

Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc": Art and Non-Art Issues

By Harriet Senie

During the night of March 16, 1989, *Tilted Arc* (Fig. 1) was dismantled by the General Services Administration (GSA) and stored in a warehouse in Brooklyn. This same federal government agency in 1979, as part of its percent-for-art program, had commissioned Richard Serra to build a sculpture for Federal Plaza in lower Manhattan. According to established agency procedure, the commissioning process began with recommendations by the building architect to include sculpture in the plaza. Selection of the artist was made by a three-member panel of art professionals appointed by the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA).¹ During the two-year evaluation period that followed, Serra addressed GSA concerns over placement, maintenance, lighting, and so forth, until the sculpture was accepted by agency offices in both Washington and New York. The salient points here are 1) that Serra followed established procedures and fulfilled all GSA requirements, and 2) that the GSA could not have been, in any way, surprised by the appearance of *Tilted Arc*.²

After its installation in 1981 the GSA received a few complaints. This initial flurry, not unusual for any new piece, soon died down. Critical reception of the piece was mixed.³ By 1983 local employees interviewed at the site seemed largely puzzled or disturbed by the sculpture. Some referred to *Tilted Arc* as "the wind breaker," in appreciation of this decidedly non-art function.⁴

In 1984 William Diamond was appointed GSA Regional Administrator, and subsequently, largely as a result of Diamond's maneuvers, the public controversy began. Initially, Diamond tried unsuccessfully to have the sculpture removed by soliciting potential alternative sites in and around New York City.⁵ Throughout, Diamond insisted that his judgment was not aesthetic and that he was not censoring a



Fig. 1 Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*, installed 1981, Cor-Ten steel, New York City, Federal Plaza. Photographed February 1987.

work of art. His public argument concentrated on the alleged destructive effects of the sculpture on the social function of the plaza. Yet he ordered placed in the lobbies of the two federal buildings that frame the site petitions "For Relocation," asserting that the signatories "find no artistic merit in the Serra artwork."

In March 1985 Diamond held a public hearing over which he presided. He chose the four-member panel—two of whom were employed by GSA—and then evaluated the results of three days of testimony by 180 witnesses.⁶ The panel's recommendation, hardly a surprise after Diamond's previous statements and actions, was that the sculpture be relocated. This left the next step to Dwight Ink, then acting administrator of the GSA in Washington, who suggested that a professional panel be appointed by the National Endowment for the Arts to determine whether a

specific alternative location would be an appropriate site. On December 15, 1987, in the pouring rain, Richard Serra stood in front of *Tilted Arc* and explained its site specificity to this NEA panel, which was chaired by the labor mediator Theodore Kheel.⁷ They voted unanimously that the sculpture could not be moved without destroying its artistic integrity and intent. Kheel concluded that any further attempt to find an appropriate alternative site would be "at best academic and at worst an exercise in futility."

Throughout this period, Serra persistently sought legal remedies to protect the sculpture.⁸ In September 1987 a federal judge ruled against a claim by the artist that his first-amendment rights had been violated. In March 1989 a last-ditch effort to save *Tilted Arc* under the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works (recently signed by the United States)

was abandoned on advice of counsel. Although Serra could find no legal protection, a high-ranking and politically appointed official, William Diamond, was able to act, without censure, in an area where no official policy existed, over an issue that was then the focus of considerable public debate and controversy.⁹

How was this permitted to happen? What were Diamond's motives? It was suggested by several persons closely involved that the conservative Diamond had long-standing political ambitions in New York City and was using this issue as a vehicle for personal publicity and political leverage.¹⁰ Regional administrators are political appointees and report directly to the director of GSA in Washington. The more important the region (and New York is clearly one of the most important), the more potentially powerful the regional administrators. What made Diamond's position even more powerful was that throughout most of these proceedings there was only an acting director of GSA in Washington—Richard Austin, who had previously been the regional administrator in Chicago and was therefore sympathetic to the issue of local control.

Invariably, the public art system operates in a political arena and is thus subject to a variety of non-art issues that must be taken into account. Personal ambition and local politics are always operative and germane. These are tied to public opinion, which can, of course, be manipulated. With *Tilted Arc*, public opinion against the sculpture mounted as the events were reported, or misreported, in the press. The role of the media in irresponsibly fanning the fires of public-art controversy requires further documentation. Why is it, for example, that although 120 of the 180 witnesses at the March 1985 hearing were in favor of keeping *Tilted Arc* at Federal Plaza, the public perception was that the majority of people testifying wanted the sculpture to go? The correspondence received by the GSA throughout was approximately 85 percent in favor of keeping *Tilted Arc*.¹¹

Had the Serra "hearing" been held as an open discussion at the time of the commission, things might have gone differently. Had the public, like Kheel's panel, initially had the benefit of Serra's words instead of Diamond's, they might have been better able to appreciate *Tilted Arc* and to resist Diamond's manipulative tactics. Had there been, say, a video program in the building lobby continually explaining the sculpture, its changing audience might have been seen and experienced the sculpture dif-

ferently. Such information is, as a matter of course, provided for a museum audience. It is all the more necessary at a public site.

Without it, only a narrowly circumscribed way of seeing is possible. In life (although not in art) we are usually restricted to a "looks like" or metaphorical means of identification. The need to identify and understand what we see is basic; it is a necessary way of making the unknown familiar. Simply put, if we can't identify a moving car as such, we are physically at risk. If we can't place a work of art in an understandable context, we are emotionally and intellectually threatened. Much of the pervasive unease evoked by new works of art in the public domain can only be understood in that context.

Tilted Arc was compared to the Berlin Wall. To some, Serra's sculpture, more than most, was perceived as threatening. In a museum or gallery setting this quality was praised as powerful.¹² In a public space it was interpreted by many as hostile. Others appreciated it as heroic, an expression of the potential of sculpture to function as a dramatic visual and perceptual element in an urban context—and, therefore, in life.

In any event, the comments elicited by *Tilted Arc* went beyond any implicit "hostile" content in the piece. The sculpture was seen as being downright dangerous. A physical-security specialist for the Federal Protection and Safety Division of the GSA went so far as to state that the piece presented "a blast wall effect—comparable to devices which are used to vent explosive forces. This one could vent an explosion both upward and on an angle toward both buildings."¹³ Although this testimony represented an extreme position, it did underline a recurring theme of a perceived threat of physical violence associated with the sculpture.

Following a similar line of thinking, George Sugarman's GSA sculpture, *Baltimore Federal*, of 1978, was seen as threatening because rapists could and therefore presumably would hide behind it.¹⁴ Although these and comments like them are initially amusing, they reveal that serious issues are at stake for those who utter them. Feelings of helplessness frequently result in expressions of hostility. Over and over again, we see the public rendered helpless and hostile by art they don't or can't understand. With or without the necessary tools or vocabulary to do so, the general public will try to interpret the objects that continue to be put in their spaces.

Seeing may be believing, but with contemporary art it is rarely under-

standing. I have been arguing for some time for the inclusion of an art-education component in the public-art process. Art education is at present such a peripheral part of our public-education system that most audiences come to public art without any background in the visual arts whatsoever.¹⁵ An education program would at least present the general public with the kind of information that is, as a matter of course, available to a museum audience—the context and vocabulary (visual and verbal) with which to understand a work of art, though not necessarily to like it.

Public expectations for a site usually begin with public amenities. Unfortunately, these were neither addressed by the GSA nor included as part of Serra's commission. Federal employees expressed the desire for trees, benches, and more open space—all at a premium in crowded lower Manhattan. Public sculpture in an urban site is not urban renewal, although it is often expected to function that way. An independent or site-specific sculpture will not obviate the need for landscaping or street furniture. These clearly should be considered at the time of building as part of the site design. To varying degrees, they may fall under the aegis of the artist or architect or the landscape architect.

What emerged at the hearings and in Diamond's subsequent statements was a vision of Federal Plaza without the sculpture as an idyllic haven of open space (*Fig. 2*).¹⁶ In reality, the fountain, which predated the Serra sculpture, persistently flooded one part of the plaza or the other, depending on the direction of the wind. It remains today mostly inoperative. Of course, no sculpture can make up for inhuman architecture or inhospitable urban design. Nevertheless, public sculpture is frequently commissioned with just that unstated and probably unrealized expectation.

Had *Tilted Arc* the benefit of a different commissioning procedure with community input and a thoughtful education program, a careful consideration of public amenities at the site, and the ultimate right of due process, the results, in all likelihood, would have been different. In the wake of Diamond's action, policy and procedural issues remain to be addressed. Of these, perhaps the most important are: Should a removal procedure be an official part of the public-art process? If so, what are the justifiable grounds? Should there be any time constraints? Who should decide and how?

The procedures attending the removal of *Tilted Arc* were clearly a subversion of the democratic as well as the public



Fig. 2 Federal Plaza, New York City, August 1989.



Fig. 3 Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*, February 1987.

art process. It is a lamentable example of yet another bureaucratic system manipulated by a hostile insider to circumvent the working checks and balances. The results of the removal of *Tilted Arc* will continue to be felt for quite some time. Michael Faubion, assistant director for the Visual Arts Program for the NEA (and, as such, the liaison with the GSA), feared that it might jeopardize the existence of local percent-for-art programs. "The message," he said, "of *Tilted Arc* is that neither legal procedures nor an artist's wishes make a difference. This signal from the federal government can have very serious ramifications."¹⁷ Certainly

it will make existing programs more conservative and thus seriously compromise them.¹⁸

Together with these issues of public policy, a closer look at the art issues involved in the *Tilted Arc* case is mandated. Art issues have to do primarily with style and artistic intent and their appropriateness to a site. The most significant art issue about *Tilted Arc* seemed to be its site specificity. (It was this argument that convinced the advisory panel that the sculpture could not be moved without destroying its essence.) In the 1970s the concept of site-specific art became important as artists sought an alternative to object

art, which was perceived as commercial commodity. Theoretically, a work was created for a specific site and thereby became a part of it. This approach governed both the land art of Robert Smithson (and others working in remote regions of this country) and an increasing number of gallery installations concerned with the creation of an interior environment rather than the display of independent art objects.

An unresolved problem of site specificity in a public space is that the site itself may undergo change, possibly frequently. Sometimes, too, a sculpture will work very well in a site other than the one for which it was originally designed. This appeared to be the case with Serra's *Clara-Clara*, which, although not specifically intended for the Centre Pompidou, was to have been installed there as part of the Serra exhibition. Because of load-bearing problems, however, it was temporarily resited in the Tuileries, where it met with great critical acclaim.¹⁹ Upon its purchase by the City of Paris, it was relocated in the Square de Choisy. At Federal Plaza it was Serra's intention to "1) structure the plaza and create directions, accentuating existing pedestrian patterns, 2) link the two sites of the federal enclave in that the sculpture should act as a bridge, connecting and visually gathering the different federal architectures, and 3) create a sculptural space within the plaza which could be experienced by those crossing the plaza on their way into and out of the buildings."²⁰

Indeed, *Tilted Arc* realized Serra's aims. It provided a variety of constantly changing views that interacted directly with the street and the architecture. From an initial approach, walking north along Centre Street, it bore an uncanny resemblance to a view of Le Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp (Fig. 3). From above, as it was seen from a number of surrounding buildings, *Tilted Arc* formed a graceful line, almost lyrical in its nature.

Yet this was not the art experience of many. Quite literally, many individuals couldn't see beyond the size (12 by 120') and the material of the sculpture. The sculpture did not block actual paths that people used to cross the space. Rather, it temporarily blocked their view of what was on the other side of the sculpture. This was perceived as threatening, while the rusted surface of the Cor-Ten steel was frequently perceived as an insult.²¹

Furthermore, its placement was seen as an obstacle to public use of the space. *Tilted Arc* doesn't actually inhibit concerts and performances, as was frequently stated. The composers Philip

Glass and Alvin Lucier offered to perform their works in the plaza. Lucier even conducted a study of the effect of the sculpture on sound and found it quite favorable. The performance artist Joan Jonas remarked that the sculpture created a "natural amphitheater" that would be an ideal setting for her work. Ironically, the noise factor in the neighborhood is such that without *Tilted Arc* the plaza will actually be less suitable for performances and concerts.

What became clear in the *Tilted Arc* controversy was that different criteria were applied to museum and public art.²² Serra was severely criticized for doing in a public place what he had been doing previously with great success in various art spaces. What is different is the physical context in which the work is seen and the public's expectations. The former is more complex and must be considered in all its ramifications; the latter may be addressed through initial meetings and consultations with the community and by permanent public-education programs.

Must the most powerful art experiences still be reserved for museum spaces and therefore primarily elite audiences? If *Tilted Arc* was impossible at Federal Plaza, are we to conclude that there is no room for a pure art experience in the public spaces of what is still considered one of the major art centers of the Western world? This raises issues of urban planning and design, and indeed many artists today are addressing those concerns.

Good art and good public art are not necessarily synonymous,²³ but the same stringent criteria need to be applied to both. Any time art concerns are less than primary, we end up with something that is not primarily art and then we shall all—the art, the public, and history—be the poorer for it.

Epitaph: During the summer of 1989, after the destruction of *Tilted Arc*, the fountain was reactivated briefly and Federal Plaza was furnished with a few benches and planters ordered from a standard federal purchasing catalogue (*Figs. 4 and 5*). In addition, to celebrate GSA's fortieth anniversary, a summer concert series was introduced. All these additions would have been possible with *Tilted Arc* in place.

On July 6, 1989, there was a "special rededication of Federal Plaza." William Diamond, Regional Administrator, who was the host of the event, announced: "It will be a real pleasure to celebrate this anniversary with the opening of this concert series and the return of Federal Plaza to the local workers and people of this community." Thus art, commis-

sioned under the auspices of the government, officially became the enemy of the people.

The mandate of GSA's percent-for-art legislation was to place art in conjunction with federal buildings. What art is there in Federal Plaza now? Is all GSA-commissioned public art now at the mercy of GSA's politically appointed regional administrators? In the future will GSA commission permanent public art? Who will choose it and how?

Notes

The original version of this article was presented

as a talk at the College Art Association annual meeting in Houston in 1988 at the session "Uneasy Pieces."

1 Unfortunately, there was a lapse of some ten years between the time of the completion of the building and the selection of the sculpture. Nevertheless, Joseph Colt, one of the project architects, was present. Members of the voting panel were Suzanne Delehanty, then director of the Neuberger Museum, Purchase, NY; Ira Licht, then Director of the Lowe Museum, University of Miami; and Robert Pincus-Witten, a New York-based art critic and art historian. Thus one member of the selection panel was from New York, and the artist chosen lived close to the site. They, too, were members of the local community.



Fig. 4 Federal Plaza, New York City, GSA benches.



Fig. 5 Federal Plaza, New York City, GSA planter.

- 2 The GSA project manager in charge of *Tilted Arc*, Julia Brown, recalled at the subsequent hearing that Serra addressed all the GSA concerns and that it was understood that he was making a permanent piece for that space. The GSA guidelines in commissioning *Tilted Arc* were those established in 1973 by GSA officials and Brian O'Doherty, then director of the Visual Arts Program for the NEA. This procedure is outlined in Donald Thalacker, *The Place of Art in the World of Architecture*, New York, 1980, p. xiii. At the time of the commission of *Tilted Arc*, these procedures were already under review. A revised procedure, developed largely by Richard Andrews, then director of the Visual Arts Program of the NEA, was subsequently put into effect. It called for more meetings per project and the opportunity for community participation throughout. This process has been running on a trial basis for some years, but at the time of this writing has yet to be formally approved by the GSA.
- 3 Peter Schjeldahl, "Artistic Control," *The Village Voice*, October 14–20, 1981, pp. 100–101, presented what was the most negative review of the piece. It elicited a sizable correspondence, which was evenly divided in its opinion.
- 4 Comments were elicited over a period of time while I was doing research for an article on Richard Serra, which appeared as "The Right Stuff," *Art News* (March 1984), pp. 50–59.
- 5 These included Wave Hill, the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, and sites administered by the city's Parks and Recreation Department.
- 6 The panel members were Gerald Turetsky (acting deputy regional administrator) and Paul Chistalini (acting assistant regional administrator for GSA's Public Buildings and Real Property), both of whom worked for Diamond, and Michael Findlay (vice-president of Christie's) and Thomas Lewin (a senior partner at the law firm Simpson, Thatcher, Bartlett). For a summary and analysis of the testimony, see the Summer 1985 issue of the *Public Art Fund Newsletter* by the author, as well as contemporary issues of nearly all the art periodicals.
- 7 This panel was appointed by the NEA to assist the GSA in determining the appropriateness of alternative sites for the sculpture. Panel members were the artist Robert Ryman, the architects James Ingo Freed and Jacqueline Robertson, the art historian Sam Hunter, Brenda Richardson (deputy director of the Baltimore Museum of Art), and Joel Wachs (Los Angeles city councilman).
- 8 For a discussion of the legal ramifications of the case, see: Barbara Hoffman, "Tilted Arc on Trial," *Public Art—Public Controversy*, New York, 1987. For a more general discussion of the legal issues, see: John Henry Merryman and Albert E. Elsen, *Law, Ethics, and the Visual Arts*, Philadelphia, 1987. Merryman stated elsewhere his view that the case over *Tilted Arc* was a first-amendment issue; see: Margaret Moorman, "Arc Enemies," *Art News* (May 1985), p. 13.
- 9 At the time of this writing there was still no official policy for the removal of a GSA sculpture. The complex factors involved in developing such a policy are discussed in Jeffrey L. Cruikshank and Pam Korza, *Going Public: A Field Guide to Developments in Art in Public Places*, Amherst, MA, 1988, pp. 125–34.
- 10 Among those who expressed this opinion in conversation with the author was the late Donald Thalacker, head of the GSA's Art-in-Architecture program. Others insisted on anonymity.
- 11 For this last and other statistics, see: Don Hawthorne, "Does the Public Want Public Sculpture?" *Art News* (May 1982), pp. 56–67. These discrepancies are also documented in Richard Serra, "Tilted Arc Destroyed," *Art in America* (May 1989) pp. 34–47. My account of the facts agrees substantially with Serra's, although my interpretation of them differs somewhat. I see Diamond's actions less as a statement of Republican policy (although they clearly reflect the current administration's emphasis on property values) than as an arbitrary manifestation of personal ambition and self-interest.
- 12 Serra's retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art, in 1986, contained a large Cor-Ten arc that bisected an entire gallery and was often compared to *Tilted Arc*. Whereas critical opinion on Serra as an important sculptor is almost unanimously favorable, judgments on *Tilted Arc* remain mixed.
- 13 Although admitting that all this would take bombs of enormous capacity, Vicki O'Dougherty, a physical-security specialist for the Federal Protection and Safety Division of GSA, concluded her testimony at the hearing with the observation that "lately we are expecting the worst in the federal sector."
- 14 Sugarman's sprawling and colorful sculpture, although radically different in style from the Serra, elicited similar responses having to do with an implied threat of physical violence. For further discussion on the Sugarman piece, see: Thalacker (cited n. 2), pp. 8–13.
- 15 An excellent study of the place of art education in the public schools is available in *Beyond Creating: The Place for Art in America's Schools*, Malibu, 1985. Included in Elliot W. Eisner's compelling essay "Why Art in Education and Why Art Education," pp. 64–69, are the following alarming statistics: "At the elementary school level they (the arts) command less than three percent of the instructional time per week. At the secondary level approximately eighty percent of all high school students enroll in no fine arts courses during the four years they are in attendance. Less than three percent of all school districts require study in one of the fine arts as a condition for graduation. The result of access denied is a program of education that leaves most students unable to participate in the arts. . . . Artistic literacy is a rare educational commodity." As Robert Storr concludes in "Tilted Arc: Enemy of the People," *Art in America* (September 1985), p. 96, "the burden of proof will always fall upon art's defenders, as does the challenge to find not only the reasons but the language to make them intelligible to those for whom art is at best a decorative amenity and at worst an authoritarian imposition."
- 16 At the hearings, Chief Judge Rao of the U.S. Court of International Trade observed that before *Tilted Arc*, "the plaza served as a pleasant and humane open space for federal employees, citizens of New York, and visitors to this great city." Diamond insisted that he pursued removal of the sculpture because it compromised the space for which it was commissioned. Finally, he said that he was "most gratified that we will be able to return to the public the use of the plaza that it has been denied so long." See: David W. Dunlap, "Artist Abandons Fight to Bar Uprooting of Plaza Sculpture," *New York Times*, March 16, 1989, p. B2.
- 17 These comments were made in conversation with the author on April 4, 1989.
- 18 See: Michael Brenson, "The Messy Saga of Tilted Arc Is Far from Over," *The New York Times*, April 2, 1989, pp. 33–34. Conversations with several art administrators and artists indicate that a new conservatism has already led to dismissal of several pending commissions now perceived as too risky.
- 19 For an excellent discussion of this piece, see: Yves-Alain Bois, "The Meteor in the Garden," *Art in America* (Summer 1984), pp. 108–13.
- 20 Serra made this statement to the GSA advisory panel on December 15, 1987, where it was also available in written form.
- 21 At the March 1985 hearing, Colonel Griffiss of the New York District Court of Engineers found the sculpture to be "nothing more than a rusty wall of sheet metal." Herbert Stupp, regional director of Action, referred to it as "this terrible rusted structure." Judge Bernard Newman found it difficult "to mention or describe this rusting hulk in dignified language." Perhaps most extreme was Judge DiCarlo's supposition "that this rusted iron object was an anti-terror barricade, part of our crash program to protect governmental buildings against terrorist activities." In light of comments like this, Serra's attorney, Gerald Rosen, observed wryly, "Now the whole thing about rust shows a kind of prejudice against the oxidation of steel." Arthur Danto, in "Richard Serra," *The State of the Art*, New York, 1987, p. 178, discusses the way in which rust is perceived as beautiful in a museum and ugly in the urban environment.
- 22 See: Calvin Tomkins, "The Art Word: Tilted Arc," *The New Yorker* (May 20, 1985), p. 100.
- 23 Danto (cited n. 21), p. 90, observed that Serra's sculpture "made vivid the truth that something may succeed as a work of art but fail as a work of public art."

Harriet Senie is Co-Guest Editor of this issue of Art Journal.

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