

19.

Debby with Monument : a Dissenting Opinion

A package has arrived from the law offices of someone named Gustave Harrow. The enclosures relate to the proposed removal of a large piece of Cor-Ten steel from the plaza of a downtown office building. Testimony on behalf of this piece of steel has been extracted from nearly every bureaucratic luminary and bright star in the art cosmos.

These expert witnesses are unanimous on several points. The work was commissioned under contract by the General Services Administration's Art-in-Architecture Program. The artist states that removal of the work equals its destruction, as its aesthetic impact is site-specific. The public is slow to understand new art and therefore is unqualified to pass judgment on it. Removal of the work would set a dangerous precedent. The hue and cry against the work suggests "certain events, practiced in Germany's history between 1933 and 1945, which were addressed against modern art and literature." In case the public has any question about what exact dish it's been served by the GSA, European museum director Rudi Fuchs has this avuncular wisdom to offer: "... would the City of Rome ever consider to remove Bernini's fountain from

Piazza Navona because it takes away a bit of sunlight? Of course not. But Richard Serra might be your Bernini." And I, to paraphrase Dortie Parker, might be Marie of Romania.

The question that seems most directly relevant to these proceedings could not very well crop up in them, but it's more or less the same one that bubbled to mind when the DIA Art Foundation began closing up its "permanent" art installations and receiving lawsuits from its "permanent" artists. Who on earth did these people think they were dealing with in the first place? Granted, everyone in public life is somehow involved with power. But if you are so enamored of it that you regularly ornament its dinner tables, ride cackling through the night in its limousines, and sign worthless contracts with it, it is no problem of mine or anyone else's if power decides, one bored afternoon, to add you to the menu instead of inviting you to eat.

Artists lavishly favored by the status quo often acquire the mentality of naturalized debutantes, complete with the delusion that favor and *arrivez* Debbyhood will last forever. "Forever" is a word with all kinds of funny meanings on the Planet Debby, but none of them is remotely synonymous with "permanent." On the Planet Debby, "permanent" is strictly a noun meaning hairdo.

The excerpted testimony supporting *Tilted Arc* reads like Flaubert's *Dictionary of Received Ideas*. Every conceivable cliché about art's relation to society has been put to work for Richard Serra by a chorus of well-off, well-meaning art specialists, who naturally see the fate of the Republic riding on the GSA's decision. Some of the clichés are true, but in this matter they are largely irrelevant. The General Services Administration is not God. Neither is Richard Serra. Either entity is capable of making a mistake, and in this case they both have. It would indeed be a dangerous precedent for the GSA, which failed to consult the public in the first place, to blithely expunge the detested object without Richard Serra's agreement. Acting by fiat, the GSA neglected its duty—obvious in this case, since many of Serra's sculptures have encountered a hostile public—to protect its funding from the kind of right-wing attack that initiated this controversy.

But it is ridiculous to suppose that Richard Serra's pugnacious resistance to reasoned argument is a thing to be supported or blown into a political cause.

The only legible aesthetic argument favoring Serra's *Tilted Arc* as a site-specific work would logically demand its eventual removal, and that of everything around it: not a bad idea, depending on the methods used. The piece heightens the alienation effect of a hideous modern office building and further orchestrates the processional regimentation of the office worker en route to and from work. It is a physically abrasive, hateful piece of art. If its intention is to raise public consciousness of the surrounding architecture's inhumanity, a future public intent on overcoming its oppression would start by removing *Tilted Arc*. This enlightened public would then proceed to demolish the Jacob K. Javits Federal Building, the disgusting turquoise fountain in the plaza, and stop going to work.

This is not going to happen, and neither will *Tilted Arc* be removed, unless the powers that be perceive some unlikely, real threat to their own authoritarianism being generated by the sculpture. This public art piece does constitute an act of aggression by an individual in public space, similar to those permitted and encouraged in architectural construction by the government and various corporations. In this sense it could be interpreted as an individual's assertion of superior importance to the government and the corporations, and therefore admirable.

But this particular individual is not proposing anything terribly distinct from the aims of corporate and governmental hegemony in the public realm. He is, like them, assuming noblesse oblige over large numbers of citizens, who—hypothetically, anyway—own the space that this work occupies. Serra's unbudging insistence on the site-specific immobility of this work refuses all accommodation with the public he designed it for, and thus it becomes a fixed component in an ensemble of oppressive architecture. Moving the piece by even 20 degrees would afford better access to the plaza and the building, but Serra has obviously read *The Fountainhead* and thinks this would be deadly compromise with squat-minded

office sheep. *Tilted Arc* is a prototype of what the government and the corporations would gladly do if they could get away with it in such a blatant manner, the dream-fulfillment of a macho universe of bigger and bigger ugly obstructions to freedom of movement. Serra has nothing to fear: his dream will undoubtedly be realized throughout Manhattan, if not the world, even if the realization does not have his name stamped all over it. If he is a true idealist, as he seems to be, this absence shouldn't bother him. But since he is also an artist, it does. In his public utterances on this matter, Serra has come increasingly to sound like Albert Speer, though he probably imagines himself Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht, and Walter Benjamin all rolled into one. Perhaps the answer is to sell him the entire building complex for a dollar and let Serra pay the taxes on it.

Let me draw your attention for a moment to the notion of public sculpture. If public sculpture consists of aesthetic objects placed in public space by the state and by corporate boards, it is the duty of every citizen to pay attention to the myriad examples of public sculpture which the state and corporate boards have placed on the sidewalks of the Lower East Side and other New York neighborhoods, without fanfare, since the election of Ronald Reagan.

I am referring to that genre of public sculpture known popularly as "the Homeless." These lifelike sculptures are positioned on every street, and typically solicit money "to get something to eat," "to buy a drink," and for other less intelligible purposes. Anyone who has observed the proliferation of these objets d'art and listened carefully to the messages they emit will have noticed certain refinements in the genre over the last five years.

In the late 1970s, most of these sculptures were decrepit, caked with grime, and seemed to display the latter stages of terminal alcoholism. Since the election of our current leader, however, fewer and fewer of them have been hopelessly incoherent. This is because there are thousands more of them, recently dispossessed. But the people who occupy their former homes know enough to regard them as nonhuman entities, to confront them as aesthetic objects—

20. All I Need Is Love

untouchable vehicles of "aura," worthy of investment on the basis of their degree of cleanliness and lucidity. A sculpture that pukes its guts out in a gutter cannot be compared in aesthetic value with one that dresses with a certain flair and has an engaging rap programmed into its circuitry.

These public works wear down, exposed as they are to the elements and to the indifference of the human swarm that passes by them: they die, in public hospitals or on the street—uncollected by avatars of aesthetic sensibility like the Thyssen-Bornemizas who financed Hitler as well as Andrew Crispo; unremembered by the Gracie Mansions and Bianca Jagers who have given so much, so unstintingly, to the society in which we are forced to live by the sheer accident of birth.

Yet they define the space of public sculpture in a sense that a hunk of steel emanating from a drawing board in Richard Serra's office never could. They occupy real space, as distinct from the space of idealistic projections, utopian fantasies, and masturbatory empires. They are the brothers and sisters of the people huddled in the halls of the Jacob K. Javits Federal Building waiting to be photographed for immigration documents. They couldn't care less if Richard Serra's contract with the GSA is abrogated. Their contract with anything has been severed at the nerve by the government. Richard Serra expects to do the proper democratic thing. That government has demonstrated, for the past five years, that it is capable of any deception, any illegality, capable indeed of anything. Compared to what it does every day to those ordinary people who can't understand modern art, knocking over some egomaniac's prefab sculpture is a hilarious canard. In case Richard Serra never heard this from anybody else, I'd like him to hear it from me: lie down with dogs, get up with fleas.

1985

All I Need is Love
by Klaus Kinski

Going out of print is only the last in a long series of humiliations inflicted on most writers by most publishing houses. Unless you are the most wildly popular public strumpet, or have written some vapid book about one, chances are your publisher—who, after all, is running a whorehouse, not a public charity—believes he is doing you a huge favor to begin with. Of the thousands of writers he could pluck from obscurity, it's you whom he's decided to favor.

Naturally, it would be base ingratitude for you to expect anything more than chump change in return for one, two, three, sometimes four or five years of work. You think your publisher doesn't have overhead? Who do you think you are, Belva Plain?

Ads? Are you crazy, ads? Why should he do anything for you? It's no surprise that dozens of good books go out of print every year, when their publishers manifest no real support for them in the first place. I know one writer whose five novels are widely regarded as ground-breaking, fascinating works; they're all out of print. I know

"Debby with Monument: a Dissenting Opinion" by Gary Indiana, 1985 (from Let It Bleed: essays 1985-1995, Serpent's Tail, London and New York, 1996]. Selected by Marc Fischer.

Please print on Cream or Ivory color paper.

Please place printed PDF underneath one activated Victor brand rat trap, spring-loaded and ready to snap)

