create an axis plumb to the contour of land, this choice was the aesthetic solution to the fall of the slope which the sculpture traverses. Such rationalisation of composition that generates unexpected affect are indicative of the structural considerations Serra brings to his practice. "I couldn't have anticipated that" is often Serra's response to such coincidental phenomenological impacts the finished product evokes.¹⁸ Interestingly, the omnipresence of the pitched yaw that *Te Tuhirangi Contour* inflicts on its viewers is a creative derivation from a similar encounter Serra had of being made to uncomfortably feel like the subject of an artwork himself (see [fig.7]).

During the years Serra spent in Europe following his college education, he visited Spain and saw Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, 1656 [fig.8] at the Museo del Prado in Madrid. Velázquez complication of illusion and reality arranged by the reciprocity of the painter staring out at the viewer from within the work destroyed Serra's interest in his own painting abilities. He could not see the benefit of persisting with pictorial space already so masterfully overcome by Velázquez centuries before.

That ended it for me. I realized there was a split between the interior illusion of space and the projected space I was standing in, and that I was the subject of the painting and Velázquez was looking at me. That really bothered me – that I was the subject of the painting – because I didn't think I could make a painting in which the viewer was the subject. [...] *Las Meninas* made me see that my way

¹⁷ Tomkins, "Man," 4.

¹⁸ Foster, *Conversations*, 5.

of dealing with painting was limited to looking at something inside a frame.
(Foster, *Conversations*, 16)

In a forthright and honest way typical of the later formality his sculpture holds, Serra realised the limitations of his own abilities to connect his inner expressions with the outside world if continuing on as a painter. “I’m a person who wants to deal with his own experience, and the things I want to know I want to know myself.”¹⁹ The process-driven teachings of Yale, combined with long hours Serra had spent drawing from works in sculptor Constantin Brancusi’s studio in Paris, conflated into a new direction for Serra as an artist.

I hadn’t looked at sculpture much before [going to Paris on scholarship ...] I found my way to Brancusi’s reconstructed studio in the Musée Nationale d’art Modern, and I began to draw. I can’t tell you why, but something just clicked. Drawing has a lot to do with how a volume hits an edge, how it cuts into space, and it was enormously helpful for me to work there. Maybe the studio had an aura that attracted me too; maybe it smelled like art. (Foster, 13)

He found at the same time texts that appealed through their sparseness of language, clarity and concrete relations to experience. Serra travelled to Florence after Paris, still interested in language with specificity – Steinbeck, Dostoevsky, Camus. He began to make assemblages of disparate real-world objects, such as *Live Animal Habitat*, 1965-66 [fig.9], a temporary installation that included a live rabbit stuffed amongst detritus in a wire-fronted cage:

I took stuff from junk shops, thrift stores, and off the street, just threw it together, and tried to make some metaphor out of what was stuffed and what was alive, illusion and reality. It was barnyard-assemblage-Surrealism, very much student work. (Foster, 16)

Inspired by the historical authority of Brancusi’s oeuvre, the step out of the existential and into the actual was irreversibly made clearer for Serra by this engagement with the materiality of process-based practice.

¹⁹ Foster, *Conversations*, 5.

1.4 Maximum Effort, Minimal Illusion.

To get a real sense of the built environment of three-dimensions in which large scale formal abstract sculpture operates in means that artistic process must come to be understood in terms of cause and effect. The willfulness to take the role of practitioner seriously enough that the technical and financial demands of Serra's art require is noticeable in his formative move away from the pictorial into the real.²⁰

Having returned to America in late 1966, Serra quickly moved on from the assemblage work.²¹ Serra inserted himself as prominent member of young avant-garde artists in New York, all whom were looking to overthrow rules and conventions. It was an anarchic and fertile time in art, and a diverse scene. Pop Art and minimalism were the current movements countering the long-prevailing hegemonic of formalism and classical modern painting.

A lot of people downtown [New York] were involved with making and doing, only everybody was making and doing different things. People didn't call themselves film-makers or composers or musicians or painters or sculptors. You didn't want to identify. Everybody was just making something, and everybody was everybody else's audience [...] We all had doing in common, we shared a language of practices and procedures, and all became close friends. (Foster, 33)

Appealing to his working-class credentials, and his confrontational nature, Serra focused on making work that creatively extracted the potential of cheap and easily available found non-traditional materials. The young Serra was brashly looking to convince himself, and others, of what sculpture in this new environment could be. He came across a large amount of discarded vulcanized rubber and set to work exploring its possibilities as a sculptural medium by using the procedural approach learned at Yale.²²

²⁰ The popularity and sheer scale of Serra's work has influenced galleries world-wide to enlarge their architectural spaces and reinforce their loading capacity. His clients are told up front of the estimated cost of commissioning a work by Serra – a proposal fee of USD\$50,000 is payable whether or not the patron decides to accept the design Serra then puts forward. See: Tomkins, "Man," 9.

²¹ "I knew I wouldn't continue the assemblages with live animals I had done in Italy. They were experiments, and their metaphors seemed too easy. I was trying to move away from painting in the most absurd way possible." Foster, *Conversations*, 19.

²² "At Yale when I was assigned a design problem, I was also given a way of dealing with the material, a set of procedures. I had a lot of rubber; the challenge was to discover its potential." *Ibid.*, 19.

As a practitioner, that “matter imposes form on form” is one of Serra’s prevailing mantras.²³ An early work that brought to the fore the nascent idea of structure and form as contingent on the physical potential of matter that now defines Serra’s oeuvre was *To Lift*, 1967 [fig.10].

Serra introduced a simple, yet radically new subject matter in *To Lift*: the ability a single ten-foot long sheet of vulcanised rubber had to self-support its own weight. By pulling up halfway along one of the long edges until the two ends of that side met the floor, Serra discovered an equilibrium that afforded the rubber mat a provisionally structural integrity. The form loosely resembled a discarded poncho uncannily retaining the shape of its wearer. A teepee-like form, or perhaps a wavelet reaching crescendo before toppling over and diminishing out of sight. These analogies all serve to describe the potential of forms to become something else; the medium stays the same, but the form is contingent. Inevitably there will come a change of state. This use of a material’s potentiality as sculptural concern affords works such as *To Lift* a quality of immanence that gives the act of viewing the piece as it is now an increased potency.

Proving that dynamic tension is latent in materiality, somehow captured and preserved in that brief moment Serra offers between the before and after of a collapse, gives a palpable sense of presence to the work; as if it is only now that truly matters. Rosalind E Krauss describes well the tension that works like *To Lift* capture in their apprehension of a liminal state.

One of the striking aspects of modern sculpture is the way in which it manifests its makers’ growing awareness that sculpture is a medium peculiarly located at the juncture between stillness and motion, time arrested and time passing. From this tension, which defines the very condition of sculpture, comes its enormous expressive power. (Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 5)

In doing just this, Serra joined in the revision of sculpture from the past whose major concern had been to generate the illusion of a transcendental, coherently structured narrative. Furthermore, during the crucial time of Serra’s development as a young sculptor there was an iconoclastic war going on within the New York scene over what in fact constituted art per se (as I will discuss further in Chapter 2).²⁴

²³ The premise “that matter informs form” was taught at Yale. “I got to the point where I was running cement through a meat grinder, making things that looked like cannoli. But it helped me understand that investigating the properties of a material can open up a whole host of ways of doing, making, and forming.” Foster, *Conversations*, 46.

²⁴ “Nobody in Serra’s group wanted to do anything that had been done before. Most of them were involved in the idea of process; like a lot of others on the downtown art scene then – dancers, filmmakers, performance artists, musicians – they believed that the process of making something was more interesting and more important than the result.” Tomkins, “Man,” 5.

Clement Greenberg, the foremost critical voice of the day, championed the idea that in order for art to be valid it must be measurable against the art of incontrovertible quality that preceded it. This historicist account of art served the formal lexicon of modernist painting well, as a plausible lineage for the stylistic innovations of great painters could be found in the increasing flatness of the pictorial space instigated by Manet and Courbet, blown open by Jackson Pollock's abstract expressionism, and brought to conclusion by artists such as Barnett Newman and Ellsworth Kelly in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Greenberg's modernist theory was often criticized however for never offering up a definitive standard with which modernist sculpture could be critiqued if based on the quality of historical precedents.²⁵ A counter argument that was very influential on Serra was offered by the minimalist artists, who considered working in three-dimensions was an autonomous mode that did not need precedents to justify artistic intention. In a polarising ideology, minimalists argued that the best new work held no secrets from the past; that the quality of art was now to be judged on the affective level of immersion the viewer experienced in the art moment. Looking to distance himself from expiring Eurocentric ideas, minimalist spokesperson Donald Judd stated in a de facto manifesto that the Specific Object of art now "need only to be interesting."²⁶

By comparison, Serra's work of this period can be read somewhat as an intermediary between the minimalist call to break from the modes of thinking and representation that linked it to the past, and the modernist call for respecting the established medium specific qualities of sculpture. Serra weighed up the pros and cons in relation to both art history and contemporary practice that his process-based explorations with materials and construction manifested. Of the radical departure from narrative, but unmistakable formal quality of *To Lift*, Serra explained:

It was a freestanding topological form that was continuous inside and out. It didn't appear to me like any other sculpture, yet I couldn't deny it was three-dimensional – it was standing there on the floor. I'm not going to compare it to a Donatello, but as far as I was concerned, there it was. It had a claim. If I set it back down again it wasn't anything, but if I lifted it up again it was the same

²⁵ Greenberg and Michael Fried suggested the internal compositional syntax of David Smith and Anthony Caro's abstract sculptures provided the best equivalent to modernism's values as seen in painting – more on this in chapter 2. Rosalind E. Krauss stated that: "Whatever power the modernist history of painting has had to convince comes mainly from the fact that it was able to explain as a comprehensible progression the lost important pictorial evidence of the last hundred years. But this is not the case with sculpture. [...] Modernist critics appear to have cut themselves off from what is most energetic and felt in contemporary sculpture." Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory*, 125-126.

²⁶ Judd, "Specific Objects," 4.

thing representing a problem, asking me if could be perceived as sculpture. And I kept saying, “Why not? Why couldn’t it be perceived as sculpture?” (Foster, 45)

The results of his melding minimalist concepts of situational time with modernist values of historical precedent produced a synergy that motivated a deeper interest in the facticity of material for Serra. This search for the fundamental nature of sculpture, its ontological essence as such, is ultimately what decides the criteria for what defines a work as sculptural or not in the modern era.

1.5 More than Truth to Materials.

“Truth to materials” was an aesthetic guideline that strongly influenced the aesthetic direction modern sculpture had taken in the early to mid-twentieth century. The art of releasing from within a material some hidden element – such as the figure from within a block of marble or abstracting some mimetic form latent within the timber grain, corresponded to the modernist belief that what made mere objects into artworks was some magically infused internal meaning brought forth by the skill of the artist. With the advent of minimalist sculpture, this revelatory rationale for the artist’s role was superseded by the sleek exteriority of industrial factory production that rendered the imprint (and even the idea) of the artist’s handiwork somewhat obsolete. An insistence on letting material show objective truths increasingly became the subject matter for modern sculpture.

Minimalist practitioners reduced sculpture to axioms, placing their faith in the idea that fundamental shape, stripped of any extraneous detail beyond the formal properties imposed by the materials used, would engender artworks that spoke of reality, not illusion. Employing industrial manufacturing removed inherent modernist connotations of an identifiable presence of the artist’s hand and the association of internalised meaning. Employing mass culture’s production lines gave an allusive quality of iteration and self-sameness, lending a mode and finish of autonomy, integrity, and the present. In works such as Donald Judd’s serial stacking of box-like forms, *Untitled*, 1968 [fig.11], the fabrication of units with exact same proportions were commissioned. The former studio practice of carving or modelling material was disregarded in favour of outsourcing labour. Industrial materials such as reflective brass and plexiglass, or plywood embalmed in high gloss-coats of startlingly bright automotive lacquer,

furthered the impression such objects had as existing independent of artisanal baggage. These were objects of and in the world.

In championing the primary modes of form: planar shape, volume and materiality, minimalism adopted an empiricist approach to break away from the age-old European tactic of illusionism in art. “The main things are alone and are more intense, clear and powerful. They are not diluted by an inherited format,” reasoned Judd. This dispensed with any need to convey a representational narrative via a coherent outward formality. However, the result was that the showroom-like precision of Judd’s work seemed somewhat ossified, existing as inert material within an eerie, abstractly silent space. The mathematical calculations Judd used to determine the spatial intervals between the units of his stacks lack the imperfections of artistry. Producing shiny, angular and modular pieces in the way of a utilitarian object – say a brand-new modern kitchen – their purpose seems other than that of existing as didactic pieces of art. The overall effect this undifferentiated “non-art” look led Michael Fried to pen one of the seminal pieces of critical writing about modern sculpture, *Art and Objecthood*, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 2.

For now, it is worth noting that Fried considered that the “emphasis on shape [...] accounts for the impression, which numerous critics have mentioned, that Judd’s and Morris’s pieces are hollow.”²⁷ The fast surfaces and production-line quality emphasised the object’s pure exteriority. Whilst boldly proclaiming their existence in the same space as the viewer, the starkness of these objects suggested a negation of meaning in conventional terms.²⁸ As such, works of minimalism posed a confrontational question: does meaning in art only issue forth from within?

Krauss posited this was a new concern for sculptural practice, one that dispensed with the traditional methods of representing an inner source of conditioned meaning held by the work. Conventionally, meaning in sculpture was there as a result of the artist’s creative prowess in effectively representing a historical narrative.

In structural or abstract terms, compositional devices of the minimalists deny the logical importance of the interior space of forms – an interior space which

²⁷ Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 12.

²⁸ “[T]he art with which Judd is associated is characterised as intentionally blank and empty [...] Obviously a negative art of denial and renunciation.” Barbara Rose, quoted by Krauss in “Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd.” Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory*, 91.

much of the previous twentieth-century had celebrated. The symbolic importance of a central, interior space from which the energy of living matter derives, from which its organisation develops as do the concentric rings that annually build outward from the tree trunk's core, had played a crucial role for modern sculpture. Because, as twentieth-century sculpture discarded realistic representation as a source of major ambition and turned to far more generalised and abstracted plays of form, the possibility arose – as it had not for naturalistic sculpture – that the sculpted object might be seen as nothing but inert material. (Krauss, *Passages*, 251-2)

Any emphasis on sculpture's existence in real world space had traditionally been downplayed. The minimalist assertion was that, "actual space is intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface."²⁹ To directly respond to modernist dogma necessitated excluding any messages hidden as latent metaphors "within" the object for the viewer in their apprehension, ending up as self-reflexive blank stares, as seen in the unflinching, faultless patina of Judd's floor box, *Untitled*, 1968 [fig.12].

Despite being strongly influenced by the performative potential minimalist objects' foray into real world space offered, Serra also felt stifled by the gleaming showroom-like finishing and dogmatic approach to specificity and wholeness that minimalism seemed to infer. Whilst applauding their move away from inherent narratives, he saw the gestalt of minimalism's objects as too static, and the finality of their realisations too limiting.

I was trying to find a way to assert my own way of making, of confronting the artists who were in front of me and offering an initial proposition of what sculpture could be. [...] The artists who were significant to me at the time were Judd, Flavin, and Andre, and most of them were a decade older. What they had done was take the work off the pedestal, thus putting emphasis on the object. What they hadn't done was emphasize the making of the object itself. Most of their works looked mechanized, like outsourced products. (Foster, 42)

In keeping with his working-class do-it-yourself attitude, Serra wanted to embrace the materiality of sculpture through involving himself in the physicality of making. This positions Serra as an intermediary between the modernist and minimalist schools of thought. A hybrid

²⁹ Judd, "Specific Objects," 4.

work that demonstrates this is the innovative *Splashing*, 1968 piece [fig.13] that combined, in the ladling of multiple coats of molten lead, minimalist ideas of repetition with the more traditional notion of the artist as maker. Left to solidify, the accumulation of liquefied lead Serra had thrown against the intersection of where wall met floor resulted in a conglomerate morass with a much more unfinished look than the austere finishes of high minimalism.³⁰ Breaking the lead free from the cornices of the room exposed the ninety-degree join that had effectively been cast onto the back of morass.

Going on to lay multiple versions of the casting technique he developed in *Splashing*, in overlapping rows of process-induced forms Serra displayed *Casting*, 1969 [fig.14]. The name, and the work's direct physical reference to the architecture from which it was derived, sets this work apart as "sculptural" from the more "generic object" approach minimalists took in their insertions into gallery spaces. "One of the limitations of Minimalism was that it didn't deal with context," says Serra.

The perception of the Minimalist object is mostly limited to a gestalt reading in a room: you read one side and then fill in the others in your head. That doesn't take into the consideration of time in relation to place, the whole subject-object relationship. The object is content to present itself in its own specificity. [...] The first splash piece against the wall: liquifying the lead then making it solid again – that really attacked the whole problem of modelling and casting, and it immediately brought the context, the architecture, into play. (Foster, 52)

This dangerous splashing of lead process gave a molded, ninety-degree back to a hardened molten lava-like façade, combining material with site through displaying the frozen process of the moment the two disparate elements had unified. Material plus action/process becomes artwork – a familiar trope in contemporary art-making, but here Serra cancels out the desire to control the process in an aestheticised manner with a technique reminiscent of Jackson Pollock's action painting, and even perhaps more akin to the unguided results of Helen Frankenthaler's and Morris Louis' watercolour washes.

Serra took the minimalist idea that the autonomy of material was more than capable to represent itself and used it to create sculptures that celebrated the moment of their own creation, not hide

³⁰ "At first I just took a ladle of lead, laid it down along the wall, took another [...] and so on. The repetition was important [...] it looked like a continuous splash, but actually it took eight hours [...] After we did it I thought, 'Why don't we just uncork it? Turn it over and see the wall and floor it was cast from?'" Foster, *Conversations*, 52.

it. To map the ability of material to shift ontological states as a working method – one thing’s potentiality to become another, its past folded up into its current existence. This demonstrates the history of Serra’s object-based early practice as the result of a willingness to expose artistic process, a model that rebuked the minimalist dictate for gestalt-completion and obdurate finishing of product-like surfaces.

1.6 Striking Out in Space.

Looking to strike out in his own direction as an artist, Serra and his cohort continually worked on their own variants of a less formal, “dirty” kind of minimalism.³¹ Serra adhered however to a medium-specific definition of sculpture, unlike most of contemporaries who looked to change categories or invent new ones. Moving on from rubber to the more structurally robust lead, he produced a series of prop pieces that investigated the malleability of the material and then matched it to its own specific weight and load-bearing capacity.

“I had done lead rolls on the floor; I understood I could take material, roll it up, and it’d still be an object even though it was primarily about its own making.”³² He also found inspiration of physicality and applied equilibrium by studying closely the performances of modern dancers who at that time were reducing traditional forms of dance to fundamental issues of stability and support, as manifested in the unique situations of bodies in motion.³³

I saw things – in terms of movement and stasis, weight and support – that I could use in my sculpture. [...] All the early props have a relation to the body in terms of balance and counterbalance; they’re an abstract reference to the body [...] Body in relation to material, circulation in relation to the material, force, also repetition. How one confronts an object – objects in space. (Foster, 28)

Serra’s early experimental works nevertheless all shared an interest in attaching meaning that spoke of an object’s material essence. His investigations of form, structure, and physical properties for their own sake were still for the most part object-based. However, Serra noted

³¹ “On his return to New York he first experimented with rubber and lead, which leads him to distinguish the “dirty” Minimalism of his cohort from the “shiny” version of Donald Judd and Dan Flavin.” Foster, *Conversations*, 3.

³² *Ibid.*, 37.

³³ “I was interested in the volume of space, in the entire context – what happened when you walked around, what happened to the rhythm of your body in motion. So I started going to dance concerts at Judson Church (I was living with Joan Jonas then) to see how those performers were experimenting with the open field – Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, and Simone Forti in particular.” *Ibid.*, 28.

that “Minimalism was completely divorced from process, whereas I was interested in manifestations of making, looking, and walking.”³⁴ This changed his overall awareness of space, and developed into the primary use of steel as his sculptural medium of choice.

In purposeful fashion, a progression from painted pictorial space, through assemblages that used animate and inanimate objects, and into competition with minimalist use of gallery space, tracks an artist increasingly concerned of the phenomenological potential of his work. The hotbed of inspiration, provocation and collaboration in the New York scene was invaluable to Serra’s development.

We all resisted the mandates of Minimalism. That said, the people who were most interested in us were the Minimalists. Judd became like an older brother figure for me; he was very supportive. Robert Morris was interested too, figuring out what he could pick up. And Johns couldn’t have been more open [...] So it was a tight-knit community of younger and older figures. The older invited the younger in, and they encouraged us. I don’t know if that situation still exists, but it was very much part of the atmosphere of the 1960s in New York. (Foster, 48)

Serra took part in an influential show that announced a major shift in minimalism, a second-wave of artists dubbed “post-minimalist,” whose disparate approaches found a loose unity in their personal idiosyncratic approaches to process-orientated art.³⁵ Things really started to take off conceptually and in practice. A corollary of unimagined proportions grew out of the splashing technique Serra had been trialing.

I built *Splash Piece: Casting* (1969-70) for [Jasper] Johns. Phil [Glass] and I were heating the lead scraps, but there was one rectangular plate too large to melt, so I set it in a corner, and I thought, “Look, it free-stands.” Soon after I went out and got a big plate. I had to hire a rigger, which I’d never done before. That move got me out of the studio and into a whole new world of engagement. (Foster, 52)

This engagement comprised a move to steel and an incorporation of architecture as support that developed into Serra’s signature style: tectonic plates of steel that interact with the place they

³⁴ Foster, *Conversations*, 37.

³⁵ “The Castelli Warehouse show got a lot of attention, and it led directly to exhibitions of Serra’s work in a number of group shows here [the US] and in Europe.” Tomkins, “Man,” 5.

find themselves in an authoritative fashion that unveils a curious juxtaposition of matter and space; presence and absence; that brings to the fore the fundamental requirements of sculptural works: what is the constituent nature of the relationship of the subject to this object?

As is the case with his first breakthrough, recognisably Serra-esque piece *Strike: To Roberta and Rudy*, 1969-71 [fig.15]. The bluntness a large rectangular steel plate wedged into the corner of a room holds, and the way it immediately encompasses the ambient space of that room whilst simultaneously demanding its presence as an object be noted. *Strike* is Serra's primary and unapologetic declaration of his own sculptural convictions. "*Strike* was my break in to space. It declared the whole space in dividing it, and I realised I could hold the room the way Flavin did [with light], only do it with my own material."³⁶ The difference being however that Serra's facture is materially tangible, whereas Flavin's works relied on the evanescent dispersal of coloured light to control the space.

In one fell swoop, Serra muscled his way past the minimalist specific objects' lack of context by introducing dynamism into the equation. If Judd's stacks hold themselves in refined check, displaying a kind of post-coital plexiglass afterglow that pristinely reflects on just how perfect, how complete a performance by the artist that was; by contrast, crudely jutting out from the intersections of the walls, Serra's unabashedly raw material and demonstratively brute use of primal force displays instead sculpture caught in the very act of procreation. He could have easily titled this newest work "Thrust," so dominant is the way the steel plate pokes into the physical space of the viewer.

It is by no means complete, nor reserved. Although in repose, the very essence of action in finely-tuned balance is on display, and viewer is kept on tenterhooks as to just when – not if – this sculptural penetration of their space will pass that incremental moment of release, a collapse of calibration signifying the passage past the point of no return. In almost comical antecedent to his caged bunnies of a few years earlier, *Strike* dominates the space of the gallery with the overbearing presence of primordial force balanced on a knife-edge. Serra had found his sculptural mojo.

His motivations are clear in the language he uses to describe the piece: "my *break* into space," and, "I *wedged* a plate into a corner." "It declared the whole space by *dividing* it."³⁷ This use of active verbs to describe his intentions reveals through language the same physicality and

³⁶ Foster, *Conversations*, 57.

³⁷ My italics. Ibid.

confidence in the artist that is manifested in his mature work. I read this self-belief almost to the point of aggression as an important factor in Serra's oeuvre, one that finds expression in his pragmatic point of view to art-making. A belief in process applied to material, whose results speak for themselves.

Chapter 2: Mid-century Polemics.

Serra's commitment to enter the artistic fray as a serious sculptor coincided with a period of ideological fracture in the American art world that in many ways determined the formal interests and characteristics of his work. During the 1960s the definitive limits of what constituted painting or sculpture, and indeed the very definition of what art itself was (or should be) were being actively discussed and challenged by artist's practices and the critical discourse of the day. An influential (and long-standing) iconoclastic argument over the preconditions for contemporary art was generated by Michael Fried's polemical essay, *Art and Objecthood*. Fried analysed the rise of minimalist sculpture – what he called “literalist art” – as indicative of a theatrical manner starting to pervade the fine arts, and indeed wider society, at the time.

As discussed in Chapter 1, as Serra's signature style developed, he often mobilised minimalist strategies for physically affecting the viewer. Early steel plate works such as *Strike* incorporated the whole gallery space as a site for aesthetic consideration. In the even more viewer-as-target aspect of *Circuit*, 1972 [fig.16] that interceded the gallery space from all four corners, demanded the art object explicitly be negotiated as part of practical concerns for the viewer. Furthermore, that Serra openly admits to an ongoing rivalry with the sculptors of his preceding generation intimates the impact minimalist art had on the art of his generation. In a late 2018 publication of recent conversations with art historian Hal Foster, Serra continually targets the “high priests” of minimalism – Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt and Dan Flavin – as influential sources for his sculpture, if in somewhat of an adversarial manner.³⁸

The innovations of his initial New York artistic cohort were often direct responses to the edicts of minimalism; hence Serra and his peers labelling the ingenuity of their process-based approach to sculpture as “dirty minimalism.”³⁹ In this context, to understand the importance of Serra as one of our times' preeminent sculptors, and the way in which sculpture of that time is emblematic of the shift in concepts of the self that define a boundary between modernist interpretations of art and what came after, it is useful to unpack the intention and implications that minimalist sculpture introduced into the American art scene at the time of Serra's induction as a serious practitioner.

³⁸ “Most Minimalists are stuck with gestalt readings,” Serra avers. “They don't truly open the space; for the most part their constructions remain objects. [...] I was trying to find a way to assert my own way of making, of confronting the artists in front of me, and offering an initial proposition of what sculpture could be.” Foster, *Conversations about Sculpture*, 5-6.

³⁹ “On his return to New York he first experimented with rubber and lead, which leads him to distinguish the “dirty” Minimalism of his cohort from the “shiny” version of Donald Judd and Dan Flavin.” *Ibid.*, 3.

In this regard, undertaking a relatively detailed analysis of Fried's *Art and Objecthood*, and the underlying modernist sensibility of its position, gives a framework to recognize the innovations Serra brought to sculpture that helped shift sculptural practice and the attendant discourse over contemporary art criticism into more ontological, not just ideological, waters.

2.1 Critics in Practice.

Sculpture has perhaps never enjoyed such a central role in the discourse surrounding the possible paths contemporary art might take than in the wake of Fried's essay, published in the summer 1967 edition of *Artforum*. Traditionally, sculpture had played the conservative foil to the more radical moves made by modernist painters that had begun with the realism and advancement towards the picture plane of Courbet and Manet at the end of the nineteenth century. As Hal Foster notes,

At least since the Renaissance sculpture has been subordinate to painting; certainly it is throughout modernism: the dominant models of art are articulated un relation to painting, even when it's antagonistic, as in Minimalism. (Foster, *Conversations about Sculpture*, 38)

The historicist account of modernism's lineage had been advanced by Clement Greenberg as a useful axiom to lay down his famous strictures for advanced modernist painting that stressed the flatness of the two-dimensional picture plane and the use of the shape to emphasise its physical support.⁴⁰ By comparison, Greenberg felt that the development of modern sculpture

Having gathered a certain momentum in the late thirties and early forties, [was] slowed down in the later forties and fifties by the fear that, if it became markedly clean-drawn and geometrical, it would look too much like machinery. Abstract-Expressionist painting, with its aversion to sharp definitions, inspired this fear [...] Not that "painterly" abstract sculpture was necessarily bad [...] but] it was too negatively motivated, because too much of it was done out of the fear of not looking enough like art. Painting in that period was much more self-confident, and in the early fifties one or two painters did directly confront the question

⁴⁰ "Numerous art historians – led by Greenberg and Fried – have traced the progressive revelation of painting's essential nature specifically back to Manet's painting of the 1860's, citing its broad, emphatic brushwork, its simplifying elimination of half-tones, and the impassive, psychologically ambiguous quality of his figures, which made his handling of the pigment stand out even more." Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties*, 139.

when painting stopped looking enough like art. (Greenburg, *Recentness of Sculpture*, 180-181)

Similarly, in *Art and Objecthood*, part of the issue Fried took against the minimalist artists was a heretical appropriation of modern painting's formal abstraction and plastic traits in order to promote the arrival of a supposedly "new" art form.⁴¹ "The new work obviously resembles sculpture more than it does painting" said practitioner Donald Judd of the new approach, "but it is nearer to painting."⁴² For example, the stacked seriality of Judd's precise, wall-mounted boxes, as seen in *Untitled* (Bernstein 78-79), 1979 [fig. 17] can be read as a logical progression of the formalised abstraction of painting into real world gallery space, as initiated by Frank Stella's provocatively titled painting *Die Fahne Hoch!* (The Flag High!), 1959 [fig.18]. Already psychologically confronting, Stella projected the intensity of the work's message further into the viewer's gamut of concern by eliminating the frame and widening the stretcher bar supports, so that the physical space of the viewer was also affected, whilst also emphasising the work's internal pictorial structure in proper modernist fashion.

The shallow bas-relief effect of Judd's "stacks" also had been pictorially employed in the trompe l'oeil collages of synthetic cubism, as well as Cézanne's reduction of subject matter to the primary shapes of cylinder and sphere that give his landscapes an abstract three-dimensionality. The neither-sculpture-nor-painting approach that minimalist artists claimed infuriated modernist critics such as Greenberg and Fried, who stressed that the borders between artistic categories were inviolable fundamentals defining high quality art.

It is, I think, significant that in their various statements the literalists have largely avoided the issue of value or quality at the same time as they have shown considerable uncertainty as to whether or not what they are making is art. [...] For Judd, as for literalist sensibility generally, all that matters is whether or not a given work is able to elicit and sustain (his) *interest*. Whereas within the modernist arts nothing short of *conviction* – specifically, the conviction that a particular painting or sculpture or poem or piece of music can or cannot support comparison with past work within that art whose quality is not in doubt – matters at all. (Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 21)

⁴¹ Minimalism "is motivated by specific reservations, or worse, about both [painting and sculpture]; and it aspires, perhaps not exactly, or not immediately, to displace them, but in any case to establish itself as an independent art on a footing with both of them." Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 12.

⁴² Judd, "Specific Objects," 2.

There was a real concern amongst critics and art historians that the proliferation of new materials, styles and techniques that ignored the old boundaries was leading to a crisis of meaning for art in general. One vital methodological constraint in the face of a plethora of creative expressions unlocked by the Surrealists, Abstract Expressionists, Pop artists, Conceptual artists, assemblages and new media such as video installation and performance art, was to ascribe value to individual works only within their particular medium. This gave coherence to criticism. Using an analogy for the progression of modern painting, Krauss pointed out a sliding doors concept to modernism where,

Within each room the individual artist explores, to the limits of his experience and his formal intelligence, the separate constituents of his medium. The effect of his pictorial act was simultaneously to open the door to the next space and to close out access to the one behind him. [...] One part of what we were seeing was a kind of history, telescoped and assessed; and the other part was the registration of feeling generated by that historical condition. (Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory*, 121.)

The importance modernist critics placed on the technical limitations unique to each individual medium as determining the quality of a specific work does however reveal a certain blind spot in the modernist argument that undermines the efficacy of its aesthetic regime. Where, for example, to place Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning*, 1912 [fig.19] if not as an innovation? The simple addition of a utilitarian piece of household furniture breached the gap between painting and sculpture in a visionary way and was usefully generative for the art that followed. Such a point argues against the rigidity of modernist doctrine, particularly at such a watershed moment of contemporary practice the New York scene encapsulated. Such an out-of-the-blue arrival is what, in regard to his own practice, Serra calls a "Prime Object."⁴³

Caroline Jones points out the significant role modernist critics played however in swaying the direction art took in North America. Acting as midcentury intermediaries that, with their own subjective motivations, both drove and compensated for the alienating subject matter formal abstraction imposed on the viewer. Greenberg's "mid-century modernism" strongly regulated the way in which art of that time was being received, and even produced: "The Greenberg effect was comprised of both statements and visibilities that declared, decisively, what was and

⁴³ "Primarily for the proposition that, if you make sculpture, you have to find an entrance into its history, and you have to invent something that's not anticipated." Foster, *Conversations*, 91.

wasn't Art."⁴⁴ In light of this, the modernist camp's aversion to minimalist works and ideology can be seen, in part, as self-interest in maintaining the order and control of their established theories, rather than impartial critical reflections on the latest contemporary art trend. Nevertheless, Fried's essay did serve to highlight the problematic status the object held for critics and artists during the late 1960s and became a touchstone in the ensuing battle that split the production and critical reception of works post-*Art and Objecthood*.

The object as a pivotal and contentious concept in modern artistic thought and production had already been demonstrated by the notoriety of Marcel Duchamp's Readymades, and the ambiguous productions of surrealism, such as Méret Oppenheim's fur covered teacup and saucer *Le Déjeuner en Fourrure (Lunch in Fur)*, 1936 [fig.20]. These controversial works augured the shifting ontological ground of art in the modern age, manifesting as intensified scrutiny over how meaning attached itself to the object as high modernism fought to maintain its foothold against an explosion of avant-garde practices. This instability underlies Fried's critique of the objecthood of minimalist sculpture as constituting the upmost antithesis of the definitive conditions of art.

2.2 Art and Objecthood.

Perceiving a threat to the traditional (and for academic modern critics, necessary) categories of art, the main thrust of Fried's argument against minimalism was clearly stated on the box: There is art, and there are objects – and ne'er the twain shall meet. Before the rise of minimalism in the 1960s, and the advances the previous decade of modern American painters had made, "The risk, even the possibility, of seeing works of art as *nothing more* than objects did not exist."⁴⁵

[T]his conflict is something new [...] objecthood has become an issue for modernist painting only within the past several years. [That] is not say that *before* the present situation came into being, painting, or sculptures for that matter, simply *were objects*. It would, I think, be closer to the truth to say that they *simply* were not. (Fried, 20.)

⁴⁴ Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses*, 17.

⁴⁵ Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 20.

The values and teachings that modernist sensibility relied upon to ascertain the quality of art with conviction were based on judgments of historical precedent, positing the idea that art evolved over time. Traditionally, this lineage was premised on the work of art's function as a placeholder for allusive meaning, that the quality of a work of art inhered in its content.⁴⁶ Such content with regard to sculpture was clear-cut: memorialise an event or monumentalise a personage. Hence Fried's demarcation of the objecthood – the apparent lack of meaningful content “inside” minimalist sculpture – as manifestly different to the qualities that had defined art historically. As he states clearly,

It is as though objecthood alone can, in the present circumstances, secure something's identity, if not as non-art, at least as neither painting nor sculpture; or as though a work of art – more accurately, a work of modernist painting or sculpture – were in some essential respect *not an object*. (Fried, 15)

In particular for Fried, the emphasis literalist art placed on the gestalt shape as an object – as opposed to form being the exterior result of the interior content's expression – emptied out the possibility of sculpture existing as a receptacle of meaning for the viewer.⁴⁷ He maintained that previously art held meaning because “what is to be had from the work is located strictly with[in] it.”

The problem minimalism brought about was that the “experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation – one which, virtually by definition *includes the beholder*.”⁴⁸ It is this quality of situation-based meaning, conditioned by exterior factors and the vagaries of the viewer that Fried derided as being essentially theatrical in nature. He argued the obdurate, industrially fabricated objects produced by such artists as Donald Judd, Tony Smith and Robert Morris held no official art content, and therefore were akin to the aesthetics of design, built for the lesser purpose of being “beheld” in a kind of durational spectacle that was a far cry from the serious business of high art.

In their concerted assertion of “the values of wholeness, singleness and indivisibility,” these austere sculptural objects with no internal relationships or interior narrative looked instead to exploit the real-world conditions of their being: the light and space in effect at the time of their

⁴⁶ Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory*, 118.

⁴⁷ “It is, I believe, this emphasis on shape that accounts for the impression, which numerous critics have mentioned, that Judd's and Morris's pieces are *hollow*.” Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 12.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

viewing.⁴⁹ This meant a new kind of art encounter generated through an exchange between the viewer-subject and art-object, drastically revising the former suspension of belief and subordination of self that was required of modernist viewers to access the messages within the pictorial space of illusionistic art.

2.3 The Theatrical.

The general awareness of objects in space that minimalism strove to make visible as art led Fried to identify the sensibility of minimalism as a putting-on of appearances, a kind of showmanship performed for the benefit of capturing the attention of the beholder, effectively reducing art's function to the quality of "stage presence."⁵⁰ By insisting the shape and materiality of their objects was sufficient as subject matter, Fried saw minimalist objects as ahistorical imposters in the realm of fine art.

Like the shape of the object, the materials do not represent, signify or allude to anything; they are what they are and nothing more [...] Accordingly, the experience of both is one of endlessness, of inexhaustibility, of being able to go on and on letting, for example, the material itself confront one in all its literalness, its "objectivity," its absence of anything beyond itself. (Fried, 22)

A crucial distinction was Fried's assertion that the hallmark for high modern art was the defeat of pervasive "theatre" arising in the Avant-Garde art practices of the late 1960s. Fried judged that a mode of theatricality replaced inherently stable, psychically accessible, and thereby meaningful content specified by the artist, with unbounded, contingent interpretation. He took this as a matter of utmost concern, going so far as to claim that:

The success, even the survival, of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theatre. The concepts of quality and value – and to the extent that these are central to art, the concept of art itself – are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only *within* the individual arts. What lies *between* the arts is theatre. (Fried, 21)

What Fried saw as the theatrical nature of minimalism significantly challenged the discursive power of art that the methodology of his criticism relied upon, leading him to state that it was

⁴⁹ Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

as though “The demands of art and the conditions of objecthood are in direct conflict.”⁵¹ To make an object without historical referent, and to consider its presence as simply being there within the same institution was sufficient enough evidence to match the undisputed quality of past genius was presumptuous and ultimately distasteful to Fried.

By contrast, Rosalind E. Krauss, although too an initial acolyte of Greenberg, responded with a more open mind to the minimalists’ intervention in the gallery’s space. She saw contemporaneous practices, such as earthworks and assemblages as redefining modern sculpture into a “category [that] can be made to become almost infinitely malleable.”⁵² As such, Krauss saw the enforcement of boundaries by critics such as Greenberg and Fried insisted on as placing unnecessary limitations upon creativity – primarily to serve their own reputations and the “modernist demand for the purity and separateness of the various mediums (and thus the necessary specialization of a practitioner within a given medium).”⁵³

This difference of critical opinion eventually split modernist academic discourse. Krauss went on to develop a phenomenology of perception methodology in specific response to the insufficiencies modernist sensibility had in searching for meaning beyond intellectual responses to works such as Serra’s site-specific *Pulitzer Piece: Stepped Elevation*, 1970-71 [fig.21], which placed emphasis on the viewer’s extended time spent walking a landscape work stretched intermittently over a five-acre site. Krauss’ innovative critique of Serra’s work responded in a different way to the same questions that drove Fried’s criticism of minimalism – the modernist belief that an interior narrative, infused via the artist, and locatable in positivist art historical context, was the only justifiable means to assess the meaning and quality of art going forward.

2.4 The Times They Are A Changin’

The pre-eminent modern mode of Cartesian dualism that structured the relationship between the artwork and the viewing subject – where a deterministic self encounters the world seeking to extract objective truth from empirical knowledge about an object was problematised by minimalism’s apparent rejection of the necessity for meaning to be located “inside” sculpture. The traditional narrative techniques of illusionistic art – the Albertian “window on the world,”

⁵¹ Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 15.

⁵² Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” 31.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 42.

Renaissance perspective, historical narration and mimetic representation were already considered passé in the sculptural medium that was increasingly fixated with the potential formal abstraction held to critique contemporary culture and break with the past. The next obvious step to be taken in three-dimensions was to address the changing perception of what constituted the modern self by destroying the illusionism that insulated the “modernist transcendental idea of the art experience” from the realities of immanent time and space.⁵⁴

The interior core that the artist-subject transferred into their artwork established how the modern subject-viewer should encounter the work of art: that a painting or sculpture, no matter how abstract, stood in as a surrogate for the body, an intermediary between artist and viewer with the requisite kernels of intelligibility contained within.⁵⁵ Crucially, these kernels were still deemed anthropomorphic in essence, making for easy reference and consumption in the state of intense detachment from the wider world that high modernism required if it was to be received as plausible in its apparent complete differentiation from representative paradigms in art.

Somewhat contradictorily, the modernist viewer was expected to perceive works of art as would a rational, fact-seeking animal. To match the formal coherence of the modernist art they viewed, Jones relates that the properly informed modern viewer’s cultivated “desire for the optical (as opposed to the pictorial) was rational, a part of the modern sensibility and its practical preference for hard facts, quickly obtained.”⁵⁶ The quintessential example of this critical theory being both Greenberg and fellow critic, Harold Rosenberg’s promotion of the nonfigurative chaotic patois of Jackson Pollock’s abstract expressionist gestures as tangible traces of the artist’s emotional state whilst he painted.

Interestingly, Serra notes Pollock’s *Mural*, 1943 [fig.22] as “probably the beginning of serialisation within abstraction” – a painterly precursor to the minimalist iterative processes that Serra himself appropriated in an early sculptural relief. *Belts*, 1966-67 [fig.23] shows the beginnings of Serra’s awareness of “gravity as force, a forming device” directly borrowed from analysing Pollock’s working methods.⁵⁷ Another parallel could be drawn; with Serra’s growing interest in the real world affective potential of the sculptural form beyond the dictates of

⁵⁴ Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties*, 140.

⁵⁵ “Such theories assume that the inner being or internal (organic) principle of the art work, as a surrogate for the subject, pre-exists and governs the externalisation in appearances. It is often said that for Fried, modernist abstraction, unlike minimalist literalism, sustained a sense that the decision-making process that activated the work was accessible to interpretation.” Ross, *‘Art and objecthood’ three decades on*, 150.

⁵⁶ Jones, *Eyesight Alone*, 14

⁵⁷ Foster, *Conversations*, 19.

pictorial art as a logical progression of action painting, to just plain action. As Jones points out, “Both Rosenberg’s and Greenberg’s discussions of ‘physicality’ were attached to the physicality of the *canvas*, which veiled and substituted for the alienated body of the viewing, or painting, subject.”⁵⁸

Fried also located, and thus believed nullified, the minimalist imperative to reject the old inherited European formulas they saw as still dominant in modern art, pointing out that there was a latent anthropomorphism hidden in works by Judd, Tony Smith and Robert Morris.⁵⁹ The symmetry and order of geometry, and the plain inscrutability when in its presence of something other than oneself meant that the minimalist object contained, for Fried, a “hidden naturalism.”

One way of describing what [Tony] Smith *was* making might be something like a surrogate person – that is, a kind of *statue*. [...] The entities or beings encountered in everyday experience in terms that most closely approach the literalist ideals of the non-relational, the unitary and the holistic are *other persons*. [...] The apparent hollowness of most literalist work – the quality of having an inside – is almost blatantly anthropomorphic [...] as though the works in question has an inner, even secret life. (Fried, 19)

One can almost decipher in Fried’s reaction to the eerie hollowness of these quasi-human surrogates a superstitious fear of ghosts. That what he found perhaps most unsettling about the apparent meaningless of the non-art object was their uncanny, unavoidable presence.

The characteristics of everyday encounters introduced as part of the new aesthetic confounded the territory between art and non-art. Modernist critics’ own perspicacity of connotative inner-dwelling meaning turned against itself. As if what frustrated them the most was the inability to ascertain exactly what that other presence in the room was thinking.

[T]he experience of being distanced by the work in question seems crucial: the beholder knows himself to stand in an indeterminate, open-ended – and unexacting – relationship *as subject* to the impassive object on the wall or floor [...] not entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of

⁵⁸ Jones, *Eyesight Alone*, 17.

⁵⁹ “The latency or hiddenness of the anthropomorphism has been such that the literalists themselves have [...] felt free to characterize the modernist art they oppose, e.g., the sculpture of David Smith and Anthony Caro, as anthropomorphic – a characterization whose teeth, imaginary to begin with, have just been pulled.” Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 19.

another *person*; the experience of coming upon literalist objects unexpectedly [...] can be strongly, if momentarily, disquieting in just this way. (Fried, 16)

This indeed does position minimalism somewhere between the concerns of painting and sculpture, reflexively pointing to the limitations both traditional mediums had in allowing for new meanings to arrive in art. Krauss called this condition the “exhaustion of modernism.”

If art deals with illusion, modernism sought to ground the work of art to its material support that would make it “truthfully” express its medium. Hence Clement Greenburg’s dictum that painting should refer to the flatness of its canvas surface. With the exhaustion of modernism, how is “truth” to be sustained? Under what conditions? (Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory*, 41)

The “truth” issue for Fried was that the liminal territory that now existed between the established genres was the domain of the theatrical. In reality, the increasing cross-pollination of theories and avant-garde practices of the 1960s in fact highlighted the need modernist methodology had to update itself beyond the maintenance of its border demarcations of medium as the sole marker of high art.

2.5 Myopic Modernism.

This idea of the work containing a narrative self-revelatory of the “heroic artist” lingered obstinately in critics with modernist sensibility.⁶⁰ Paradoxically, the truly affective quality of minimalism’s specific objects lay in their focusing on the subject. With their full disclosure materiality and gestalt shapes, what the object sought to express was not the conventional spiritual residence of an artwork’s “secret life,” but an obstinate presentation of its material existence to the viewer. Leading practitioner Robert Morris stated that,

While the work must be autonomous in the sense of being a self-contained unit for the formation of the gestalt, the indivisible and undissolvable whole, the major aesthetic terms are not in but dependent upon the autonomous object and exist as unfixed variables that find their specific definition in the particular

⁶⁰ “The art that emerged in the wake of Pollock’s sensational, near-suicidal death in 1956 made similar stories [of heroism] difficult to tell. Even before that event, artists of the next generation were withdrawing from the heroic model of artistic selfhood.” Crow, *Rise*, 9.

space and light and physical viewpoint of the spectator. (Morris, Notes on Sculpture, 234)

To renounce minimalist works as theatrical, and therefore not art, based on the assumption their “hollowness” concealed an “inner secret life” highlights one of the contradictions in the modernist system of analysis. Subsequently, a move away from the stipulation of an inner pictorial narrative to the purely optical reception of a work of art (that must nevertheless still retain an anthropomorphic message) occurred in modernist critiques.

Prior to the arrival of minimalism on the scene, subject matter in even the most formally abstract works of modernist sculpture and painting had been made accessible to sophisticated viewers by utilising Greenberg’s theory of “opticality.” Opticality, as the name suggests, privileged eyesight as the primary interpretive tool for the intellectualised modern art experience. To view “correctly” the kind of formal abstraction Greenberg recommended relied upon the Kantian notion of disinterestedness, a refusal to let the external world beyond the work of art impinge on one’s aesthetic experience.

Dominant in the modern age, the hallmark of the proper reception of art is, in Kant’s word, ‘disinterestedness.’ [...] On an aesthetic approach such as this, the essential thing about aesthetic is decontextualisation. We attend to the object of perception in and for itself, abstract, that is, from every relation it may have to our intellectual and practical interests. (Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Art*, 10-11)

This state made plausible the confusing lack of identifiable content, narrative, or perspectival space by appealing to the proclivity modern subjectivity has for assuming mastery over objective reality. As Iain D. Thomson describes, “The modern prejudice that (to put it simply) all meaning comes from the human subject” verifies the idea that the work of art retained traces of its creator’s essence and emotions.⁶¹ Accordingly, with the restrictions of illusionistic representation that hampered pure painterly practice diminishing in twentieth century art, painters were afforded the freedom to explore the plasticity of pigment and brushwork as expressions for their own sake. The subject matter of “good” painting in high modernism became painting itself, which led to a further reduction of mimetic content that surpassed even the supposed emotional traces left behind by the action painters of abstract expressionism.

⁶¹ Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 53.

Again, Jones notes this development as proof of the drastic impact critics had on artist practice at the height of modernism, citing Fried's *Modernist Painting and Formal Criticism* essay of 1964 to claim a "master narrative" was at work that activated as positive the "existential distance avant-garde art and artists assumed in Greenberg's system."⁶²

Greenberg was eventually forced to revise his prescriptive theory once the limits of his systematic demands for modern painting were met, and then surpassed, in the late 1960s by the burgeoning New York art scene that he had helped to create – of which Serra was a prominent player.⁶³ Painters such as Barnett Newman exemplified modernist aesthetics, his signature "zips" divvying up two-dimensional space without any extraneous detail beyond the pigmented mark, as seen in his iconic *The Stations of the Cross* series. Of note however is Newman's incorporation of titles that still lend a didactic relevance to otherwise formally complete works of abstract art.

In sculpture, modernist critics looked to the welded constructions of Anthony Caro as a parallel of anti-illusionistic procedure that also retained purposeful meaning. Caro's mature works, such as *Early One Morning*, 1962 [fig.24] were the supposed antithesis to minimalist unified objects. The part-by-part interrelationship of elements within the optical envelope of the work's boundary was seen as the correct application for formally abstract components to maintain sculptural specificity whilst still generating inner meaning. Specifically, Fried read Caro's work as syntactical – the "mutual inflection of one element by another [...] bestow significance on one another precisely by virtue of their juxtaposition."⁶⁴

By contrast, the endless iteration of self-same objects in works like Judd's stacks, or Carl Andre's *Lever*, 1966 [fig.25] seemed to lack some vital component of artistry on behalf of the artist – made worse by Andre's choice to use mass-produced firebricks as a sculptural material. The value structure of modernist criticism starts to reveal itself when making such comparisons. To champion Caro's compositional structure of disparate abstract shapes, painted the same overall colour, whose "lowness, openness, part-by-partness, absence of enclosing

⁶² Jones, *Eyesight Alone*, 16.

⁶³ "The practice of art, even within a traditional medium, will nevertheless outrun the grasp of any theoretical system, however pertinent and powerful it may have been at the start. At the end of the 1950's, Greenberg himself was facing certain problems induced by the very success of his New York School painting, the object of his earlier advocacy." Crow, *Rise*, 60.

⁶⁴ Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 20.

profiles” contains a message accessible through their “efficacy of gesture,” speaks of Fried’s implicit concern: the loss of interior meaning in art.⁶⁵

Caro’s sculptures [...] defeat, or rather allay, objecthood by imitating, not gestures exactly, but the *efficacy* of gesture; like certain music and poetry, they are possessed by the knowledge of the human body and how, in innumerable ways and moods, it makes meaning. It is as though Caro’s sculptures essentialize meaningfulness *as such* – as though the possibility of what we say and do alone makes his sculptures possible. All this, it is hardly necessary to add, makes Caro’s art a fountainhead of anti-literalist and anti-theatrical sensibility. (Fried, 20)

We could surmise therefore that, from Fried’s viewpoint, what constituted anti-theatrical medium specificity for sculpture is that it must retain some discernible human narrative, some “efficacy of gesture” that contradicts high modernism’s valorisation of the content and subject matter of painting to be only painting. It is here that Greenberg’s theory of opticality falls down as a system not applicable beyond modern painting. Sculpture is unignorably in the same space as the viewer. To treat an object as not there just because it is to be judged as art does not bring “anti-illusionism full circle” as Greenberg claimed – rather, it denotes willful blindness on behalf of his modernist sensibility.⁶⁶

Sculpture’s primary mode of being in the world is just that: it is *in* the world. More than choice of materials, or the processes of making; even more than the aesthetic form a work finally takes on, it is three-dimensionality that is the most medium specific trait that sets sculpture apart from its counterparts in the fine arts – and it was this fact that minimalist sculptors were investigating at base level. A theory premised on disengaged intellectual appraisal to appreciate art was supplanted by a practice based on art’s undeniable existence in the real world.

One could go further: art had ignored the real world for long enough. Ironically, it was the inability to see beyond an ingrained conception of where the meaning of art lay that undid the category structures insisted upon by Greenberg. Minimalism’s complete gestalt forms should have appealed greatly to a modernist intellect that sought indisputable, observable facts. It is

⁶⁵ Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 20.

⁶⁶ “To render substance as entirely optical, and form, whether pictorial, sculptural or architectural, as an integral part of ambient space – this brings anti-illusionism full circle. Instead of the illusion of things, we are now offered the illusion of modalities: namely that matter is incorporeal, weightless and exists only optically like a mirage.” Clement Greenberg, “The New Sculpture,” *Art and Culture*, 144.

curious that the arrival of such new, three-dimensional, autonomous objects which stressed the needful essentials of sculpture in fact exceeded what should have been a hallmark display of high modernism. Unable to find any quantifiable value in minimalist's display of works because of their seeming ignorance of the historical purpose of art, "It would seem," lamented Greenberg of his encounters with the minimalist style, "that a kind of art nearer the condition of non-art could not be envisaged or ideated at this moment."⁶⁷

I would argue that in reality Greenberg and Fried's antagonism towards minimalism needed to be a little more (medium) specific. That what really insulted their modernist sensibility was that, all of a sudden, here was a kind of sculpture nearer to the condition of non-sculpture than they quite knew what to do about.

2.6 In Favour of Minimal Sculpture.

The reduction of sculpture to primary geometry that did not seem to express anything but immanent physical presence as shapes, as objects. As we have seen, modernist critics argued an object that only refers to itself is cut off from evaluation as art by not asserting which type of art it is, therefore removing it from the preconditions of its medium and, by extension, from qualitative judgements about its value. The practitioners of minimalism sought to distance themselves from what was essentially a critics' conundrum by incorporating the condition of everyday lived experience to offer a new category which blurred the lines between art and non-art. By introducing the idea that the general awareness of objects in space was visibly an artform un beholden to historical precedent provided a way forward in sculpture, and it is hard to overstate the impact minimalist works had for the practice of sculptors that followed in their footsteps.

Fried's retort to objecthood stated it was antithetical to the requirements of high art. In *Art and Objecthood*, Fried indicates early on that

From its inception, literalist art has amounted to something more than an episode in the history of taste. It belongs rather to the history – almost the *natural* history – of sensibility; and is not an isolated episode but the expression of a general and pervasive condition. (Fried, 12)

⁶⁷ Greenberg, "Recentness of Sculpture," 183.

The ‘sensitivity’ Fried speaks of that goes beyond just “an episode in the history of taste” encompasses the actual conditional engagement people have with the world of objects. And if one really thinks about the embodied negotiation of space we practically engage with in our everyday lives, that our physical being-in-the-world is structured by objects can be seen as a “general and pervasive condition.” But that is everyday life, and what Fried argues for, in separating art from object, is that art concerns itself with something other than the mundane if it is to retain its authenticity and purpose.

Because they ignored conventional aims, although stressing shape as the fundamental attribute of sculptural anatomy, minimalism’s gestalt forms alone were not enough to satisfy Greenberg or Fried’s call to explicate clearly enough their medium specificity. Rosalind Krauss also picked up on this problematic issue: “a medium is, after all, a shared language developed over centuries of practise so that no individual initiative, we would think, can either organize new sources of its meaning or change established ones.”⁶⁸

Krauss’ pithy insight encapsulates the territory Fried was trying to defend by criticising minimal art. Yet it is undeniable the revolutionary impact minimalism had on sculptural practice going forward. In terms of promoting the identity of his Specific Objects as being a “new” kind of art form, Judd saw the affective benefits sculpture had in its three-dimensionality more relevant than painting for expressing the actual conditions of being-in-the-world. “Actual space is intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface,” wrote Judd.

Three dimensions are real space. That gets rid of the problem of illusionism and of literal space, space in and around the marks and colours – which is riddance to one of the salient and most objectionable relics of European art. The several limits of painting are no longer present. A work can be as powerful as it can thought to be. (Judd, *Specific Objects*, 4)

By embracing the possibilities of inhabiting space, as opposed to pictorial representation, modern sculpture tapped into the physicality of mass and volume as a descriptive element in its own right – ironically uncovering assets that were more uniquely sculptural than ever before, offering the very evidence of specificity modernism insisted upon to uphold categorical boundaries.

⁶⁸ Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory*, 51.

Judd, Morris and Smith's objects seemed to capture a hidden volume within; and the hermetic welds of industrial fabrication must actually seal air inside. Considering the latent anthropomorphic qualities that Fried thought he saw in minimalism, this can be read as somehow monstrous: the literal expression of minimalism's attempted suffocation of the internal narrative of traditional sculpture. But that is to read the works with the conventions of painted or sculpted narratives in mind; whereas the minimalist object was motivated by the need to "get clear of these forms" of art.⁶⁹

Treating three-dimensions as content necessitated the negation of interiority in favour of the completely external conditions of existence. This expanded the subject matter of abstract sculpture in new directions. A focus on non-traditional materials arose, materials that often displayed the origin of their fabrication, as opposed to veiling the truth of their materiality and perpetuating the unreality of illusionism. Serra's move from assemblage of found barnyard objects, through to the procedural experimentations with rubber, and his breakthrough stand-alone pieces in lead *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)*, 1969 [fig.26] and *Splashing* [fig.13] before finally committing to steel, is a classic example of the innovations minimalist thinking instigated.

Such a ubiquitous industrial material held little historical connotation in art. The *Chicago Picasso* had been installed in 1967 [fig.27]. Anthony Caro, David Smith and Alexander Calder had also established careers constructing abstract works in welded steel. But Serra claimed pre-eminence by proxy of a materiality hard-earned through working class graft and a commitment to that honest approach. Speaking of his contemporaries in steel, Serra remarks in a fashion that would please Fried, I think. "They assemble and weld steel parts, then anchor them, in ways that, in terms of gravity and balance, are fake. [...] Those artists make-believe something's happening when it's not."

I've never welded anything in my life; I wouldn't know how. [...] But bringing the methods of industry into art, as well as the mechanics of building, certainly interested me. The history of sculpture hadn't really dealt with steel; that was my opening. [...] I wasn't interested in stitching together metal together with a torch; I was interested in how to open up a space. (Foster, 211-212)

⁶⁹ Judd, "Specific Objects," 1.

Minimalism had recognised the fact that there is an initial interplay between entities that precedes the intellectual appraisal that culminates in conclusiveness about the type, name and meaning of any particular object. The essential factor in the overall task of successfully navigating our way through time and space is the initial, primary contact with phenomena that launches the functional processes we then use to make sense of our worlds. As such, in the first instance, what immediately characterises any encounter could be seen as consisting of a non-cognitive, but very physical presence; a primary moment occurs prior to cognition. Thus, the gallery space and the body of the viewing subject became considered to be an integral part of an interrelated compositional whole.

The object is but one of the terms in the esthetic. It is in some way more reflexive because one's awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many internal relationships. One is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context. (Morris, Notes on Sculpture, 232)

Serra's *Strike* [fig.15] typifies just such a drama that minimalist insertions into space were capable of. A large rectangular steel plate juts out of one corner to dominate an otherwise empty gallery room. A physical presence with implications for the subject: distancing, in that it makes the viewer aware they come up against the work, an initial impenetrability that precedes the subsequent cognitive search for a meaning that the viewer already experienced, if not intellectually registered. Balanced so precariously on its thin edge, *Strike* evokes anxiety. Space becomes a loaded term. Serra used architectural and engineering principles to shore up the work: proof of the validity of physics. Yet we are led to question them in this new context – the thin balancing edge brings to the fore the viewer's own vulnerability in the world, the built environment.

Art was now anti-pictorial, anti-illusionistic, and so undeniably in real world space that, in Serra's hands, it had become truly dangerous. The modernist paradigm, based upon rationality, therefore needed a phenomenological sensory update to respond to practices such as Serra's that were influencing gallery viewers in such unmistakably visceral ways.

2.7 The Whole Wide World.

When viewed as an attempt to wrest order onto the chaos of inhabitable space in real time, without the context of historical narrative or mimetic necessities as an aid, minimalism's use of non-traditional materials, repeating of identical units, gestalt-completion and indivisibility positions the object itself as the indispensable element for defining the space within which they appear. But for whom is this need fulfilled? Space for minimalists, as for us all, is at base an anthropomorphic concern. Fried comes to this conclusion in his assertion that the goal of minimalist art is to announce its presence to the viewer. Fried deduced this as objecthood; minimalist works were essentially theatrical in nature. "Literalist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work."⁷⁰

Minimalism strategically forgot however that history, too, is fundamentally comprised of substance made into things, and of beings then negotiating those objects. Krauss remarks upon this phenomenon, that although "modernist sculpture had a kind of idealist space to explore," it was left however "essentially nomadic" without the historical precursor of the (sculptural) monument, thus entering "a domain cut off from the project of temporal and spatial representation."⁷¹ A kind of timeless vacuum if you will.

This negation of the historical aspect as substantive of the sculptural objects of minimalism again contradicts their goals. For however generative and freeing idealist space may be, it is not real space. The high-modernist look of "non-art" that minimalism achieved could not ultimately dispense with the more fundamental ontological ground of its endeavours: that materially present objects in the world, by default, hold meaning for those who behold them. Krauss sums this up, claiming that "Judd's analysis is misnamed, since what he is supporting cannot be the *specific* object but is, instead, the *generic* one."⁷²

Although disparaging in tone, Krauss' observation is useful for understanding the direction minimalism opened up for contemporary sculptors. In looking to find an equivalent answer to the modernist search for incontrovertible truths about painting, minimalism inadvertently opened a door that led beyond its ideological stance as a new medium with its own agenda as neither painting nor sculpture. Importantly, the formal achievements of exteriority as the

⁷⁰ Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 15.

⁷¹ Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," 34.

⁷² Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory*, 48.

primary subject matter in art that Judd and his minimalist cohort made available to contemporaries such as Serra, in essence comprised the whole world.

The determiners of the spatial environment, its nuances of light, and site-specific contexts, rose to be major concerns in modern sculpture – phenomenological factors unavailable to the two-dimensional representational surface of painting and photography.⁷³ The problem for the minimalism-as-modernism paradigm lay however in the fact that, for the involved viewer, the world of objects is never arbitrary.

This underlying affinity with the notion of what humans' care about is perhaps what subliminally drove Judd to conceive such concretised, integrated objects. They offered a definitive foothold, the plausibility of a simple truth-as-appearance that minimalism needed upon its embarkation into the cacophony of the world-as-subject-matter, and the variability that opened up for creative expression in three-dimensions. Grounding the essential correspondence between subject and object by its unitary forms, the first step was taken in the investigation of the last frontier of space yet to be known in art: that of the subject themselves. Fried argued that this path dubiously leads to the non-art condition of objecthood. Serra was faced with just such an issue when undertaking his first major outdoor commission.

Pulitzer Piece: Stepped Elevation [fig.21] was Serra's first attempt at moving his minimalist-inspired practice into an out-of-door setting. Faced with the problem of how to influence space on a much grander scale than any gallery room could insist upon – in scale and context – it offered new challenges that Serra's use of industrial technology and material was well suited to. The site for *Pulitzer Piece* stretches over 5 acres of parkland near St Louis, Missouri. The work consists of three approximately sixty-foot-long, five-foot-high steel plates embedded into the ground so as to accentuate the fall of the land. Five-feet roughly corresponds to the average eyeline of a human subject, so the top line of the work becomes a surrogate horizon for the viewer as they survey the field, somewhat anchoring the subject to the otherwise diffuse composition of the work. Broken into three separate units, the placement of the three plates is relational to the topography, as is their orientation to each other, which is determined by the expanse of the actual field in which the work sits.

The plates measure out the land into anthropomorphic units of clarity. In doing so, the work describes the elevational drop of the landscape, thus framing the landscape in a volume that the

⁷³ "The better new work takes a relationship out of the work and makes them a function of space, light and the viewer's field of vision." Robert Morris, as quoted in Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 15.

viewer can behold as a unity, with the three plates acting as schematic guides. Serra's interest in sculptural fundamentals such as volume and its relation to axis are here brought into the service of perception in the time of viewing – a major move away from the pictorial space that grounds almost all preceding sculpture.

A recent problem with the lateral spread of materials, elements on the floor in the visual field, is the inability of this landscape mode to avoid arrangement *qua* figure ground: the pictorial convention. The rationale for this investigation is a plea for perceptual wholeness or a willingness to allow the definition of the place to control the priority of relationships. (Serra, *Writings/Interviews*, 7)

What Serra's new mode of seeing space allowed for is an abstract subject to generate a working model of the space encompassed by the sculpture, without enforcing the need to complete the overall form, shape or even conceptual whole that the gestalt of the minimalist object insisted upon as the placeholder of new meanings in sculptural form. Serra's exteriority operates at a higher level of abstraction; understanding that as the viewer moves through time and space, if the object *is* space (not material), then the work exists to accommodate such irregularities as movement in, around, and in fact over the visual field.

The perception of the work in its state of suspended animation, arrested motion, does not give one calculable truths like geometry, but a sense of presence, an isolated time. The apparent potential for disorder, for movement endows the structure with a quality outside of its physical or relational definition. (Serra, 7)

This manifest aspect of the viewer's time built into the production of the work is something completely new in sculpture, a radical break from the internal model of narrative, to an awareness of immanent encounter, contingency and the physical attributes of external life – both of the viewer's own body and the surface skin of a sculpture as publicly on show. To generate meaning the work needs the activation of a viewer walking the landscape.

As such, the a priori ideas of modernist art are shown as incomplete ideas, in that they come up short in their seeking the closure, and therefore categorisation, of meaning in art. Serra's work being to focus more and more on how meaning is perpetually generated in a dance-like narrative between the viewing-subject and the activated-object – something that large scale sculptures such as the *Pulitzer Piece*, and *Te Tuhirangi Contour* seem, in their sympathy with the topography of the place they exist, naturally inclined to evoke. He drew layout inspiration

for this integrated landscape technique from a 1969 visit with performance artist and his then partner, Joan Jonas, to Zen gardens in Japan.

The layout of the gardens is based on the perceptual principles of time, meditation, and motion. This concept of space is essentially different from our western concept which is based on a central perspective and arranges all objects on a line emanating from the eye of a static viewer. In the Zen gardens, directions, continuity, and paths work together to deny a fixed measure. (Serra, *Writings/Interviews*, 258)

The idea that the truth of sculpture as a medium lies in its capacity to project *beyond* its material self as part of a wider “sense of the field as a whole emerg[ing] only by constant walking and looking,” provides a working metaphor for the reattribution of meaning further than modernist ideals of art allowed for.⁷⁴

2.8 Lived Time.

Serra’s work of this period brought to the fore the idea that the viewing subject influenced the contingency and exteriority of sculpture as a three-dimensional object. This led critics such as Rosalind E. Krauss to see theatricality in a positive light. Embracing the performative elements of the sculptural task as a way out of the limitations of modern sculpture, works such as *Pulitzer Piece*, and *Strike* need the viewer’s physical presence to be understood. This is antagonistic to Fried’s call that theatricality was the death of art’s value hierarchy. Rather, as Krauss saw it, in regards to modern sculpture “meaning is specific and a function of lived time [...] it has used theatre and its relation to the context of the viewer as a tool to destroy, to investigate and to reconstruct” a medium specificity based on modernism’s “idealist myth.”⁷⁵

Whereas minimalism offered up stabilised gestalts to the intellect, the contraction and expansion of Serra’s single plate works from thin vertical edges to blocks of horizontal volume as the viewer walks around them consistently highlight the indeterminacy of the viewing perspective of space. This demolishes the idea of an abstract, a priori space existing in the mind from which the viewer absorbs the information of the object and maps it accordingly to obtain understanding. As Krauss puts it,

⁷⁴ Serra, *Writings/Interviews*, 257.

⁷⁵ Krauss, *Passages*, 242.

The distinction between Serra's sculpture and that of minimalism comes in part out of his rejection of the a priori geometries of the grid. For the grid is an abstract tool describing a space that always begins at a point just in front of the person who views it. The diorama of the analytic sensibility, the grid forever leaves the viewer outside looking in. (Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory*, 152)

For art to exist outside of itself, to be made public (as opposed to the private interior knowledge of an integrated subject) it needs to address the issues of time and space in a pragmatic, as well as an intellectual way. To reformulate the "what the object is, how we know it, and what it means to 'know it'" of modernist conceit.⁷⁶ The understanding gained when watching how Serra's plates move-as-we-move into thicker or thinner versions of themselves represents the capacity objects have to change in time in relation to ourselves. This positions the real essence of intent in Serra's sculpture as investigating the quality and states of existence given to us as we perceive them: consciousness as such.

He writes of the experience that *Shift*, 1970-72 [fig.28] – a work similar to *Pulitzer Piece*, awards the attentive and retrospective viewer.⁷⁷

From the top of the hill, looking back across the valley, images and thoughts are remembered which were initiated by the consciousness of having experienced them. This is the difference between abstract thought and thought in experience. The time of this experience is cumulative – slow in its evolution.

The time spent, or one could say given, by the artwork addresses the actual moments spent interacting in the space it has defined. The viewer inhabits the volume of the work – in fact, the viewer generates the voluminous-nature of that volume by their presence. But, as Serra points out, it is not a knowledge instantly, nor easily, grasped. It is knowledge of the space you are in as arrived at by the process of being there in space and time. This defeats the efficacy of the modernist paradigm that practical truths could be exact, "hard facts, quickly obtained."

The honest exposure of facture, formally abstract shapes and a ubiquitous materiality only helps to increase such effects of the perception-of-ourselves-perceiving subject matter plate works such as *Strike*, *Pulitzer Piece*, and *Shift* (which, being cast in concrete, was one of Serra's

⁷⁶ Krauss, *Passages*, 242.

⁷⁷ *Shift* also employs three elongated units set in the ground to encapsulate the space. Co-created with Joan Jonas, the work manifests the couple's walking the elevational ground of a rural valley on two sides whilst holding each other's gaze.

last works in a material other than steel) bring to bear. The artwork's content is minimised in terms of decoration in order to maximise the physical presence of its potential dimensionality. The satisfying rusty orange-brown that weathering steel takes as it oxidises over time is but a trivial by-product of the material itself. "It's transitional to me. Colour's not my problem," states Serra of the patina of his works – "Because next week it'll change."⁷⁸

Ironically, this quip by Serra is useful to understand the telescoped nature of time-as-experience in walking one of his works. It is merely the duration that differs – the quality of perceptible changes in lived space as a somehow in-built essence of the work remains the same. We may not be able to sustain attention long enough to perceive the colour changing in his work; but it is possible to ascertain such shifts in the more bodily-registered sense data provided in our actual experience of the work. For example, the thickening and thinning of volume into line and back again as the viewer circumnavigates *Strike* demonstrates the limitations of minimalist gestalt in practice by phenomenologically adding emotional meaning premised on the viewer's perspective of the experience as it happens. The same effect is produced by the overhanging presence of *Te Tuhirangi Contour*; both works implicate and engage the viewer on more than just cognitive levels of awareness.

It was the very dependency of theatre on a variable situation that was able to put pressure on and disrupt the conventions of classicism [...] It was clear that theatricality and performance could produce an operational divide between the sculptural object the preconceptions about knowledge that the viewer might have about both it and himself. (Krauss, *Passages*, 240.)

The physical presence abstract sculpture's embracing the theatrical gave to the art moment was the seriousness not of modernist intellection, but of universal mortality. This moves the location of space in art away from the modernist (and classical) pictorial mode of subject's viewing objects in their field of vision – Greenberg's opticality – to a breach of self by the object. Separate lives are conjoined, positioning space as real and very much of individual concern. It is in the manner of lived space that Serra's art operates in where it begins to matter to the viewer at an ontological level of meaning.

The conventional aesthetic mode extinguishes creative opportunities for obtaining meaningful encounters with works of art outside of currently known parameters, reducing the importance

⁷⁸ Foster, *Conversations*, 12.

art can play in teaching us about what is truly meaningful in our lives, and that this is yet another instance of how modernity has made us forgetful of engaging with the mystery of being alive at all. A part of the critical backlash against the autonomous forms of minimalism focussed on their disregard for the narrative conventions of traditional sculpture. Minimalist provocateur Donald Judd sideswiped both modernist painting and sculptural tradition in making statements such as: “Painting and sculpture have become set forms. A fair amount of their meaning isn’t credible. The use of three dimensions isn’t the use of a given form.”⁷⁹ This drive for a new minimalist vernacular using shape as a three-dimensional object Fried sees as a definite ideology, but one that lacks an ontological cornerstone if it denies the history of art.

Its seriousness is vouched for by the fact that it in relation both to modernist painting and modernist sculpture that literalist art defines or locates the position it occupies [...] Specifically, literalist art conceives of itself as neither one nor the other; on the contrary, it is motivated by specific reservations, or worse, about both; and it aspires, perhaps not exactly, or not immediately, to displace them, but in any case to establish itself as an independent art on a footing with either. (Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 12)

That to discard the term art in favour of a non-art vernacular typifies a move of modern subjectivity towards objectivity. The trivialisation of art is complete when the word art itself loses all meaning through a sheer ubiquity of usage or its coinage being stretched too far between separate mediums to cover a generic and therefore devalued homogeneity, as Fried suggests. This does tend to argue for the “art for art’s sake” credo with more than just an underlying aesthetic argument. It argues for the sake of art itself as worth protecting, delineating its place as different, as unique – not ubiquitous, homogenous and tool-like, like all the other objects we confront in the world. Fried seems aware of this in his championing of modernist ideals.

In my preface I used the *Tilted Arc* controversy as an example of what I see as a necessary question: what role, if any, should or can art play in contemporary society? In that specific case, the authorities of New York answered in the negative. Art’s value as art was not enough to deem it worthy of occupying the real estate space of the modern world. So, what are the conditions that might govern such a decision?

⁷⁹ Judd, “Specific Objects,” 4.

In *Sculpture in the Expanded Field* Rosalind E. Krauss laid out an argument as to why the rise of modernist, formal abstract works of sculpture is problematic in terms of general reception. She cites the advent of a post-modern intellectual approach to the category “what is sculpture” which has expanded the term to a point where “the category can be made to become almost infinitely malleable.”⁸⁰

The creativity of the avant-garde in the 1960s strategically loosened the boundary definition of sculpture to enable new artistic territory that could express the contemporary human condition of life in Western consumer culture. Claes Oldenburg’s oversized soft felt hamburgers and cigarettes, Carl Andre’s sparse arrangements of utilitarian firebricks, Richard Long’s documentation of his country hikes, Mary Miss’s wood-framed hole in the ground, Bruce Nauman’s installation of TV screens that projected the videoed image of the viewer back towards themselves as they walked down a narrow gallery corridor. There are countless examples of a radical departure from what sculpture had conventionally been perceived to be and what it was conventionally supposed to do: display and thus preserve the memory of a person or event of significance.

Krauss points out that conventionalised understanding of what sculpture is predetermines the rules of engagement for most viewers.

“As is true of any other convention, sculpture has its own internal logic, its own set of rules, which, though they can be applied to a variety of situations, are not themselves open to very much change. The logic of sculpture, it would seem, is inseparable from the logic of monument. By virtue of this logic a sculpture is a commemorative representation.” (Krauss, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, 33)

By ignoring the preceding history of commemorative content that traditionally gave sculpture both its *raison d’etre* and its formal characteristics, modernist sculptor’s use of radical abstraction and non-traditional materials expanded the medium to a point where it ruptured not only visually, but semantically. This increasingly became a problem for post-modernist practice in terms of general consumption, in that a heterogeneous account of “that is sculpture” no longer sufficed, thus undermining the validation of its former status as culturally significant through association with the symbolic value of the monument.

⁸⁰ Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” 30.

This in part explains the argument against Serra's *Tilted Arc* – that a kind of cultural lag exists, drawn from a lack of understanding the motives and vernacular of avant-garde artists, and the problem of accessing meaning (and therefore assigning value) when faced with a non-mimetic visual codex. Harriet F. Senie notes that:

As a group, artists seem to inhabit a world apart, perceived as privileged yet often reviled. And art is treated in our culture as peripheral, an exclusive form of entertainment or hobby [...] coupled with the widespread belief that making art is not work, fosters an aura of elitism and exclusivity, prompting deep resentment. The *Tilted Arc* controversy was used to rehash a well-established story line that only furthered the cultural divide: Abstract art alienates the public. (Senie, *The Tilted Arc Controversy*, xiv-xv)

Just as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried described the “non-art” look of minimalist work as nearing the condition of being an object with no artistic content, it would seem that the accompanying explosion of styles, materials and concepts that emerged as a result of modern sculptors’ breaking with tradition also lessened the ability of their chosen artistic medium to disseminate ideas that would be taken seriously. This culminated in a reception by the wider public of works such as *Tilted Arc* “as the embodiment of the presumptuous elitism of the art world.”⁸¹

Whilst a detailed account of the issues surrounding public art commissions’ success or failure is beyond the scope of this thesis, some of the particular objections made against Serra’s work are insightful in more general terms of contemporary engagement with sculpture in the landscape. Indeed, since the *Tilted Arc* case arose it has served as the quintessential example that debate surrounding the true value of art in and for society is still a question open for discussion.

Interestingly, this echoes the detrimental effects that Heidegger argues technology has had on modern consciousness, linking the reception of art in modern times with a fundamental shift in the historical understanding of being itself. Limiting art’s place as to provide emotive responses through aesthetic reception ultimately reduces the significance art has for society as a whole. As Iain D. Thomson puts it:

⁸¹ Senie, *The Tilted Arc Controversy*, 6.

The historical process by which Western humanity came to understand art as “aesthetics” is so freighted with significance that it needs to be recognised as “one of the essential phenomena of the contemporary age.” Strikingly, Heidegger goes so far as to assert that treating art as aesthetics is just as significant for and revealing of our current historical self-understanding as are the increasing dominance of science and technology, the tendency to conceive of all meaningful human activity in terms of “culture,” and the growing absence of any god or gods in our Western world. (Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 52)

Heidegger wrote provocatively that, “For us today [...] art belongs in the domain of the pastry chef.”⁸² The analogy inferring that an artist’s role, like the pastry chef, is making truly delicious things to be consumed. To see the removal of the *Titled Arc* in such terms can shed light on the usefulness Heidegger’s philosophy has for assisting an argument in favour of art as an ontological necessity if society is to be healthy.

⁸² Heidegger, “Introduction to Metaphysics,” 140.

Chapter 3: Heidegger's Contribution.

As I have discussed in the previous two chapters, Richard Serra's sculptural production has been influenced by the modernist art theory of critics such as Greenberg and Fried, as well as his deep involvement with the New York group of post-minimalist, process-orientated artists that broke free of the limitations modernist doctrines insisted upon – as documented in Krauss' revisionist critiques of Serra's landscape works. In chapter 3, I would like to offer an additional method of looking at Serra's work that combines modernist and minimalist strategies, and somewhat reconciles the differences in their approach to modern sculptural theory. To do so, I would like to forward certain philosophical ideas about the role art can play in society made by the German phenomenologist, Martin Heidegger during the early to mid-twentieth century.

Heidegger made the unique assertion that the Cartesian understanding of subject and object that guides the conventional metaphysical investigations of the world we inhabit in fact presupposes a more primordial engagement with the world. Iain D. Thomson writes that in Heidegger's view modern philosophy had,

Misled aesthetics into looking for the work of art in the wrong place, at a derived rather than a fundamental level of human interaction with the world, and thus into mistaking an immense subjective experience of an external object for an encounter with the true work of art. (Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 56)

This observation holds import for the way in which we can experience sculpture through phenomenology. Instead of seeking to extract an internal narrative (as with traditional mimetic sculpture), or even recognise a universal truth in the one-thing-after-another logic of seriality (as with minimalism), what Heidegger suggests is that to truly encounter the work of art one must let go of subjectively assessing the work and approach without any prefigured intentionality. Thomson continues, "It is so to privilege the detached perspective of the observer that the participatory perspective gets eclipsed and forgotten."⁸³

⁸³ Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 56.

3.1 Same Subject – But Different.

Heidegger was looking to offer a reappraisal of the conditioning factors of consciousness by suggesting that modern subjectivity blinds us from experiencing the unlimited potential of Being that reveals itself as ultimately a mysterious force of which we are an integral part. Although the practical concerns of one's day to day existence are not enough to truly reveal the full extent of Being as such, they nevertheless offer an opportunity for the subject to experience life in a truly meaningful way.⁸⁴ This receptive mode can make an encounter with large scale sculpture revealing of fundamental aspects of being-in-the-world and give insights to the viewer about broader ontological questions in their lives.

To reinvigorate the conception of the subject as an entity amidst a land of wondrous potentiality, Heidegger introduces a new term for describing what a human being is: *Dasein*. An ontological term, *dasein* is used by Heidegger to refute Cartesian subjectivity and offer instead an account of modern people as historical beings thrown into the world at this particular time and place, and destined for better or worse to cope with that condition.⁸⁵ As such, *dasein* is not an intellectual master purveying the totality of what is; but an information forager constantly negotiating with a plethora of possibilities that exist within the present context of our everyday lives, and defined through experiential encounters with the mystery of being alive.

The conceptual shift from Cartesian subject to Heideggerian *dasein* positions consciousness as a discursive agent that manifests reality, therefore situating what it is like to be a human being as a conflation of subject with place; the site where the world shows itself. The English translation of *dasein* usefully describes this as a hyphenated term: being-there. *Dasein* is a concept of a person forever in and of situations. As Timothy Stapleton describes it, *dasein*

Means the self *as* the there (*Da*) of being (*Sein*), the place where an understanding of being erupts into being. Being-in-the-world is Heidegger's descriptive interpretation of the self *as* *Dasein* [...] intended to capture the

⁸⁴ "What we notice in everyday life are the 'objects' of our practical concerns, never the background 'framework' that allows them to be the objects that they are." Young, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art*, 36.

⁸⁵ "What is *Dasein*? *Dasein* is not a self-contained, conscious subject. *Dasein* is not the Cartesian *Cogito*. If anything is clear, it is that Heidegger's unrelenting goal was to overcome Cartesian dualism that made Kant's philosophy possible and culminated in Husserl's phenomenology." Lack, *Martin Heidegger on Technology, Ecology, and the Arts*, 15.

descriptively various dimensions of what it means for Dasein to be. (Stapleton, *Martin Heidegger: Key Concepts*, 14).

Dasein is the structure and condition through which the world shows itself to us. At the same time we *are* dasein. Somewhat akin to subjective consciousness, but different in that dasein is entangled in the world, not merely the intentional agent with a directionality and attitude to seek out knowledge from the world as in Cartesian subjectivity. It is also this mode of our being-in-the-world that allows Being as such to shine forth, positioning human beings as a *modus operandi* of existence to experience itself. As Anthony Lack puts it, “Dasein is a *way* [...] rather than a *what*.”⁸⁶

Dasein is however destined to live within the horizons and structure of social, cultural and human intelligibility. Heidegger calls this structural conditioning of dasein our “world.”

‘World’ is the background, and usually unnoticed understanding which determines for the members of an historical culture what, for them, fundamentally, there *is*. It constitutes, as it were, the entry conditions, the ground plan, the ‘being of beings,’ which something must satisfy in order to show up as a being in the world in question. (Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Art*, 23)

We can choose to live authentically by musing on these ontological issues of world that influence our way of being-in-the-world, otherwise we become “forgetful of being,” in an increasingly controlling attitude towards life seen as a problem we can solve outright. This leads to an inauthentic mode of dasein, characterised by what Heidegger names as “falling,” a state in which we go along in everyday life inattentive to possibility of things being other than they currently are, and uninterested by the ontological questions such inquiry would raise.⁸⁷ Everyday life is full of trivial concerns that distract us from a deeper connection with being.

Heidegger suggests there is a dialectic between the subject and the art object however that can make us aware of the world we inhabit in an expressly purposeful way. Art can function as an intuitive, relational entity which embodies the ability to reveal to us both the implicit and explicit conditions within which we navigate the world. A simple demonstration of this is seen in Serra’s first steel piece *Strike*, in which the large plate sheers into physical space in such a

⁸⁶ Lack, *Heidegger on Technology*, 15.

⁸⁷ “One can only be in the fullness of truth for a short period of time before taking the plunge into inauthenticity and superficial, public truth.” *Ibid.*, 19.

way that governs the protocol of movement around it by the viewer. Therefore, the sculpture becomes less about itself, and more about an awareness of the navigation of the viewer's body in the world, highlighting their possibilities and limitations of bipedal actions and cultural expectations within an enclosed, institutionalised space at that present moment. As Lack nicely puts it, "Things only have meaning in a particular context, and that context is structured by experience and practice – what Dasein is doing and feeling."⁸⁸

Art, for Heidegger, "thematizes" the world already in existence by pointing itself out as belonging to that world.⁸⁹ Serra uses this thematic to increase the drama of presence to where the standard "don't touch the art" stipulation becomes an issue of personal safety, lest the plate loses its equilibrium and falls. This experiential aspect of life leads Heidegger to revise the truth-as-corresponding-to-the-facts of empirical knowledge and reason, into the idea of truth as a receptiveness, where what is manifestly true – i.e. what is important to dasein as a being entangled in the world – is revealed as it happens. The "openness" of dasein infers a phenomenological approach that affords a way of experiencing the world so that sculpture affects the viewer at an existential level of awareness.

This changes the experience of approaching a large scale formally abstract sculpture such as *Te Tuhirangi Contour* from a "what is it?" question to be answered, into a revelatory event of what constitutes the actuality of our being-in-the-world at all. The usefulness of Heidegger's theory is that for abstract works of art, meaning exists as perpetual immersion in an open-ended question.

3.2 Being-in-the-World with Objecthood.

As discussed in chapter two, Fried proclaimed that this kind of open-ended approach to meaning – what he saw as theatricality – was a problem that first arose in art through increasingly abstract modernist painting that began to be received by the uninitiated viewer as bordering on merely an object, thus entering into the category "non-art." The subsequent response was utilising the formalised logic of shapes that could only appear within a vertical plane to stress the picture support, thus defeating the reception of abstract painting as lacking illusionistic content and a dearth of meaning by providing a plausible evolutionary step in

⁸⁸ Lack, *Heidegger on Technology*, 18.

⁸⁹ "What follows, then is that [...] the role of the artwork is not to create but rather to 'make expressly visible,' to 'thematize' a world *which is already in existence.*" Young, *Heidegger's Philosophy*, 33.

painting as a painting. In this way, Fried thus argued in support of a viewer's need to relate to an artwork as an artwork – not an object.

The same issue arose in modern sculpture, although as three-dimensional, the facticity of the genre meant that the theatrical disguised itself in a different way. Whereas formal abstract painting needed to defeat the impression it was merely an object in order to retain plausible meaning within an art historical context, minimalist sculpture – in its encouragement of the total experience of time and environmental space as relational to its meaning, was to some degree conditioned by the very fact the minimalist object was to be found in a gallery context. The institutional setting by rote afforded Specific Objects the precondition of art and, problematically as we have seen, instilled a sense that, by its presence in this place, therefore must have something to say that goes beyond its just being there.

The minimalist approach to sculpture relied on the particularities of its site to make up for the apparent lack of contextual inner meaning, drawing on historical precedent of a generic place to give it currency in the world. What Fried thinks of as being the objecthood of minimalism is a condition thus enabled by the institution, by the interwoven history of art as an item of information exchange exhibited for public consumption in galleries and museums. By contrast, what Fried critiques in the objecthood of self-presentment, is what Heidegger sees as the true role of art: to show explicitly the relationship between what is and the potential it conceals. To phenomenologically receive a work of art, it must explicitly manifest itself as it is – the literal antithesis of pictorial abandonment. Heidegger's conception of world is useful here.

World is the cultural and historical horizon that reveals and conceals earth, and opens and closes possibilities for human being-in-the-world. The essence of the work of art is its potential to highlight the open relation of earth and world while simultaneously gathering them together. (Lack, *Martin Heidegger on Technology, Ecology, and the Arts*, 27)

The world of cultural and historical knowledge that a *dasein* inhabits enables the minimalist object to be created in the material sense, and simultaneously exist as a graspable concept. In this context, the investigation of perception of objects as subject matter in works, such as Robert Morris' *Untitled* (L-beams), 1965 [fig.29], are therefore not just arrangements of arbitrary objects, but things inflected with meaning. The meaning is almost too obvious: this thing exists. That Judd's work, such as *Untitled* 1968 [fig.11] for example, also feature the rosy-tinted allure of plexiglass and the entrancing shimmy of light across polished brass

compartments stacked like jewel-boxes in the gallery space, provides whimsical beauty whilst resolutely announcing presence as things are. In this way, Minimalist objects of this kind are in fact sympathetic to the viewer, rather than isolating and hostile as Fried claimed. Their conflation of conventional aesthetic beauty with the radical reconceptualisation of situated meaning refutes the idea that minimalism created a problematic realm of works with no inherent message. What is actually necessary to access the new vernacular was a way of seeing that accepted the arrival of works that withheld their meanings as potential to be released in the moment of their viewing. Aesthetic concerns were still there, but minimalism began a trend of externalisation and publicness which Serra builds upon, where phenomena and experience of time and space usurps the need for conventional forms of beauty to be present as the definitive subject matter of art.

3.3 Earth, Contingency, and the Logos.

On pure surface exteriority, minimalist art would appear to concern itself exclusively with the world context; relying on reason, gestalt, known shapes, precision, mathematics, the perspectival grid and so forth. Fried saw these attributes as superficial in terms of value and meaning within the minimalist object, yet the inscrutable presence of objecthood is what Heidegger would instead define as the “earth” component of the artwork showing itself. Earth was Heidegger’s definition for the mysterious, yet undeniable, aspect of existence that exceeds our current level of understanding. Earth holds intimations of the vast totality of the yet-to-be. If, for Heidegger’s *dasein*, “The world is the self-opening openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of a historical people” – in other words, what already *is* – then earth “is the spontaneous forthcoming of that which is continually self-secluding and to that extent sheltering and concealing.”⁹⁰

Objecthood, the non-art aspect of minimalism, thought differently offers an example of earth; the unknown jutting forth into the already-known world of modern art. Heidegger suggests the deeper truth about existence is comprised of an interplay between the known and the unknown. World and earth are “essentially different from one another and yet are never separated. The world grounds itself on the earth, and the earth just through the world.”⁹¹

⁹⁰ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 174.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

That this eerie potential shows to us gives art part of its capacity for intrigue. The inscrutability of gestalt objects suggests, for example, that the logos of modernist thought – where meaning stabilised and was thus transmissible across time – was a flawed ideal that reasoned away the contingent nature of temporality that the minimalist artists were trying so hard to present as the truest content of art in the real world. This very much positions modernist sensibility as rationalist, an intellectual dogma presupposing that the knowledge of objects and scientific truths are absolutes. By contrast,

Heidegger calls [the] process of creating limit out of chaos *Logos*, which according to his interpretation receives a much broader meaning than its usual definition as a rational ideal or principle. Heidegger claims that *Logos* is a “permanent gathering” that helps form a limit, a place where being can take shape and emerge into the light. By this definition, *Logos* is a rational principle as well as a creative principle; the *Logos* binds together elements of *Phusis*. (Lack, 11)

To speak of Being is to ask about the mysterious issuing forth of the underlying primordial energies of life, an unknown force that dynamically emerges and take on particular forms; potential congealing itself and appearing in the real world in a certain way, which we then perceive as what is. This process of dynamic emergence culminates as a kind of limit, what is known in Greek as the *logos* condition that defines each and every specific thing as it appears to us. Serra finds a sculptural equivalent to such a revealing where,

The perception of the work in its state of suspended animation, arrested motion, does not give one calculable truths like geometry, but a sense of presence, an isolated time. The apparent potential for disorder, for movement endows the structure with a quality outside of its physical or relational definition. (Serra, *Writings Interviews*, 7)

Heidegger connects the archaic Greek word *phusis* with life force, a dynamism that animates matter, as the mysterious fundamental essence underlying existence; ever-present, emergent and ever changing. This is the Being he wishes to investigate. As a descriptive explanation for the intangible power of nature, phusis accordingly underwent scrutiny by successive philosophers as they tried to pin down a definitive meaning.

Perhaps here lies the kernel of the scientific method of reifying nature to irreducible truth? Plato’s theory of forms, which distinguishes between perfect form as an abstract human

concept, and the sensible, imperfect manifestations humans encounter in the real world, was an attempt to give the form of material – matter – a stabilised meaning. An ontological ground in a very literal sense. Heidegger argued that in doing this, Plato and subsequent thinkers conflated the presence of material in the world with the power from which it derived. *Physis* was thus mistakenly interpreted as substance – matter, not energy. What this meant for history of Western thinking about the nature of existence was that it premised itself on a conception of the world as being at base a physical thing. Useful, in that it has given us the scientific method of measuring and weighing, provided ways of proving facts about the physical nature of reality. Truth in this explanation is the irrefutable relationship between the properties of an object and the claim of what it is – empirical evidence, Linnaean categorisation, self-obsessed objecthood, or whatever you will. This method of inquiry is nevertheless insufficient in answering deeper questions about the nature of existence that, as we have seen in the shifting perspectives of sculpture, fail to remain constant in their revelations.

It is interesting to note in the above quote from Serra a real – if implicit – interest in a very similar type of question. In investigating the limits of physical potentiality in his works, Serra involves himself in the question of whether matter is in fact irreducible in its essence to stable formalised properties; a one-to-one relationship Young defines as the conventional idea of truth as correspondence.⁹² If this were so, why do his works affect the viewer in such a way that express an awareness of a contingent aspect to matter, of their potential for change?

In *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)* [fig. 26] four roughly symmetrical square bolts of lead tilt inwards to delineate a precarious cube that, as the name suggests, seems likely to topple and fall at any moment. No joke, if the piece does, as Serra states, weigh a metric tonne. Serra's punning of scientific measure against the contingency of physics and time suggests that defining the essence of materiality is not merely a case of understanding the physical properties of an object. That we sense this bodily offers a glimpse of the hidden irrationality to empirical "facts."

3.4 A Critic's Intuition for Heidegger.

Fried considered that the condition for finding meaning outside of the work, in asking the viewer to incorporate the entire gamut of external factors – including themselves – as part of

⁹² And problematically so. "For one horizon of disclosure to be inhabited, to be, as it were, favoured, is for all others to be... occluded." Young, *Heidegger's Philosophy*, 39.

the work, would ultimately lead to establishing an experience of the world itself as a kind of objecthood. Flummoxed by the possibility that “There is no suggestion that this is problematic in any way,” he rallied for the need to define a realm in which art as such could still exist.⁹³

Minimalist artist Tony Smith had famously given an account of a midnight drive along an unfinished New Jersey turnpike that had struck the artist as so profoundly affective and immersive, that it brought the art of preceding generations into stark relief. Fried was perturbed.

What seems to have been revealed to Smith that night was the pictorial nature of painting – even, one might say, the conventional nature of art [...] in comparison with the unmarked, unlit, all but unstructured turnpike [...] as experienced from within the car, travelling on it – art appears to have struck Smith as almost absurdly small. [...] There was, he seems to have felt, no way to “frame” his experience [...] make sense of it in terms of art, to make *art* of it, at least as art then was. Rather, “you just have to experience it” – as it *happens*, as it merely *is*. (The experience *alone* is what matters). (Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 19)

The sheer unboundedness of Smith’s viewpoint that art is a situation that includes everything was a radical affront to modernist medium specificity; indeed, to semantic meaning itself. What is art? That question constantly addressed by the artists and critics of the New York scene at the end of sixties can be read as implicitly Heideggerian.

What the ubiquity of materials made available as a result of Duchamp’s Readymades, and the dissolution of category boundaries by the sixties’ avant-garde experimentation that increasingly knew no bounds (as illustrated by Tony Smith’s midnight visions) meant that the validity of sculpture as a modernist art form was attacked from within its own ranks. A rupture of value and meaning as determined by the modernist theory of Greenberg and Fried was, in Krauss’ opinion, inevitable. “[A] set of anomalies which does not fit, and cannot comfortably be explained by, modernist critical theory [that...] has never been able to come up with a satisfactory history of sculpture.”⁹⁴ Modern sculpture was the first art to really undergo such theoretical deconstruction – from the critics’ position, anyway.

Serra’s creative practice offers a possible solution to the modernist problematic in finding aspects of the medium that are definitively sculptural alone. Through his investigations of the

⁹³ Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 19.

⁹⁴ Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory*, 125.

structural properties of steel he constantly looks to find new forms, new capabilities for his chosen material that correspond to his shift into phenomenological considerations. The space of the viewer and the space of the object are considered to be the same space. Serra sees his concern as “Changing the content of perception” from modernist narrative to phenomenological affect “by having viewer and sculpture coexist in the same behavioural space.”⁹⁵ The low-in-content, high-in-presence objects provided by minimalism posited a rift in the conventionalised production and reception of art. That a modernist viewer, a Cartesian subject conceptualised as a bystander who analyses works of art for graspable meanings, could also be a participant in the co-creation of that meaning redefined the notion of art as such.

The expanded field which characterizes this domain of postmodernism possesses two features [...] One of these concerns the practice of individual artists; the other has to do with the question of medium. At both these points the bounded conditions of modernism have suffered a logically determined rupture. (Krauss, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, 41-42)

Instigated by *Art and Objecthood*, and thanks in part to the minimalist object becoming the nexus of the ontological debate over where the meanings in art should lie, an exploration of how to represent the public vs private space of the self became a prevalent subject matter in late nineteen sixties practice. In recognition of this expanded field of interpretation as a beneficial aspect that afforded sculpture primary content that suited its corporeal presence, Krauss reconsidered the theatrical nature of minimalism as a positive progression in the medium that critical theory needed to address, not dismiss.

For example, Krauss argues for a usefulness in the theatrical self-awareness brought on by minimalist objects, encouraging the awareness of place and the immanent moment has as generative of consciousness. There is a sense of inconclusive endlessness in Robert Morris’s unitary forms. His *Untitled (L-beams)* [fig.29] – three identical, painted plywood “L” shapes of approximately human-size, that could be upended or rotated to describe themselves ad-infinitum in the gallery space without the necessity of a conclusion give no “finished” piece for the viewer to reflect upon.

In a way they seem as volitional surrogates of the body; as other entities to be considered. An awareness of phusis is palpable as a presence. The incorporation of random chance to a

⁹⁵ “This implies movement, time, anticipation.” Serra, *Writings/Interviews*, 146.

sculpture by its form as essentially moveable parts, exacerbated the seeming arbitrariness of their composition to the point where composition as an end seems irrelevant to the work's message. This relationality between physical objects generated new possibilities for interpretation that did not rely upon the interior sameness of an abstract idea about what the sculpture was. Accessible in a moment of time using our perception of objects in space from the position we inhabit, the sum of parts are shown to be externally different. This proof of difference in seeing three L's that we also understand rationally as the same upsets the a priori knowledge Greenberg's opticality relied upon. They do not congeal into a single, analytic and therefore resolved final meaning or understanding. Meaning of such forms become contingent on their exteriority, and especially on the viewer's position in relation to them. Art of this kind is non-representational in the truest sense: the pictorial mode of disinterested belief in an illusion is made tangibly unnecessary by the factuality of an object in space.

3.5 New Sites of Meaning.

The question as to whether or not this constituted art in regard to such works that flagrantly dismissed the need for an interior meaning by their resolute, mute presence fell accordingly on to how such objects were received by the people who encountered them. Fried's supposition that the minimalist object operated as a surrogate for the human body is helpful here. As composite bodies, the repositionable elements of Morris' *L-Beams* describe an experience akin to entering a room during a performative dance, the subjects frozen in their particular poses that, upon closer inspection, reveal them to be more-or-less cut from the same cloth. There is a sense in which Morris's units of meaning democratise the shared space of the (gallery) world, the *L-beams* suggesting that on the surface at least, all that really sets us apart is our trajectory through space. Crucially, for the minimalist object, a space that we all share.

Fried argued that minimalist object isolates the individual in beholding it. Krauss determines otherwise, suggesting that "The notion of a rigid, internal armature that could mirror the viewer's own self – fully formed prior to experience – founders on the capacity of the separable parts to shift, to formulate a notion of the self which exists only in that moment of externality within *that* experience."⁹⁶ What this means for the modern self as viewer is a turning away

⁹⁶ Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 267.

from a privatised, coherent and rational fact-finder model of appraisal to a time-based, lived experience that hinges on attentiveness to the situation as it unfolds its potential for meaning.

This encourages multiple viewing points, but movement around the work never gives a completed narrative of something it represents. With no interior narrative and no apparent meaning beyond showing itself as it is positions the “what is it?” question as insufficient in encapsulating the artwork’s affect on a viewer. That we are with the work has a dramatic impact. There is no suspension of reality, yet our imagination is opened; mind and body respond. Theatricality cannot therefore entirely be the pejorative experience Fried claimed.

This is one way Serra exceeded in his practice one of the major problems Fried saw in minimalism. Objecthood came disturbingly close to simply sitting or adhering to the gallery space as a mere object of curiosity. Judd even stated in his treatise *Specific Objects* of 1965 that his creative goal was achieved if one’s curiosity was pricked – “A work needs only to be interesting.”⁹⁷ Fried’s retort was telling of the ideological climate within the American art scene at the time.

For Judd, as for literalist sensibility generally, all that matters is whether or not a given work is able to elicit and sustain (his) *interest*. Whereas within the modernist arts nothing short of *conviction* – specifically, the conviction that a particular painting or sculpture or poem or piece of music can or cannot support comparison with past work within that art whose quality is not in doubt – matters at all. (Literalist work is often condemned – when it is condemned – for being boring. A tougher charge would be that it is merely interesting.) (Fried, 21)

What Fried implies here is that the minimalist object’s success as measured by its ability to pique interest in the viewer is at odds with the art of the past that had risen to be considered of incontestably high quality – one of the key factors Greenberg stressed needed to be met if modernist abstraction was to be critically acclaimed. To throw away the catalogue of masterpieces that comprise the history of art was indeed a brash move, although perhaps not an unusual one for the avant-garde artist of the 1960s. Fried’s real concern however went deeper than an optical distaste for the new minimalist aesthetic and its accompanying rhetoric.

⁹⁷ Judd, “Specific Objects,” 4.

3.6 Underlying Fried's Sensibility.

In a turn-of-the-century reappraisal of Michael Fried's essay *Art and Objecthood*, Toni Ross reviewed with fresh eyes Fried's criticism of the objecthood and theatricality of the minimalist movement. Her contention is that the usual reception of Fried's essay as being an "apologist" piece for Clement Greenberg's modernist ideals (that rejected minimalist art as optical gestures entirely empty of credible content) is a "conclusion is due for reassessment"⁹⁸

Ross posits Fried's disdain of the minimalist object in fact derives from a deeper, ethically-driven wish to defend the concept of self as fundamentally a historical subject that was coming under attack by the burgeoning anti-modernist critiques of the time. Fried conceptualises an internalised subjectivity where the limitations bequeathed by conventionality in fact afford agency to the viewer of art by giving a frame of reference that is abolished otherwise in the kind of endlessness that Fried speaks of. This stands in opposition to the usual reception of his notorious objecthood-as-theatrical criticism as simply being an aesthetic-based reaction against the non-art "literalist" ideology of minimalism.

This ethical dimension to Fried's criticism gives weight to the issue he had with the so-called 'stage-presence' of works by Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Dan Flavin and their minimalist cohort that sought to locate the meaning based on the exteriority of their works and environmental factors alone. As a response to this rejection of narrative in favour of actual circumstance that typified the process and time-based contemporary art of the avant-garde in the 1960s, Ross notes that:

Fried was one of the first to reflect in depth on certain divergences between modernist abstraction and various minimalist, conceptualist, installation and performance tendencies of the late sixties and early seventies. During the eighties, this division was often interpreted as a contest between two models of identity applicable to both art and to persons. The first is commonly allied to Greenbergian modernism where identity emerges from an internalised process of self-purification and consolidation, while the second thinks identity according to extrinsic logic of displacement and mutation. (Ross, *Art and objecthood, three decades on*, 149)

⁹⁸ Ross, "Art and objecthood, three decades on," 149.

I agree with Ross' reading of *Art and Objecthood*, in that Fried's essay does go further than the functions that the aesthetic categorisation method offers to its fundamental judgement of minimalism. He takes a measured approach to the cultural and theoretical shift in the conception of the self that modern sculpture of the time was grappling with and identifies the implications for the then current trends in modern art in a wider, humanistic context.

As such, the complexity of Fried's argument against the theatricality of objecthood that minimalist works promote intimates the philosophical standpoint from which he writes. For example, the underlying tenor of statements such as "what has compelled modernist painting to defeat, or suspend its own objecthood is not just the developments internal to itself, but the same general, enveloping, infectious theatricality that corrupted literalist sensibility in the first place" shows Fried's awareness of (and anxiety over) the cultural zeitgeist at play in the contemporary artistic expressions of the day.⁹⁹

This leads me to believe that, whereas Ross links Fried's position as one of Kantian doctrine, influenced by later re-interpretations of that philosopher by Stanley Cavell and Wittgenstein, there are also Heideggerian notions present in the subtext of *Art and Objecthood*.¹⁰⁰ One of Heidegger's central claims, that the regulatory quality of modern subjectivity was being amplified to one of "enframing," a mode of existing where life becomes an endless process of resource management for maximal efficiency, holds strong similarities to the objection Fried makes to the theatrical nature of some late nineteen-sixties' art.

If we remember [in Heidegger's opinion] that modern *subjectivism* designates the human subject's quest to achieve total control over all objective aspects of reality, then we can see that late modern *enframing* emerges [...] as subjectivism increasingly transforms the human subject itself into just another object to be controlled. (Thomson, 58)

Fried's problem with minimalism seems founded on just such an issue. That theatricality demands an audience of one that "once he is in the room the work refuses, obstinately, to let him alone – which is to say it refuses to stop confronting him, distancing him, isolating him."¹⁰¹ One could say that what Fried objects to is any artwork holding such sway over the subject as, in doing so, the minimalist work goes rogue, turning the subject into just another object

⁹⁹ Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 20.

¹⁰⁰ To be fair, Ross' excellent essay does note Fried acknowledges these thinkers as influential on his writings. See: Ross, "Art and objecthood, three decades on," 150.

¹⁰¹ Fried, 21.

controlled in specifics determined by the environmental factors the art object seeks dominion over. “The concerns now are for more control of... the entire situation,” stated Robert Morris of his intent in emphasizing the surrounding environment as part of minimalism’s space. “Control is necessary if the variables of object, light, space, body, are to function. The object has not become less important. It has merely become less self-important.”¹⁰²

Now, whether or not minimalist works in fact exert such power over the viewer is a moot point; but it is interesting to note the paralleling ethical distrust shared by Heidegger’s philosophical prescience of the arrival of late-modern enframing leap-frogging modern subjective consciousness, and Fried’s apparent difficulty in substantiating his gut-feeling that “theatre and theatricality are at war today, not simply with modernist painting (or modernist painting and sculpture), but with art as such.”

For example, when showing approval for the syntactical efficacy of Anthony Caro’s sculptures to generate meaning through interrelated gestures of part-by-part juxtaposition, Fried states:

The individual elements bestow significance on one another precisely by virtue of their juxtaposition: it is in this sense, a sense inextricably involved with the concept of meaning, that everything in Caro’s art worth looking at is in its syntax. [Caro’s sculptures] defeat, or ally, objecthood by imitating, not gestures exactly, but the *efficacy* of gesture [...] they are possessed by the knowledge of the human body and how, in innumerable ways and moods, it makes meaning. (Fried, 20)

This passage in support of Caro’s aesthetic acknowledges the importance of meaningful content for the viewer of an artwork, even if abstracted away from naturalistic representation down to mere relationships between formal geometric shapes. The underlying Heideggerian idea that Fried’s support of Caro’s work suggests is that we are fundamentally ontological creatures, ones who live with and in an understanding of our own existence as “entangled in the world, thrown into the world, and attuned to the world certain moods. Dasein does not have a simple cognitive relationship to the world, it has an existential relationship to the things it cares for and uses.”¹⁰³

Accordingly, we want to locate meaning in Caro’s *Early One Morning*; the array of metal beams, pipes and slabs by no means remains static as content. Our eyes flit back and forth

¹⁰² Robert Morris as quoted by Fried in *Art and Objecthood*, 16.

¹⁰³ Lack, *Heidegger on Technology*, 17.

seeking coherence, a narrative built up piece by piece that will establish meaning. Formal abstraction demands an increase of supposition on behalf of the viewer to obtain such meaning. Thus utilising what little “information” is provided is what gives abstraction as a means of representation its power of persuasion and affect. By opening up the mind of the viewer to curiosity, uncertainty and speculation, the work can remain activated in its presenting to the viewer – an involvement illusionistic work strives to defeat with such (by comparison) obvious pictorial evidence of a given event.

In doing so, the modernist belief in the historical precedent of form as content in sculpture, and of the self as inextricably entwined with that history when viewing sculptural works, is positioned against minimalism’s desire to engineer uniform, statutory wholes without precedent in or interdependence on sculpture as a medium, or even willing to make an empathetic gesture by including relatable anthropomorphic content.

In terms of Heidegger’s concept of being-there, what would really be required to gain a truthful reading of much of contemporary nineteen-sixties American art would in reality require the combining of these two disparate ideologies. To take a modernism meets minimalism approach, where the facticity of the historically-informed self apprehends itself in situ negotiating the horizon of lived experience instantiated by the artwork – what Heidegger suggests is actually the natural “way” of dasein, as our “way of being-in-the-world is primarily as an understanding and interpreting being.”¹⁰⁴

Similarly, there is an underlying theme to *Art and Objecthood* that an ontological component of art goes astray if one becomes too dogmatic about any one doctrine. Fried speaks of Caro’s sculptures containing a complex (if abstract) interior dialogue that,

[I]n the grip of his best work one’s view of the sculpture is, so to speak, eclipsed by the sculpture itself – which it is plainly meaningless to speak of as only partly present. It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness: as though if one were only infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it. (Fried, 22)

¹⁰⁴ Lack, *Heidegger on Technology*, 15.

This longing for a quixotic communion with fullness has the quality of a wish to reconnect with something transcendent through the work. Whilst it could be argued Fried was advocating a desire for teleological realisation of the perfect work of modern art, looking to be “convinced” by the medium-specific, rational and historically calibrated sum of its parts, I want to offer another interpretation. That the underlying (say, hidden) ethic of Fried’s writing is infused with an implicit awareness that Greenberg’s modernism was a flawed doctrine, somehow insufficient in its capacity to address art “in all its depth and fullness.” Fried’s implicit accession of a mysterious unknowability present in the work that denies complete understanding, as if “eclipsed by the sculpture itself,” matches in type what Heidegger calls the integral feature of great art: a palpable dynamic between intelligible content and hidden mystery that, brought forth by *dasein*’s presencing, renders explicit the interplay of world and earth that characterises our being-in-the-world.

Also important here for a phenomenological view of sculpture that goes beyond modernism is that the truth of a work is based on not only that the work appears to a viewer, but on the characteristics of how it appears. Because “Truth for Heidegger is not a correct or incorrect mirroring of the world; it is a matter of experiencing the being of things as they show themselves to us through our relatedness to them,” the attunement to the art encounter constitutes its meaningfulness for the viewer.¹⁰⁵ In becoming more attuned to our moods whilst experiencing art, the truth of the work is allowed to shine forth of its own accord.

To demonstrate this, think of what Julian Young describes as the “flickering alternation” of the planar compressed space of Cézanne’s proto-cubist landscapes that offer a pliability in the two-dimensionality of the painted surface that holds at bay the transformative three-dimensionality of the latent forms within the composition.¹⁰⁶ Cézanne’s work jumps – holds the potential to jump – between two modes of visibility, between “abstract, meaning-less space [of colour, tone and shape: formal abstraction] and a state in which the abstract shapes have transformed themselves into a meaningful world of objects.”¹⁰⁷

It is not difficult to note the similarities between Young’s Heideggerian account of the “flickering alteration” of Cézanne’s paintings, and Fried locating in the interplay of gestures

¹⁰⁵ Lack, *Heidegger on Technology*, 19.

¹⁰⁶ The existence of this tension is first pointed out by Heidegger in his famous interpretation of Van Gogh’s *A Pair of Shoes*, 1886. “The background of the painting not only inconspicuously supports the foreground image of the shoes but, when we turn our attention to this ordinarily inconspicuous background, we can see that it continues to offer up other inchoate shapes that resist being firmly gestalted themselves.” Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 87.

¹⁰⁷ Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy*, 155.

Caro's sculpture an anti-theatricality of "continuing and entire presentness, amounting [...] to the perpetual creation of itself." Both writers mention a kind of constant dynamic tension seemingly present in the artworks that continually reveals and conceals itself to the viewer. In attending to one part or mode of a work by necessity conceals our attention to another. As such the work is shown to be both present and absent during a viewing.

This is what Heidegger dubs the *aletheia* element of his more primordial idea of truth: as a revealing, an uncovering, or presencing of one aspect of being that simultaneously conceals all its other potential ways of coming-to-be.¹⁰⁸ The idea here is that everything that is has come forth, has been revealed. But Being is a way to conceptualise the ultimate source of everything, and as such is far greater than anything we can perceive as real at this present moment – even in the light of our current apparent technological mastery over the externalised world. If truth phenomenologically equates to that which has been manifestly revealed, then *aletheia* offers a counterpoint in that the revealing is also a necessary concealing of Being as such. Art, Heidegger thinks, is one such method that this fundamental interplay of being revealing and concealing itself as a dynamic process can be held open for *dasein* to witness, and hence connect to the primordial source that is omnipresent but often invisible in our lives.

By contrast, the minimalist gestalt of the specific object loses the capacity to include this ontological differentiation between the process and its result. Appealing to the rational logic of known shapes, the point that Heidegger would make is that by formalising a shape to its logical telos, its conclusive end-point, all one is left with is the ultimate product, the existence of the object as it is – but devoid of any traces of a generative interior life-force: the nothing is not only absent, but dismissed as not-possible, therefore excluding the potentiality of Being in its fullness. The extreme concern with exteriority by minimalists as the sole interest of art, thereby losing (and this becomes the central issue in Heidegger's critique of modern subjectivity) the ability to appreciate that from whence the produced came. The minimalist gestalt enframes the object in an act of blatant self-promotion that forgets itself as part of a larger process of revealing the truth.

That there is a radical *difference* between being – that is, 'presence' – and beings – 'what is present' – is, of course, a fundamental Heideggerian insight: being is

¹⁰⁸ Lack, *Heidegger on Technology*, 39.

not a being. It is, rather, that ‘truth’ or horizon of disclosure which renders beings possible and ‘legislates’ the kinds of beings they can be. (Young, 154)

Heidegger’s philosophy of art helps us understand plausibly how the work of art can indeed make such a disclosure as a site for the appearance of truth about Being and beings.¹⁰⁹ The world an artwork sets forth has its limitations for interpretation set through the historical acumen of time, place and culture. This is an essential point in understanding art’s ontological importance. To further explain the idea of the contingency this places upon truth existing in modern sculpture is indeed best given through a detailed account of an artwork. In short, reality is perceived as both revealed and concealed by manifest presence and its accompanying world-disclosure that covers over other ways of being.

This will be the focus of the final chapter investigating *Te Tuhirangi Contour* using Heidegger’s mode of being-in-the-world as *dasein*. To outline the argument as to the importance art holds as a vehicle for revealing a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be, the following section focuses on Heidegger’s philosophical views that particularly influence the modern subject.

3.7 How do you find yourself?

Heidegger contended that the advent of modernity changed for the worse the way humans’ experience the world by making us ignore the profound mystery of life. A paradigmatic shift occurred as a result of the scientific and technological advances that modernity brought, generating an increasingly subjective misapprehension of the world. The increased ability to control the physical environment encouraged a secularisation in modern society where man became the measure of all things, and a “degodification” of the individual and collective contemporary consciousness ensued.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ “[Truth as correspondence] depends on the horizon of disclosure. [...] Aletheia means to unconceal and reveal aspects of what is hidden by our way of being-in-the-world. Reality is always simultaneously revealed and concealed. Every revealing, every disclosure from within a horizon. Is also a concealing, a covering up of possibilities. Being, the ultimate ground of truth, can never fully disclosed. It always remains partially hidden. Truth is a mystery; it lies partially open to us but always-already partially hidden. Art is one vehicle of disclosure. Art brings truth into the light, makes it present.” Lack, *Heidegger on Technology*, 38-39.

¹¹⁰ “Science, technology, aesthetics, culture and degodification are “equally essential” as five major historical developments that feed into and disclose (what we could think of as) *the current*, that is, the underlying historical direction or *Zeitgeist* of our contemporary world.” Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 52.

An assumption was generated in modernity that “our unlimited power for calculating, planning and moulding all things” affords mastery and control over all aspects of life, generating a worldview that nature is subservient to human demands.¹¹¹ This engendered a secularised appraisal of reality encapsulated by the belief that it is ultimately the powers of science and technology alone that are capable of unlocking the secrets of the universe, and that by cultivating ever-increasingly complex methods of reasoned enquiry undertaken with strict scientific objectivity, we shall eventually come to know all about the world.

Whilst this may seem the common place, and even innocuous way of viewing the world, Heidegger thought that in actuality, the seemingly omnipotent power the empirical method has to assert control over the external world lives gives a “technologised ” account of existence that fools mankind at the deepest ontological level. This is symptomatic in the embedded, subjectivist-only account of existence that orientates toward a conception of existence that challenges, rather than relates to, the world around us.¹¹² The convenience and reliability such things as cars, electricity, medicine, communications, plumbing and so forth that modern technology provides engenders a false sense of security that, if one was to really question their place in our lives, would point towards a certain wilful blindness to the uncertainties of life. That necessity is the mother of invention has reached crisis point, in that the cause-and-effect conditions that initially drove humans to adapt to the environment has ballooned into a hubristic belief that the environment should in fact adapt to us.

Consequently, science and technology’s maximal striving towards control over nature is one of the key ontological issues’ contemporary humans face at a metaphysical level. Heidegger thinks that,

Technology en-frames a world of manipulated objects and unleashes a one-dimensional subjectivity that blinds us to the essence of the object world. It is a distraction that promotes inauthentic living over the confrontation with the finitude of our existence. (Lack, 25)

This encapsulates Heidegger’s wider philosophical project – to refute the direction of the underlying metaphysics of Western conceptions about what it means to be that ignore the

¹¹¹ Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 135.

¹¹² “All science is ruled in advance by technology – a forgetting of the hiddenness of being and a reduction of things to their presence or outward look [...] Technology turns everything into an accessible surface, devoid of distance [...] In this way, all objects are reduced to a single mournful feature: their superficiality in comparison with the withdrawn depth of being.” Harman, “Technology, Objects and Things in Heidegger,” 22.

hidden aspects of reality. From a philosophical position, the influential worldview Western metaphysics currently has – what can be described as the latest instantiation in the history of being – developed out of the empirical thinking and rationality of the Enlightenment, which had its orientation set by Descartes’ subject/object dichotomy.

Heidegger thinks that “Metaphysics grounds an age in that, through its specific interpretation of what is [...] it gives the age the ground of its essential form.”¹¹³ Meaning, the underlying acceptance of an historical people’s view of how things are – how they look and what they mean – is based upon what is intelligible within the realm of understanding reached by those people in place and time; a horizon of intelligibility, the current worldview.

Iain D. Thomson elaborates, “Everything *is*, so by changing our understanding of what “is-ness” is itself, metaphysics can change our understanding of everything [...] metaphysics molds our understanding of what it means for something – anything – to *be*.” In contemporary times, our specific interpretation of “what is” has increasingly become, to put it simply, what exists is for us.

Timothy Stapleton suggests the fundamental existential problem humans live with is that “What constitutes the very “am” of “I am” is that being is an issue for it: is a question and a matter about which it cares.”¹¹⁴ Obviously, we treasure knowledge and the privileges it brings to our lives. Knowing about things gives our perceptions a structural stability that arms us against temporal uncertainty. However, when confronted with unpredictability, or something that conflicts with our knowledge about the way things are, epistemic facts are often shown to be assumptions; a precarious castle in the sand built on technological feats. One tends to be disorientated by encountering something unknown. Heidegger thinks that our fascination with technology and the domination it partly provides over nature undermines our capability to deal with the unknown, and that this ultimately contributes to a feeling of alienation from our life that is experienced as anxiety. But perhaps there is another way to look at life that would somehow fortify against such existential angst?

Heidegger suggest that what seems to be missing from contemporary lives is a connection with the underlying mysterious, unquantifiable “essence” of the world – that is, what constitutes the

¹¹³ Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 115.

¹¹⁴ Stapleton, *Key Concepts*, 44.

nature of being here at all? ¹¹⁵ An investigation of essence guides Heidegger's thinking as he turns towards art and technology as competing aspects of modern life that can offer a deeper understanding of how being-in-the-world reveals itself. ¹¹⁶

As Thomson puts it, our modern subjective stance towards life misses this question out completely when upholding the worldview:

In which an intrinsically meaningless objective realm ("nature") is separated epistemically from isolated, value-bestowing, self-certain subjects, and so needs to be mastered through the relentless, normative, and practical activities of these subjects. [...] The subjectivism of the modern worldview functions like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Its progressive historical realization generates not only the political freedoms and scientific advances we cherish, but also unwanted downstream consequences such as our escalating environmental crisis and less predictable side-effects like the aestheticisation of art. (Thomson, 53)

That the current technological view of being oversimplifies the equation of what it means to be down to questioning at surface level is derived from the metaphysical presuppositions of Cartesian dualism that delineates existence from the perspective of a subject seeking knowledge about objects in the world. Just think of the epithet "as a matter of fact" that exemplifies the embedded assumption that matter is the most real thing we can know, and that by scientifically understanding it we unlock the truth about existence. This materialistic viewpoint comes up short if one is interested in finding out more than knowledge can describe, as in experiencing meaning in the presence of awe inducing things, such as a sunset, a beautiful painting, or your beloved.

The stance that Descartes held was inherited from antiquity, when it was believed that there was a stable, underlying substance to which every particular thing manifest in the world owed its origin.

For Aristotle, whose ontology was the basis for ancient science and medieval thought, there is an underlying substance for every particular thing. Other

¹¹⁵ "Heidegger is claiming that quantity changes quality [for the worse], that the very nature of advanced technology, the sheer power and ubiquity of machines and tools, has changed our relation to nature." Lack, *Heidegger on Technology*, 25.

¹¹⁶ "What Heidegger is interested in is the very nature or essence of the artwork *as* artwork. He is interested in the *origin*, the *essence* of the work of art, by which he means the relation of the work of art to Being and truth." *Ibid.*, 35.

characteristics of a thing, or even a theory, are like appearances that are tacked on to the underlying substance or essence [...] each substance has a telos or end goal toward which it is orientated [...but there is only] one underlying, unchanging essence that gives form to the surface appearances. (Lack, 10)

Thus, the history of metaphysics has played a significant part in structuring traditional conception of reality as a supposedly permanent ground of existence, positioning subjects (humans) as agents whose job it is to extract the definitive answers about the world by providing a complete set of facts that explain the properties of the unchanging, underlying essence of objects. It gave to us the task of extracting knowledge from matter that underpins the scientific method of enquiry, whilst simultaneously undermining the ethical component pragmatic necessity attaches to its goals.

If all we ever do is gain an increasingly sophisticated understanding of mere technology, the master of tools and instruments and the application of techniques, even those that indisputably improve our standard of living, without gaining an understanding of *the essence of technology*, our understanding will not free us but only further enslaves us. (Lack, 24)

3.8 Engage in the World.

Again, the primary focus of Heidegger's philosophy is the question being; of what it means to be. Not just what being is for – that technologised, subjective enterprise to reduce being to quantifiable, controllable terms; but what does it actually mean to be here, existing, at all? There is an underlying mysterious aspect that drives this universal question about existence. This is the driving force behind Heidegger's ontological philosophy – one that divines the need to explore the essences of things, not just their outward appearances. The past two-thousand years of philosophical thinking made metaphysical presuppositions that constructed a subjective lens so thick that it distorts the truth of reality by privileging subjective cognitive conclusions and epistemic knowledge.

In short, the major problem with metaphysical suppositions about the world, for Heidegger, is that it ignores that subjectivity is in fact a secondary response to experience. But how is this so? Heidegger uses the example of a hammer to relate the nature of our primary experience of the world as one of dynamic engagement. When hammering in a nail, you hold at most only a

dim awareness of the hammer as a separate object. You are decidedly not thinking of its colour, its constituent parts, nor any other of the multitudinous physical properties that make up its hammer-ness. No – the hammer is merely equipment we use to facilitate a task and bring about a desired result.

When engaged in tasks like hammering in a nail, one experiences what Heidegger calls the ready-to-hand mode of existence. It is only when our engagement in a task we care about is interrupted that we subjectively “stand beside” and perceive objective properties. It is not until the hammer malfunctions in some way, say the head flies off, that you would stop and consider the hammer as a distinct object separate from yourself and look to understand the particularities of it as an object. When broken, the object becomes present-at-hand for our contemplation.

This relates a fundamental difference between immersed, everyday interactions *with* the world and the contemplative reflexivity towards the world, i.e. thinking. Offering a clearly distinct characterisation of two modes of being-in-the-world, these differentials point to the subject/object dichotomy as a secondary response to life that treats objects as external to our subjective sphere. For Heidegger, the primary mode of being exists in average-everyday engagement with ready-to-hand activities where the subject is integrally involved with the object.

As is found in the process of experiencing ordinary life through action. An example of how this plays out in sculpture is apparent in the re-evaluation Krauss makes of Caro’s *Early One Morning* [fig.24]. Caro offers a brilliant synopsis of the battle ground in which sculpture was operating as the less-celebrated sibling of the fine arts. To view from a position straight in front of the shorter side of *Early One Morning* gives the illusion that the disparate parts that make up the nearly twenty-foot-long extension contract into a single, flattened plane. The large vertical plate at the back of the work acts as a surrogate not of the body (as Fried would have it) but cleverly, as a stand in for the picture plane. Caro is demonstrating in undeniable terms the insufficiency of pictorial space in a distinctly sculptural context. This lends the strung-out conglomeration of abstract shapes displaying the fundamental structural nature of sculpture from the side profile a verticality that mimics the two-dimensions of painting from the privileged viewing point conventionally taken to survey mimetic relief sculptures. Krauss makes this connection, noting that:

The kind of verticality to which I am referring – one that is quite different from that achieved by the systems of weight and support – is the verticality of

painting. Because what one confronts in a painting is a system of graphic display by which all elements in real space, including horizontal ones, are made into shapes borne by the vertical surface of the canvas. (Krauss, *Passages*, 189)

Caro is advocating for the uniqueness of sculpture by showing how it goes beyond this limitation of the purely vertical and gives a perspective of depth that can be explored physically. Thus the knowing, the completion of the work optically is distended, and breaks down as a unified whole.

Krauss saw this as fundamental breakthrough in the search for a modernist language for medium specificity in sculpture. It hinges upon the lived experience of contingent movement by the viewer to experience the work not only in the round, but as two separate instantiations of being that simultaneously exist in the one work. “This change from the horizontal to the vertical is expressed as a change in condition, or being.”¹¹⁷ This fights against the modernist call for illusion, distraction and stasis in the viewer’s perspective that mimics the condition of ontologically distancing people from obtaining meaning to their lives by concentrating on truth as a process of correctly corresponding matter as it appears to us with the tools of epistemic knowledge we have aggregated thus far without allowing for the possibility of contingency.

Such demonstration of contingency to perspective suggests that experiences cannot be encompassed by cold, calculable facts about reality alone. That the innovations science and technology have afforded contemporary life have not yet quite reached the point where science has magicked away all the unexpected difficulties of life speaks of this underlying, fundamental component of our nature. We are ontological beings – entities who recognise their own existence, and question its constituent elements, its meaning, and even at times its validity.

That we are beings that are connected to the wholeness of Being is often overlooked in our immersion with technologized life. We become immunised to the idea that the unknown beyond our horizon of intelligibility holds more than just a passing relevance to our lives, an existential blip in our otherwise controllable lives – except perhaps in those darkest moments where we lay awake in the middle of the night.

Why should this questioning of existence disappear when we view art? Heidegger reconciles this by introducing the idea that art can act as an illuminating foil to a technological way of

¹¹⁷ Krauss, *Passages*, 192.

being that exists as a “problem for which there can be no solution but an ontological condition from which we can be saved.”¹¹⁸

Heidegger’s claim is that the subjective viewpoint encourages us to ignore ontological issues when viewing art. In the passage above, Thomson mentions that viewing art aesthetically is an “unwanted downstream consequence” of subjectivity. This curious point in fact plays an integral role in Heidegger’s philosophy of art. He positions aesthetics as a conditioned “disinterestedness” we assume when coming face-to-face with art in our own lives. A state symptomatic of modern people’s distance from being that, as Heidegger sees it, inhibits us from the true role art could play in our lives.

In his most famous piece of philosophical writing about art, *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1935-36), Heidegger states that:

Almost from the time when specialized thinking about art and the artist began, this thought was called aesthetic. Aesthetics takes the work of art as an object [...] of sensuous apprehension in the wide sense. Today we call this apprehension lived experience. The way in which man experiences art is supposed to give information about its essence [...] Yet perhaps lived experience is the element in which art dies. (Heidegger, 116)

Heidegger thinks that the current modern “technologised” comportment towards the world generates a dangerously nihilistic worldview fixated only on what presently “is,” wilfully ignoring the full extent of such yet-to-be external factors that could, and will, come to radically influence life in an unforeseen way. Expanding on Heidegger’s notion of our fundamental state of existence as something about which we care, Anthony Lack writes that we are always “dependant on a mood that Heidegger calls *Sorge*, meaning fear, or worry, or care.”¹¹⁹ He continues,

The nature of being-in-the-world is such that we never escape these concerns, but we often try to deny them. We distract ourselves from our cares, the major one is death, and live inauthentically. Our relation to technological tools, techniques, and gadgets can provide this distraction, taking us away from our

¹¹⁸ Dreyfuss, *Being-in-the-world: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time, Division I*, 98.

¹¹⁹ “One of Heidegger’s terms for being-in-the-world is *Befindlichkeit*, which is a neologism, based on the German greeting, “*Wie befinden Sie Sich?*” (Literally, “How do you find yourself?”)” Lack, *Heidegger on Technology*, 26.

more fundamental experiences [...] This pseudo-security is a danger if it prevents the lived awareness of what we ultimately are, beings in trouble in a world of uncertainty. (Lack, 26)

That art has died in contemporary society by ceasing to function as an ethical compass for modern people through aesthetic reception in lived experience is indeed a complex and challenging idea. To explain this further, and to demonstrate the troubling ramifications that Heidegger suggests modern subjectivity has on diminishing the role art plays in the contemporary world, requires looking more closely at the way art as a form of technology has come to shape the contemporary zeitgeist. This issue is reminiscent of Fried's charges against the underlying theatrical sensibility of minimalism in *Art and Objecthood*.

3.9 The Truth about Technology.

Scientist: Then the name 'technology,' strictly speaking, refers to a kind of representing, that is, a kind of cognition, and hence to a kind of theoretical comportment. The essence and dominance of technology consists in the fact that, through it, nature has become an object. Nature is set up by the human, halted by him, so that it may be accountable to him and his plans for it. Technology is the objectification of nature. (Heidegger, *Country Path Conversations*, 7.)

Heidegger argues that our sense of reality has become increasingly technologised, that we receive the world through a subjective lens coloured by technological expectations. What does this mean? In one of his key pieces of writing, *The Question Concerning Technology* (1954), there is a distinction made between technology as it appears in everyday life (meaning the tools, processes and resulting goods that are produced), and the underlying metaphysical understanding of what technology is (and what it does for us).

Accordingly Heidegger, in what is a standard method of his philosophical investigations, breaks down the blanket term "technology" into two quite different, and revelatory, aspects: the mere technology of tools and their characteristics as they manifestly exist in the world, and an underlying essence of technology as the ontological understanding about their usefulness *as* tools that adds to our implicit understanding of how we view the world. In the case of modern technology, this implicit understanding has reached a point where we "increasingly come to

treat all entities, ourselves included, as intrinsically meaningless “resources” standing by merely to be optimised, enhanced, and ordered for maximally flexible use.”¹²⁰

This severe diagnosis of modern consciousness sheds light on the non-trivial nature of Heidegger’s philosophical critique of modernity and the depth of the problems in its underlying metaphysical assumptions that prejudice “our very sense of the intelligibility of all things, ourselves included.”¹²¹ That we, he suggests, come to “en-frame” the world through our placement of it into a structure that suits our needs means nature is perceived technologically as a “standing reserve” that we objectify within the limits of our epistemic knowledge of the world, a one-dimensional attempt at mastery over the totality of what already is. As G. Harman relates, “Things now have meaning insofar as they are subjected to this universal grid of presence.”¹²²

The late-modern technological comportment towards being shows our desire to control existence, to order “toward one thing [...] namely: to establish *the single whole* of that which is present as standing reserve”¹²³ The nature as a “standing reserve” idea positions existence itself as anthropocentric in essence, our belief in the scientific mode of enquiry ignoring the fundamental question from whence this all came that shows a hubristic attitude that all meaning comes from the human subject.¹²⁴

Heidegger’s main objection to this attitude is that it mischaracterises the way in which the world really exists in the most fundamental of ways. This issue stems from the roots of enquiring into the world from a single, subjective point of view – one that in its very nature actually presupposes a more primary mode of being-in-the-world as an engaged state of existence that, for the most part, is our basic everyday immersed way of interacting with the world.¹²⁵ This actually positions science and technology as subsidiary means to investigate Being; without doubt useful in their own reductive ways, but by no means capable in and of

¹²⁰ Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 19.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹²² “[T]his universal ordering is called *Ge-stell*. In normal German this is a word for all sorts of everyday frames, racks and gridworks, but as a Heideggerian technical term it is usually translated as ‘en-framing.’ Harman, “Technology, Objects and Things in Heidegger,” 22.

¹²³ Heidegger, *Insight Into What Is*, 32.

¹²⁴ “The modern prejudice that (to put it simply) all meaning comes from the human subject reaches its most powerful apotheosis in Nietzsche and Freud.” Thomson, *Heidegger*, 53.

¹²⁵ “By failing to recognise and do justice to the integral intertwining of self and world that is basic to our experiential navigation of our own lived environments, modern philosophy effectively splits the subject off from objects and other subjects. In this way, modern philosophy lays the conceptual groundwork for *subjectivism*.” *Ibid.*

themselves in answering the fundamental question Heidegger is seeking to unpack, his lifelong preoccupation, the question how to arrive at an understanding of Being.¹²⁶

Perhaps art does play a necessary part in a fuller account of what it could mean to be?

3.10 Subject/Object, Dilemma/Art.

To answer such a holistic question indeed challenges the most primary level of the subjective account of the way we inhabit the world, the normative ways in which we go about the daily task of living. The conventional way modern humans have been taught to respond to being-in-the-world is as thinking creatures whose role is to arrive at knowledge about the world and then act upon it, a position best characterised in Descartes' famous maxim *cogito ergo sum* – I think, therefore I am.

That art has fallen prey in modern times to just such a technological comportment to the world – the assumption that all things are foremost here for our utilisation to complete a task that is important to us – is revealed in the question used by many when approaching abstract works of art: “but what is it?” Through its lack of illusionistic representation, abstract art's inability to convey an intelligible message for general consumption means that its purpose often falls on deaf and dumb ears. The uninitiated only recognise familiar sounds. As in our primordial past, that unfamiliar noise coming from somewhere deep in the forest generates our fear of the unknown. What we do not recognise is threatening. But what is recognition? Recognition infers that we have seen or heard this thing before – or at least seen something similar that by association we can “fit” the new experience in to our pre-existing cognitive schema. This sounds very much like the dogma of Clement Greenberg and his assertion that quality was only measurable by comparison with the past. In contrast, Serra promotes that prime objects come into the art world as essentially rootless ideas, completely new and generative going forward – but not backwards. Krauss thinks that most art criticism of the modernist-historicist type finds lineage and precedents to make “the new comfortable by being made familiar, since it is seen as having gradually evolved from the forms of the past.”¹²⁷

Obviously, there are real world implications when experiencing anything new, and it is one of our first gut-driven reactions to treat the unknown with curiosity and fear. In this light, it could

¹²⁶ “Heidegger's principal intention is to reawaken the western world to what he feels has been lost, or better, covered over by the history of western metaphysics since Plato.” Lack, *Heidegger on Technology*, 9.

¹²⁷ Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” 31

be said that people are afraid to engage with abstraction. The fight or flight response to corporeal existence is a universal human response. As such, art in fact offers a benign encounter with the new where, rather than outright fleeing the scene, we are afforded the luxury of indulging in our curiosity about the world without dire consequence. We can explore mystery without fear of mortal consequences – if we can release ourselves from the conception that to exist in a state of not understanding something is not necessarily dangerous nor to be feared outright. If we release ourselves from the restricting paradigm of modern comportment towards truth arrived at only through empirical facts.

The reception of abstract art suggests that we have, through an increasingly subjective view of the world, become forgetful of the mysteries of existence. This issue encapsulates Heidegger's wider philosophical project – the refutation of the direction metaphysics has taken the evolution of Western conceptions about what it means to be that ignore the hidden aspects of reality. The current influential worldview Western metaphysics has – what can be described as the latest instantiation in the history of being – developed out of the empirical thinking and rationality of the Enlightenment, which had its orientation set by Descartes' subject/object dichotomy.

Ontological historicity is the thesis that our basic sense of reality changes with time [...] Metaphysics can change our sense of everything simply by changing our understanding of what "is-ness" is [...] Heidegger's deconstruction of metaphysics makes a convincing case [...] by uncovering a succession of different ways in which Western humanity has understood what entities are. In the "history of being" each "ground" and "guide" their respective ages.
(Thomson, 8)

If we consider that formal abstract art has been a part of the world for more than one hundred years, it seems plausible to argue that as visual language, the ubiquity of formal abstraction has led it to become ordinary in its appearance for contemporary viewers. In this way, formal abstraction becomes a useful tool to investigate a contemporary encounter with a work of art such as Serra's *Te Tuhirangi Contour* in Heidegger's terms of late-modern subjective enframing. The issue being that in its common reception as "art," the ordinariness of formal abstract works in our visual culture, means that as a source for meaning the artwork remains unexamined beyond its surface appearance, its objecthood, and therefore, as it lacks narrative content, remains mute in its didactic content. It is not that the work does not hold meaning; it is that the viewer, challenged to extract that meaning, falls back on the ready-made answer: it

is recognisably just art. If the question of searching for meaning in Serra's work is forfeited to generalised understanding, its' impact is limited to a surface-level appraisal; a mere glance, not a serious engagement.

Formal abstraction, I would argue, has slipped into the aesthetic mode of comfortable, disinterested reception – typifying what philosophers describe as the “aesthetic attitude” which characterises modern subjective viewings of art. Why is this important for Heidegger's critique of modern subjectivity? The aesthetic attitude integrally situates responses to art as seeking to categorise the experience in terms of subjective, epistemic knowledge – for which in particular we look for something that appeals to our conception of the beautiful that alleviates the stress and mundane aspect of our day-to-day life.

We therefore arrive in front of *Te Tuhirangi* with acculturated perceptual baggage that assigns the parameters for obtaining meaning from the sculpture: does it or does it not match our subjective ideals about beauty or usefulness? This inhibits any chance for alternative interpretations of the work to arrive of their own accord. In controlling the experience subjectively, from the modern perspective the raw truth of this large-scale steel wall is shielded from our eyes.

Chapter 4: Modern Presence as Methodology.

The antipathy between modernism and minimalism that I have been discussing in the theories of Fried and Krauss find a reconciliation in the work of Serra. Objects are experienced as meaningless until given valence by their contextual relationship to our lives, and Fried's issue with minimalism boils down to the idea that art needs accessible meanings to retain what was historically its ethical purpose. By relocating meaning to an external sphere of influence, as viewer defined (or at least incorporated), objecthood moved away from the traditional concept of art as a container of meanings assigned by the artist.

At the same time however, minimalism placed art firmly back in the realm of the actual space as a pragmatic concern for people, much like the Greek temple. Modernist intellection censures the art experience for those uninitiated in its language; and even if well versed in the history of art, the Cartesian sensibility of mind over body that uses cognition and rule-orientated protocols to enjoy the art experience deign to say that art stays in the realm of the imagination. Works by Serra are open to the public in a very literal sense: their non-mimetic yet impressive presence sidesteps the need to find an answer to the "what is it?" question, favouring instead the lived encounter as meaningful and enjoyable.

Serra's perseverance with steel, his dutifully investigating its formal possibilities, is resolutely modernist. Looking to re-invent the tried and true by rejecting the pedestal, and moving in to influence the same space as the viewer melds the former imaginary transcendent space of modernism with public, and therefore (in theory) less idealistic situatedness of the viewer. Using the oxidised patina of an industrial product to counteract the notion of a high-finished product, he complicates the minimalist object. Embracing the phenomenological aspect of sculpture-in-the-world removes the need to create a convincing illusion, thus changing the role sculpture had traditionally played in removing the present context by focusing on memorialising the past. This freed modern sculpture of the kind Serra produces, through fundamentals of gravity, mass, scale, physics and anxiety-inducing counterbalance, to concentrate on ways to break free of the Cartesian mindset that the fundamentals of consciousness are directive.

The phenomenology Krauss takes to critiquing Serra's works blends the anthropomorphic surrogacy of modern aesthetic readings of large-scale site-specific works with minimalist specificity of the object to push the true subject of sculpture as being a matter of space, time

and contingency – the same inescapable qualities of existence that influence *dasein* at its ontological level of being.

Fried signed off in *Art and Objecthood* with a presentiment that anticipates the role Heidegger's philosophy can offer to the canon of art history.

This essay will be read as an attack on certain artists (and critics) and as a defense of others. And of course it is true that the desire to distinguish between what is to me the authentic art of our time and other work which, whatever the dedication, passion and intelligence of its creators, seems to me to share certain characteristics associated here with the concepts of literalism and theater, has specifically motivated what I have written. More generally, however, I have wanted to call attention to the utter pervasiveness – the virtual universality – of the sensibility or mode of being which I have characterised as corrupted or perverted by theater. We are all literalists most or all of our lives. Presentness is grace. (Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 23)

Presentness is what Fried offers as an antidote to theatricality, and by this he is offering a twofold solution to counteract objecthood. If the endlessness of Tony Smith's turnpike experience and the sequential ordering of one-thing-after-another in minimalism is the antithesis of finitude, then an acceptance of the materiality of art as a permanent structure to experience the conditions of the present moment offers an authentic experience of *dasein*. The inconclusiveness the condition of objecthood generates in viewing art means that "The experience in question persists in time, and the presentment of endlessness which I have been claiming is central to literalist art and theory is essentially a presentment of endless, or indefinite, duration."¹²⁸

Being-there is a historical condition; a *dasein* is a being who is existentially aware of the future and, by definition, therefore the past.

For Heidegger, it is clear that our most primordial relationship with Being can only come through the confrontation with death. It is through this confrontation, and the authentic relation to oneself that flows out of it, that one gains a primordial access to the truth. (Lack, *Heidegger on Technology*, 20)

¹²⁸ Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 22.

This condition in which we are always-already in tempers our experience of the world – the very same historical conditions that modernism strove to utilise as a platform to assess quality in art. The truth revealed in authentic, no-nonsense awareness of mortality – one’s past, present and future – is the same state of being that Fried is conscious of as being jeopardised by theatricality. “To ask the question of Being is to ask the question of truth,” states Lack.¹²⁹ To ignore the history of art made minimalism an inauthentic site of *dasein*, blind to the import the past has on the fullness of the present, whilst paradoxically encouraging an awareness of the world of context beyond the artwork itself. Minimalism in this sense makes art present-to-hand, and therefore a novelty to be purveyed cognitively, broken down to assess the meaning, which is the aim of the *gestalt*.

At the same time however, modernism tried to wish away the vagaries of temporality in asserting the need for a measure of conviction, of stable meaning in an artwork. “Faced with the need to defeat theatre, it is above all to the condition of painting and sculpture – the condition, that is, of existing in indeed secreting and constituting, a continuous and perpetual present” that for Fried offer salvation from meaninglessness. “It is as though one’s experience of [modernist painting and sculpture] has no duration [...] because at every moment the work is wholly manifest.”¹³⁰ This form of presentness also parallels Heidegger’s call for authenticity by promoting the reverie of ready-to-hand experience of the artwork, but this problematically contradicts the modernist ideal of transcendent meaning. Therefore, Krauss’s addition of contingency as a modality of the art situation affords a methodology that complements modernism from the Heideggerian point of view.

This all culminates in what I am calling the “modern presence” – a mode of phenomenological enquiry that conflates the minimalist interest in idiosyncrasies of the moment, as afforded access through sculpture as an objective entity in space, place and time, with the awareness that meaning in one’s life is inevitably situated by attending to personal history and one’s authentic acceptance as a limited historicised being caught up in the flow of time. Essentially this is an attempt to unify minimalist and modernist sensibilities as seen through the lens of Heidegger’s concept of world and earth. What follows is a selection of accounts that give my personal readings of being-there with Serra’s *Te Tuhirangi Contour* in keeping with the mode

¹²⁹ Lack, *Heidegger on Technology*, 21.

¹³⁰ Fried, ‘Art and Objecthood,’ 22.

of comportment towards art and my own personal being as *dasein* that I have studied (and hopefully related) over the course of writing this thesis.

4.1 Narrative Sequence.

Aligned in sequence, the fifty-six large panels of Corten steel in *Te Tuhirangi Contour* present a layout recognisably literary in structure. In appearance, the overall effect is akin to scholarly scroll paintings from China, a tapestry, banner, or even the nineteenth century Zoetrope, which projected animated scenes on to the walls of a room – the precursor to today’s moving image pictures. Where Serra’s work radically diverges however from these mediums expected display of visual narrative is in its extreme lack of representational content. For, to repeat identical, featureless partitions of the same size, same colour, and same surface does not offer a very rich storyline – at least not at first glance, and certainly not in the conventional sense.

Devoid of figurative content, or even an abstracted-from-nature surface relief, the work is reticent when approached in terms of sculptural narrative. No story is laid out. No protagonist obviously presents themselves, nor is there a history being related. It provides no logical subject matter to satisfy sensibilities based on the expectation of representational content. Consequently, the viewer is left frustrated by the artist’s apparent refusal to insert intelligible details. And yet, through their repetition the panels generate a sequential rhythm that activates a reader-like response in the viewer. This storyboard’s frames however remain obstinately blank.

But does this steel wall really show nothing at all? Have nothing informative it wishes for the visitor to receive? If this was indeed the case, Serra’s work would become folly in the extreme – a massive, domineering (not to mention costly) empty expression that definitively rejects the idea of sculpture as means to make artistic statements. I however would argue that, although unconventional in its way of speaking, *Te Tuhirangi Contour* in fact makes a meaningful narrative about site and being-there available that is rich in nuance and significant detail.

4.2 The Phenomenology of Momentary Knowledge.

Through moving into the landscape with works such as *Te Tuhirangi*, Serra dismantled the intellectual space of the gallery and dispensed with the illusionistic and pictorial predecessors

of sculpture. Phenomenology, being-there with the work, is activated by the body in space and time, but retains an element of the theatrical in that there is a meaninglessness to experience once the lived moment has passed. Phenomenology can be bolstered by the addition of an ethical component given by *dasein's* care, accessed through noncognitive reciprocal engagement with an object in a way that resonates with a person not just as a detached art moment, but an affective ontological encounter. This makes the work of art a flashpoint for Being to show itself as present; our mortality integrally intertwined with the physical nature of reality. Metaphysics and phenomena merge, and this is how being-there with *Te Tuhirangi Contour* lends itself to more than just a day out to “see the art.”

Standing alone beneath the yaw of *Te Tuhirangi's* overburden, truth becomes a matter of correctly ascertaining the material nature of reality to understand our vulnerability. We are brought explicitly closer to Being: you are in danger (or at least feel its presence). The work operates as a truth-locale; its work is to make explicit the physical nature of itself and, as surrogate, of yourself, too. It reveals itself as it is, which encourages you to do the same. What does it reveal? Our uprightedness that subjectivises the account of the world we embody as pedestrian creatures. The scale, size, proximity and distance all relate to our anthropomorphic limitations in time and space.

I remember a writing exercise set by my stage three English professor where she suggested that walking was an effective way to compose poetry. The practicalities of walking-whilst-writing aside, what the task brought home to me was a locomotive element to creative thinking. Each step became attached to its own unit of thought. Steps and thoughts combined in sequence to produce a text: body and mind in unison created something – I want to say manifested themselves in writing, a kind of immanent and physicalised playing with pentameter. Thinking back, the ground beneath my feet served as a drum, my body was percussive footfalls, the landscape a sound-studio. Moving through space a rhythm and songline of both our devising took place. As I walked the roping undulations of Tuhirangi, my body became an instrument playing the land, the contour providing the key, setting the tone.

In the ten months between visits, I found *Te Tuhirangi's* patina to have aged. It was darker. Its pock-marked stipple of rust that is actually alive and never-stable, looked to be more dark chocolate, almost liver-coloured, in places, like the age-spots on your grandmother's hands. I realised an element of time made manifest. Time passes; but the wall also brought me back to the present by catching and reverberating the noise of nearby cars passing on the wind. *Te*

Tuhirangi is active as a feature in its environment. A sound piece, a more discrete ear than the obstreperous horn of Anish Kapoor's *Dismemberment, Site 1*, 2009 [fig.30] that dominates the ridgeline five-hundred-metres to the west of where *Te Tuhirangi* sleeps sprawled like a basilisk.

4.3 Snakelike.

Changing shape has been of particular concern to Serra throughout his sculptural career. Or, more specifically, to produce structural responses that correspond to shape and the space in which they appear. *Te Tuhirangi Contour* borrows its name from ancient Maori mythology. The taniwha, *Tuhirangi*, accompanied the Maori ancestor Kupe on his voyage of discovery, and it is easy to see the connection in the serpentine contoured sprawl of Serra's piece. Traditionally, taniwha appeared as serpent or dragon-like in form – a motif found in many ancient cultures worldwide. The official government website *Te Ara – Encyclopaedia of New Zealand* does however make note that taniwha were supernatural creatures that often changed their form. It was believed that Kupe's *Tuhirangi* reappeared as a dolphin in modern times – the celebrated Pelorus Jack of the Marlborough Sounds, who accompanied sailors between North and South Islands around the turn of the twentieth century. Perhaps this taniwha has at last come again to the shores of New Zealand?

The phenomenological method is based on direct experience. It is the “how” element of an encounter: how does it feel, how does it look, sound, smell, taste? These are all sensations felt in the lived moment, and it is somehow reassuring to have stumbled across a methodology for viewing art that comes so naturally once the brain is excused from finding the correct answer. There are no labels necessary on a large-scale sculpture in the world – we are simply asked to “resolve philosophical questions in and through the phenomena in question” – in this case, through the sculpture itself.¹³¹ In other words, we are tasked simply with being alive, and being attentive to that fact, in order to find meaning.

What this does is encapsulated by Heidegger's idea of the Greek term *aletheia*: that truth is a process revealing and concealing the possibilities of existence as they appear right front of us at a particular moment in time. Whilst this may seem somewhat dismissive of the history of art, I did not find this to be the case in my time spent with *Te Tuhirangi Contour*. Perhaps the

¹³¹ Parry, *Art and Phenomenology*, 10.

modernist reliance on the indisputable quality of works from the past does have a place, after all?

4.4 Seeing the Land.

The land sets the tone. Set on an expanse of dutifully mown green grass that affords no distractions that encroach onto the visual field, through the play of light the sculpture cannot deny its relationship to its wider environment. Embedded in the landscape the work mimics the topography, the rippling form absorbing the ambient light in the exact same configuration as the folded valleys of the surrounding coastal Kaipara hills. Consequently, one experiences a sense of very New Zealand kind of light that exists in the landscape as a kind of topographical drapery, not unlike Colin McCahon's *Takaka: Night and day*, 1948 [fig.31].

By reiterating the horizon line – one of Serra's particular concerns in his landscape pieces, *Te Tuhirangi Contour* brings the land into focus, deferring itself to the place where it exists. That such a feat of technological perspicacity rescinds its prowess in apparent subservience to the land relates a complex phenomenological relationship for the viewer in which the sculpture becomes a measurement for the landscape, and vice versa, through the body awareness of the viewer. This state of *dasein* serves as the nexus that triangulates an interplay between the natural and the cultural environments.

On this particular occasion, as the sun reached its zenith in a jet blue sky, I was grateful for the shadow *Te Tuhirangi* cast. Like indulging in the respite of a shady tree, I walked in the coolness of the western flank. Less challenged by the late-summer glare, here my pupils dilated some: I began to notice the consistency of the shadow as it moved in unison with the faraway sun describing its arc across the sky. The substantiality of the work, the presence and seeming resoluteness to withstand the vertical steel barricade seems to possess, refracts light in such a way that, if one was familiar enough with the seasons, the work could be read as a sundial, its pieces of time allotted by older circadian rhythms than the compartmentalized notions of the atomic clock.

The shadows and the highlights realise the directional fall of sunlight. One supposes the moon secretly does the same. *Te Tuhirangi* is so big that you can only experience sections of the work at a time. In its continual unfolding it explicitly reveals itself as having unseeable traits. The bulges and yaws, the soft recesses and bends are fluid, like walking a river projected upward

in space. The uniformity of colour, the patina of rust and the continuity it affords form within our sphere of reference infers a continuum between the visible and the unseen; the present and the absent.

This is further explicated as you walk the façade to become a revelation of a perpetual kind of newness, akin to Fried's presentness that, in amounting to the perpetual creation of itself, one experiences an instantaneousness quality to being that "if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it."¹³² *Te Tuhirangi* becomes a flashpoint for being-there.

An expansion of intelligibility comes to the fore as the selfsame panels stretch out ahead, yet as one gains familiarity through a slowing of the senses and gives in to the journey the work provides, individuated traits of difference emerge. The variegation of the mottling on each steel panel, in texture, in the individualised bending of form that describes the perpendicular fall of the land beneath, are all consequences of transience. Light, entropy, time are informed by the subtle curvature given by the earth we traverse. We must inhabit our imaginations to go further than this.

Our mind can make the leap over the wall; only to find sameness and difference on the other side. This is an instantiation of the alethic struggle, a material barrier that coerces an awareness of the problematic nature of assumptive knowledge. To really know the work, one must walk, and live with the memory. For there will always be aspects of life that elude our encounters with things, but for *dasein*, the beauty lies in the manifestation of a consciousness integrated with revealing truth in the world as it appears. The phenomenological method. As such, as Thomson states,

There is no single aspect that stands forever beyond our reach, in principle inaccessible, as if located in some transcendent realm outside time and space. [...] What does not completely show itself to us conditions our experience of what does show itself (and vice versa), but it's not completely showing itself does show up to us, either implicitly [...] or, as in great art, explicitly where we see there is something we do not see at the heart of what we do see. (Thomson, 79)

¹³² Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 22.

Giving oneself over to the unknowable, the mysterious presence of what is not there by attending to what is, is an authentic mode of being-in-the-world. As such, *Tuhirangi* becomes, in its extended viewing, a perambulation in the presence of the absent, affording a recognition of being here now.

Heidegger promotes the idea that art should afford humans a feeling of being at home in an uncontrollable universe. That art is demonstrably about being human; I like this idea. Art as a vehicle of truth that can aid humans to make sense of their time and place. A materialised guide of what is. Our being-in-the-world is a subset of Being as such, the unlimited potential of existence, the plurality of ontology. If this unlimited potentiality is the ground from which everything and anything in history that has been or could emerge in to being comes, then if we limit our interpretations of art (and life) to epistemic knowledge and systematic discoveries, it hinders an ongoing awareness of the totality of Being. *Tuhirangi* plays this metaphysical narrative out in real world space: the before, during and after of corporeality is made abundantly clear by your presence with the work and walking with the contingencies of the yet-to-be it constantly displays. It helps one to understand that in physical actuality, we are conduits, not controllers of how Being decides to show itself.

A film documenting the creation of *Te Tuhirangi Contour* begins with Serra stating his intention for the piece was to help the viewer “See the Land.” Seen from a distance, the work undoubtedly does just that, its serpentine glide along the contour of an embankment simultaneously displays its formal aesthetics and the topography it describes. Yet, at over two hundred and fifty metres long and six metres high, when seen close up its undeniable materiality denies access to the visual field beyond the work. Orientation of the body in space becomes subject matter, perception is shown to be a body-activated sense.

The sculpture is impressive in the true definition of the word, it does impresses on one’s physical being. An English major himself, Serra would no doubt enjoy the analogy.¹³³ But regardless, the viewer is left with a conundrum: how to see the landscape when it is blocked off by a twenty-foot high Corten steel wall? I would like to suggest a nuance of practice that fits plausibly when considering Serra’s oeuvre. What Serra means by “seeing” goes beyond the mere pictorial and optical receptivity of traditional representational sculpture. Throughout his career-long investigations into the nature of space, on how to approach space as a material

¹³³ In 1967, Serra penned a “Verb List” that has been a generative source of process-based practice throughout his career. See: Serra, *Writings Interviews*, 3.

medium through the phenomenology of presence, has resulted in opening viewer's eyes wider than ever before. To "see" *Te Tuhirangi Contour* is to experience the land. Serra takes the cognitive insightfulness and opticality of modernism and fashions it into an active verb. Insightfulness becomes sight in fullness; a deeper way of seeing the land.

4.5 The Art of Being-unto-death.

A crucial underlying aspect of Serra's oeuvre is this taking the matter of the hidden forces of gravity as a contingency with mortally serious implications for our corporeal existence. This is something that is fundamentally missing from illusionistic art – no matter how graphic, profound or disturbing its content may be, it does not affect us in a primary way. I mean, I suppose, in a *threatening* way.

From the somewhat innocuous beginnings of *Strike* and *To Lift*, Serra cottoned onto this implicit possibility held in dealing with objects in space. They influence us bodily; the logical end point of this fact being that objects can kill us. This explains in part Serra's career-long aversion to the pictorial mode of sculpture. To generate works that reference a narrative of harmony, balance and mystique somewhere else would miss the point of being-there with his works at all. In a sense, this dispels the notion of his being an abstract sculptor at all. To reject the pictorial brings Serra's sculpture much, much closer to the fundamental conditions of real life.

Perhaps artists have always been more attuned to the finitude of life, and that is part of why we venerate them so? The history of art and culture is littered with tales of existential angst that often broke the person apart: Van Gogh's depression and epilepsy that pushed him to cut off his own ear, and eventually commit suicide; Nietzsche's fall into insanity at witnessing the public beating of a workhorse on the streets of Vienna; Modigliani drinking himself to death – Pollock essentially did too; the suspected tubercular death of Turner as a result of prolonged exposure to the hazardous oxides in the paints he prepared.

Art for artists, it would seem, has always been a life-or-death struggle that cut to the very marrow of their personal existence. Why do we, the mere viewer, think that in witnessing the exquisitely demonstrative results of the struggle self-same creatures we label as "artists" went through with conviction on a daily basis, should not apply to our own lives? Inherent within each artwork is in fact a rage against the dying of the light. The great works of art serve as an

example of how to live, not only in their content, but also in the process of their very coming into being. This expands the idea of the subject matter of a work of art. It is not only what it representationally shows; it is what itself as an entity gathers around itself in the very fact of its existence. It is earth showing itself through the world.

The physical imposition that Serra's work has on the viewer cuts closer to the bone of the perilous, tenuous grasp we have on existence. Art should not only distract us from our lives or make us feel safe from harm. To attain Heidegger's wish that art in modernity could reobtain a world-disclosing role of significance requires, in my estimation, an engagement with the opposite of the aesthetic attitude. Not disinterestedness, but full-blown involvement with the fundamental issues that face every one of us. Non-trivial in not only the philosophical sense, but in the maintenance of the actual integrity of the very boundaries of ourselves as entities in the spatial realm. That is why Serra's work is so important – it strips away frivolity and highlights the uselessness of representing what is unnecessary, to focus on showing a part of what really matters to us at our deepest level of awareness. That you are a fragile, wonderful being, existing in this time, in this place.

This maze of life is scary; but as you walk, disorientated, through his latest torquing loops, or follow the meandering curves of *Te Tuhirangi*, there is so much of yourself – your true self – that comes rushing back: thoughts, memories, breath, sound, the light... that you cannot help but register a twinge of elation at the very fact that you exist at all.

This shows Heidegger's idea of earth and world well. The object is present, with physical properties on show, and yet there is some force – gravity – that is fundamental to its presence that nevertheless remains invisible, outside of perception but an irrefutable law of nature that is ever-present. Serra's works, as seen in *Te Tuhirangi's* yaw, capture our implicit knowledge of this fact, and elicit both cognitive and bodily reactions. Gravity permeates our everyday existence, but is seldom even thought of, let alone apprehended as a crucial factor in our movement through space. We know as a scientific principle that structures reality that Newton's apple will come back to earth – but this conceptual proof matters little until gravity individually becomes an issue for us in time and space.

In the presence of the eleven-degree pitch, fearful of the collapse of a significant structure, gravity rushes forth as profoundly important. We are made aware of our being in a mortal way. The artwork "attains its own position in space by reacting to its load," yes – but so do we. There is an interrelationship that holds grave import for our corporeal self; we are in danger. Not

many artworks have the capacity to inflict such an impact on our life. By this I do not mean emotionally – either through beauty, awe or abjection – but by posing an actual fundamental threat to our very existence. Chris Burden’s performance piece *Shoot* (1971), where he takes a bullet to his left arm intentionally, Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*, and Marina Abramovic’s *Rhythm O* (1998) all feature this element of physical danger. The important difference being that in each of these cases, the artist themselves is the target of that violence. Serra utilises the concept but transmogrifies the empathetic response people have in witnessing the physical harm of another and makes it a primary response to danger experienced by the viewer themselves.

This follows with the Heideggerian idea of “being-unto-death” where the ultimate consideration for a *dasein*’s existential possibility is coming to terms with the finitude of their own existence. In this way, *Te Tuhirangi* becomes a performative piece of the highest order: we do not need to relate, empathise with the other – the artwork challenges our self to the very limitations of our being; one which we do not often consider, whether through fear, denial or plain refusal to admit the truth.

If art is to function as truth-as-revealing, I can think of no stronger oeuvre than Serra’s that demonstrates the profundity of the art object as mattering at such a deep level of ontological conviction. What does it mean to be? Perhaps the answer to this unanswerable question is accessible most clearly by its opposite: we understand, albeit implicitly, exactly the implications of what it would mean not to be. Standing in the shadow of *Te Tuhirangi Contour* is a life-affirming experience; one that resists the forgetfulness of being.

I see now the reasons behind my intuitions that attached themselves to my response to the *Tilted Arc* controversy. Reasons that Heidegger reveals through a going beyond aesthetic reception of art that reveals a deeper understanding as to why art matters. The dismissal of *Tilted Arc* was implicitly governed by aesthetic grounds: that such an apparently “useless” piece of art had no place in utilitarian space as it was misunderstood in terms of its pertinent content, and should therefore remain in the province of only museums and galleries.

The positive response of the public to Serra’s later ellipses and spirals – large scale installations that use cutting-edge aeronautic technology to define pathways and maze-like chutes of double and triple-sided steel puzzles that allow the viewer to walk through and with the works. The immersive encounter with designed space offered in *The Matter of Time*, 1994 - 2005 [fig.32], offers a clue as to why works such as *Te Tuhirangi* has consummate value in an outdoor, public setting. The sense of wonder, of removal from the morass of everyday life’s complexity is

brought home to people as they wander the maze; they are brought into contact with their own physical presence.

Importantly, this occurs in the “safe-space” of a gallery – a place where such ontological awareness is culturally acceptable – somewhere to lose yourself and your inhibitions, indulge your existential interests away from the prying eyes of social expectations. That Serra’s sculptures often hide the viewer inside their walls only exemplifies this fact. Here I am, at one with the universe. I move through space. This is my fundamental concern... To breach the gallery walls, so to speak, and allow this experience in the greater world is a useful aspect *Te Tuhirangi* affords. And on the open days at Gibbs Farm, we see other people doing the same as us: wandering freely amongst the sculptures in a kind of art-driven reverie. This is no bad thing.

Perhaps this is art at work at an ontological level; post-aesthetics as such, engendered by the fact that people are moving amongst the works, sweating, talking, stopping to look, thinking, taking a different path as another work draws them in. This all happens in lived time. We approach the works; the distance becomes less: this is not only a physical experience in sculpture; we become ontologically closer to the work too – if one can revel in the phenomenological excess they offer.

Serra has pushed abstraction to its logical conclusion, and thereby goes beyond itself into a new condition for art to where it utilises the non-mimetic properties to signify and increase the necessary conditions for making presence explicit. This explicitness of presence is akin to Heidegger’s call for us to be present in the moment of being-there.

4.6 The Modern Presence.

Whilst Krauss brings general awareness of phenomenology into the realm of art criticism as a positive addition to understand the idiosyncracics of modern abstract sculpture, her esoteric application of phenomenology as a modernist theory often culminates in passages of impenetrable prose.

The problem being that a system of analysis that affords equal prominence to the body’s being as wise as the mind does not easily lend itself into the kind of intellectualism that Krauss uses to demonstrate it in action. Phenomenology calls for an absorption *in* action in what Heidegger describes as a ready-to-hand way. This is primarily, necessarily, a non-cognitive mode of being.

Phenomenology as a science then sets itself the difficult task of description of that state. As such, poetic prose and intuitive syntax lend themselves much better to phenomenological analysis than any serious art criticism with allegiance to the modern mode of intellectual clarity and brevity.

How to overcome such a dichotomy? The idea of taking aesthetics as a theory of sensibility – the disinterestedness of reverie in the experience of an artwork, and using the solidity of a lengthened, non-gestalt encounter with a meandering work such as *Te Tuhirangi*, elevates aesthetics to a kind of ontologised state of being. The artwork's presence guides you non-cognitively, bodily, through a series of contingent moments, and begin to affect one's reception of the phenomenological as a different kind of knowledge, one more illogical, interconnected, freeform and transitory – perhaps like a waking dream. But most definitely real in a lived sense.

Most importantly, it illuminates the generative propensity of consciousness as in dialogue with one's surroundings. I walk the undulations of *Te Tuhirangi's* flanks. The delectation of visual knowledge is constantly frustrated by the work's resistance to close its form into a coherent, stable whole. But I am rewarded as I move with novel views reminiscent of what I passed by moments before. This animated state is co-creational and perpetual when in the sculpture's presence, it does not stop - even when one pauses for a breather. To reflect upon this experience after the fact is exactly that: after facts. Whereas the knowledge of that experience was in itself factual only when given in terms of presence and lived experience.

This begs the wider question: Does art need to exist in the space of one's memory at all? Serra's work would suggest yes – and no. I saw the Serra at Gibbs Farm. I can walk its sinews in my mind now. In this sense, it has become part of me; but only in its presence can I become part of it. This makes me think of the saying of *in* the world, but not of it – and I wonder, for which is the better state to be?

In arguing for the necessity of art to keep society healthy at an existential level, then one could easily say that being-there with Serra's sculptures is akin to religious teachings, where the belief in the importance of the profundity that the physical experience the work affords is equivalent to the belief that beyond the material world and the distraction from its mystery technology enforces, lies a transcendent Being, always-present, at pains to show itself to us *as us*, as what we are. We are not free from care, except in the moment we accept our deep involvement in the actuality about that which we care. Aesthetics becomes ontology when art moves us at the profoundest level of our being: you are alive, and yes, this is real.

Phenomenology is based in part on the presupposition that in the present, the past and future are included, already folded up in the time being spent; that is what gives colour to the experience of time. The here and now as affected by your story to date, your hopes for the future, and the importance of this present moment as a progenitor that links those two distal strands of your life together. As such, being-there is not non-cognitive. It is *more than* cognitive. How else could it be? Serra's work activates, even somewhat overstates at times, the principle constituents of physics that structure material life in order to elevate these scientific givens back into the realm from which they were first extracted in the modernist desire for empirical clarity. His sculptures are analogies of the wondrous quality of our limitations: Man is not larger than life, but life is no larger than man.

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Images.



Richard Serra

Te Tuhirangi Contour, 2000 – 2002.

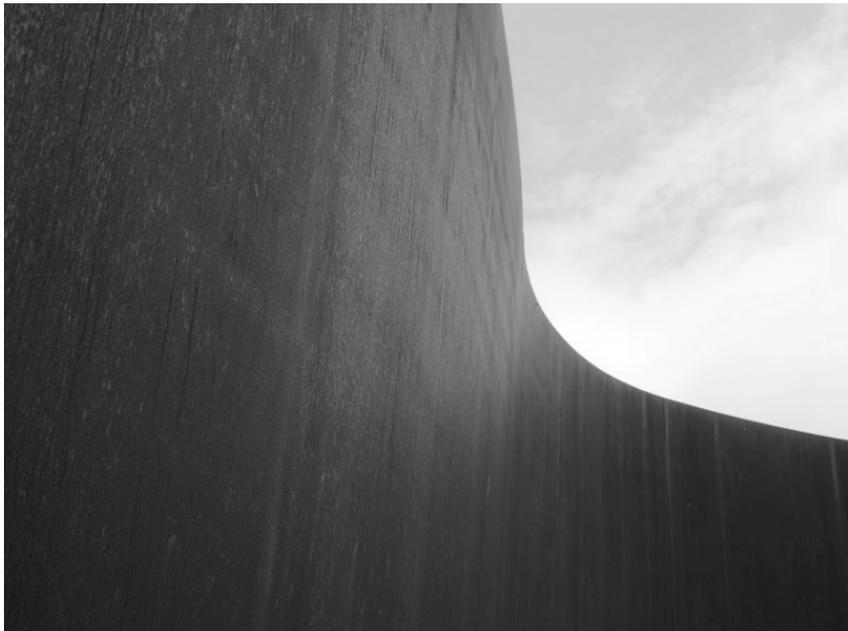
Weatherproof steel. 6m x 257 m x 5cm.

Gibbs Farm, Kaipara Harbour, New Zealand.

Photographs by Rowan Klevstul,

7 February 2019.









Fin.