

Curator's Key

Curators talk about a work they
keep coming back to

Francesco Ragazzi Urbano

on Richard Serra's *Promenade* (2008)



Promenade, 2008

Weatherproof steel, 5 plates, each: 17 m x 4 m x 13 cm
Installation view, Monumenta 2008, Grand Palais, Paris

That work seemed to create a magnetic field. There were five long, narrow steel plates that cut through the space, standing straight out from the concrete floor. Five slabs, each seventeen metres high, four metres wide, thirteen centimeters thick, weighing seventy-five metric tons, tilted by 1.69 degrees and spaced twenty-eight metres apart. They were surrounded by the huge aisles of the Grand Palais: 13,500 square metres in the Nave, the great hall underneath the largest glass roof in Europe; 72,000 square metres of gross floor space; 6,000 tons of steel covered with sixty tons of mignonette green paint; 200,000 tons of stone; two million visitors a year.

Richard Serra called it *Promenade*. The simplest thing in the world, yet we could have spent our whole lives contemplating it. That work, that walk, that *promenade*, was endless. It remained new with every step of every visitor. With

every glance of every viewer. Deeply earthly, but at the same time aerial, otherworldly. As if a new unit of measurement had imposed itself and would finally liberate us from human miseries.

Was it minimalist? Was it constructivist? Hard to say, hard to define. An answer seemed to come to us right from inside that exhibition. It was 22 May 2008 and a dear friend of Serra was invited to intervene *face à l'œuvre*: Chantal Akerman. Her words described the friction between those vigorous sheets of steel and the "decadent curves" – that's what she called them – of the Grand Palais's stained glass windows. An apparent digression on Akerman's relationship with Paris followed. She said that, for her, cinema was always a way of discovering something new about the city. And that this made Paris new to her as well, even though it was the city she had lived in for a long time, her own city.



Promenade, 2008

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By looking at what others have already seen, the world appears simpler, more legible, safer.

We might call it the act of looking through different eyes. A simple deed that says much about the voyeuristic cinema of Akerman, much about Serra, and *Promenade*, and perhaps much more about the vital function of art. Looking through different eyes is a survival gesture: a personal strategy of coping with reality.

A strategy that certainly concerns artists, those who think and produce images by profession, but not them more than others. Each of us thinks and produces images from the moment we are born: we think and produce them even when we don't want to, even when we are sleeping, or when we want to forget them.

The flaneur is no better than a tourist, just as explorers, artists or intellectuals are no better.

Borrowing a word from the market, we are all consumers of reality. And at the same time we are its products – we are consumed. This might sound like a position of constriction and subjection, but it is perhaps the only known form of liberation from hierarchies. The democracy of reality, of perception, of Serra's artwork. The democracy of a walk in which no one competes and no one excels, in which there is nothing to teach and nothing to learn, and there are no morals. Just life flowing and us flowing through life. *Memento vivi!* Remember that you live. Remember to live. Remember that you are alive. Remember that you must live.

Ludwig Wittgenstein described this discovery by imagining a theatre:

“Nothing could be more remarkable than seeing a man who thinks he is unobserved performing some quite simple everyday activity. Let us imagine a theatre; the curtain goes up and we see a man alone in a room so that suddenly we are observing a human being from outside in a way that ordinarily we can never observe ourselves; it would be like watching a chapter of biography with our own eyes – surely this would be uncanny and wonderful at the same time. We should be observing something more wonderful than anything a playwright could arrange to be acted or spoken on the stage: life itself.”

Observe life itself! This is the reminder coming from Wittgenstein, from Serra, Akerman, and Paris. The same call that a few years later would lead us to Venice, and to invite Jonas Mekas to make a show at a fast-food restaurant, Kenneth Goldsmith at a supermarket, Pauline Curnier-Jardin at a detention facility. In Venice, more than in Paris, democracy is a physical experience. In Venice everyone, sooner or later, must walk. Rich, poor, children, elders, Venetians, Italians, foreigners, tourists, shopkeepers, the illiterate, the cultured. Everyone participates in a daily collective performance to the rhythm of *calli*, *campi*, *fondamenta*, and bridges. And this is how the staging of an open-air museum takes place every day: a full sensory experience that, like a sequence shot, enters the eyes of the walkers, mixing eras and codes in an infinity of details. Details that are infinitely investigable or completely negligible, left to the discretion or indiscretion

of the walkers. In this way, they trace their own personal path, but not only this: they, in turn, become an integral part of the path of others, entering their frames, their visual field, their sphere of interest.

Not all the time. Mass tourism works by channeling this enormous flow of interests and desires into a series of predetermined routes within which what is unmissable is established *a priori*. By looking at what others have already seen, the risk of getting lost is reduced to a minimum and the world appears simpler, more legible, safer. In this prejudice, there is a survival instinct as valid as the instinct to look at things with different eyes. Indeed, science and experience tell us that this is a primary urge, much more widespread and prevalent. And there is nothing wrong with that. Again, Wittgenstein can help us here:

“One might say: ‘I know’ expresses comfortable certainty, not the certainty that is still struggling.’ Now I would like to regard this certainty, not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as a form of life. (That is very badly expressed and probably badly thought as well.) But that means I want to conceive it as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal.”

The flaneur is no better than a tourist, just as explorers, artists or intellectuals are no better. They are tourists too, as we all are, and this is the other side of democracy: unawareness, inattention, and prejudice are intrinsic parts of perception, without any distinction between mass and elite. The very distinction between mass and elite (sometimes) is a cognitive bias.

Our attempt to look at consumption and art with different eyes starts from here. From a promenade. From a loving gaze for a walking humanity that looks uninterruptedly and is looked at, that in uncertainty finds what it is looking for and that sometimes, a very few times, discovers something new.

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