TO STOP AND LOOK:

RICHARD SERRA’S ICELANDIC SCULPTURE ÁFANGAR
AND RELATED NOTEBOOK DRAWINGS

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by

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INTRODUCTION

Richard Serra is one of the most influential sculptors of today. He lives and works in New York City with his wife, Clara Weyergraf-Serra, and splits his time in Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia, as well. Serra has produced and exhibited work all over the world for museums, galleries, and private collections. With an impressive repository of publications cataloguing his work, Time Magazine hailed him as the world’s greatest living sculptor and major artist of our time. Art historian Robert Hughes described him as not only the best sculptor alive, but also the only great one at work anywhere in the twenty-first century.\(^1\) Serra has received multiple honorary degrees from universities, including the Doctor of Fine Arts from his alma mater, Yale University, and was recently awarded the Americans for Arts’ 2014 Lifetime Achievement Award. Earlier this year, Serra was awarded Les Insignes de Chevalier de l’Ordre National de la d’Honneur, which is France’s highest government honor.

Early in his career, like many of his New York contemporaries during the 1960s, Richard Serra abandoned traditional methods and challenged the fundamental nature of sculpture. He stated that the customary concept of placing a sculpture, whether small or large, on a pedestal separated the sculpture and the visitor. One of the biggest successes of twentieth-century sculpture, according to Serra, occurred when the pedestal was removed and the traditional or memorial spaces of monumental sculptures shifted to a new type of sculptural space that was created by a visitor’s experience.\(^2\) As Serra created what he called a “behavioral space” in which

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a visitor interacted with the sculpture in its context, other variables that were atypical of traditional sculpture were considered, including a visitor’s visibility of variable rises and falls of the landscape. The particularities of a site, such as where an object was located and the measurable distance from one object to another in a specific space, were also considered in order for Serra to redefine the space.

Works, to be discussed, such as Pulitzer Piece: Stepped Elevations and Shift, provided a foundation for Serra to build upon as he explored the mix of sculpture with space in more complex settings that were often outside the confines of a gallery. Following his compilation of Verb List, 1967-68 (Figure 1) in which he explored the application of verbs on materials, as evident in To Lift, 1967 (Figure 2) that involved the application of the action verb “to lift” on discarded rubber, Serra completed To Encircle Base Plate Hexagram, Right Angles Inverted at 183rd Street and Webster Avenue in the Bronx in 1970 (Figure 3). Serra, who had recently returned from Japan, sought to work in open space, though he did not want to work in the preexisting contexts of sculpture parks. “I wanted to build a work in a New York Street and was

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4 Liza Bear, “Sight Point ’71 – ’75,” in Writings, Interviews, ed. Richard Serra (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994): 46-7. Responding to Bear’s statement about distinguishing the different ways of looking at space (behavioral vs. cognitive), Serra remarked, “I think I’ve grown through them but hadn’t articulated them by distinguishing them one from the other…they are the consequence of decision making in the development of my work.”
5 Miwon Kwon, “One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity,” October 80 (1997): 103. Serra once reduced the work to elementary, physical actions (to lift, to drop, to roll) and later explored a more complex set of verbs in the situations he would define with his work (to coordinate, to compromise, to organize). While Kwon listed those examples in her essay, verbs included on Serra’s list that related to site-specific sculpture included: of time, of context, and of location.
6 Bear, “Sight Point,” 47. Bear asked Serra about space in relation to his very early works that mainly dealt with balance and weightlessness. Size was not a factor that excluded them from being spatially defined, but because these types of works were closed, they were not based on the idea of behavioral space. They were solely base on the principles of construction. These early works, because they are not related to behavioral space, will not be discussed.
told, “Manhattan is out,”’ summarized Serra. So, he accepted the urban space provided in the Bronx.

Aside from the wrecked cars lining the dead-end street in the blighted neighborhood for which the sculpture was intended, the Bronx offered an open space that Serra could redefine with the addition of his sculpture. Unfortunately, cautious visitors mainly opted to view the sculpture from stairs nearby rather than experience the sculpture and its context at ground level. Serra described, “The place in the Bronx was sinister, used by the local criminals to torch the cars they’d stolen. There was no audience for the sculpture in the Bronx, and it was my misconception that the so-called art audience would seek the work out.”

To Encircle Base Plate Hexagram, Right Angles Inverted is an example of Serra’s early attempt to create a direct experience for a visitor entering the space of the sculpture, but he considered it a failure. More cautious visitors viewing the work from above did not interact or experience the sculpture in its space. Viewing the sculpture from above, while still enjoyable, was not what Serra planned. He wanted to create a closer encounter.

The treatment of space has always been a critical issue in Serra’s discourse and he has maintained a firm stance on site-specific sculpture. Site-specific sculpture is intended and created for an exact location. The characteristics of the location are taken into consideration when the work is designed. Tilted Arc, 1981 (Figure 4) served as another example in which Serra intended for his large, minimalist form to redefine the space and prompt a new experience.

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8 Lynne Cooke, “Thinking on Your Feet: Richard Serra’s Sculptures in Landscape,” in Richard Serra: Sculpture Forty Years, ed. Richard Serra, Kynaston McShine, and Lynne Cooke (New York London: Museum of Modern Art Thames & Hudson, 2007), 80. Lynne writes, “Soon, however, Serra was dissatisfied with the piece. Its inconvenient location in a rough, even dangerous neighborhood meant that it was seen by few art-world associates. And although they could scan if from above by climbing staircases nearby, as well as from within its expansive circumference on the street, it was ultimately pictorial in character.”
for a visitor beyond the smaller-scale examples seen in museums and galleries. As *Tilted Arc* was designed specifically for the location, the site-specific sculpture suppressed the original patterns and characteristics of the space, redirected a visitor, and reinvented his experience. Regardless of having a positive or negative experience, a visitor became aware of himself and of his movement. The entire environment changed, the sculpture contracting and expanding as a visitor moved through the space.¹¹

Movement through the space of a site-specific sculpture is an essential characteristic of Serra’s Icelandic work *Áfangar*, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. For Serra, his site-specific sculptures could not simply be placed on any site and be expected to function properly. The design of the sculpture took into consideration the characteristics of a specific site and would, in turn, redefine the location and also the experience for visitors. Movement *Áfangar* is an Icelandic word that translates as, “stations, stops on the road, to stop and look, forward and back, to take it all in.” The sculpture is composed of nine pairs of columnar basalt stones, indigenous to the region, that are carefully placed around the perimeter of the northern section of the island Viðey near Reykjavik (Figure 5). The distance between the stones requires a visitor to walk from the first pair, to the second pair, and so on in order to experience the entire work and observe their entire surroundings.

The sculpture’s design was thoroughly integrated into the landscape of Viðey, so an alternative site would not serve all the customized intentions; the work is classically site specific. Building on the idea of a sculpture’s site-specific nature, I questioned if Serra’s notebook drawings made on the site of the sculpture and during his experience were also just that – site

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specific. The notebook drawings provided Serra with the means for him to better understand the sculpture and also return to his experience after leaving the site. They underlined the site-specific nature of Áfangar because the compositions of these drawings relied on the placement of the sculpture. If the sculpture was altered, the drawings would also change. There are specifics of the sculpture’s design, such as a shared elevation and spatial plane (contained within the area that is defined by connecting all the tops of the stones), which Serra looked for while he moved through the space, documenting the placement of the sculpture in the notebook drawings.

Just as the sculpture is connected to the site, the notebook drawings are understandably as well. By providing a brief background about Serra’s youthful experiences and development as an artist, examples of his early site-specific sculpture and drawings leading to Áfangar, a first-person narrative description of Áfangar to illustrate the navigation around the island to readers, and examples of the notebook drawings that highlight particular features that Serra intended in his design (elevation, plane, framing, and movement), this thesis seeks to highlight the site-specific characteristics of the sculpture and its related characteristics that Serra documented in the notebook drawings.

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12 Richard Serra discussed the site-specific nature of his large-scale installation drawings that are often altered to fit a particular place. The notebook drawings differ from these types of formal drawings.

13 John Beardsley, “Review: Art and Authoritarianism: Walter de Maria’s ‘Lightning Field,’” October 16 (1981), 36. Other artists have also explored a shared elevation, such as in Walter de Maria’s sculpture The Lightning Field, 1977, which is a Land Art sculpture located in the desert of western New Mexico. The work is comprised of 400 stainless steel poles measuring approximately 20 feet. The poles are spaced 220 feet apart and arranged in a one mile by one-kilometer grid.
CHAPTER I

THE ARTIST

Youthful Explorations and Formal Education

Richard Serra was born in 1939. He was the middle of three sons and grew up exploring the sunny beaches of San Francisco. He is best known for his large-scale steel sculptures that test the limits of engineering and rigging, as well as his stance on sculpture and site specificity, in which he remarked that “to remove a work, is to destroy the work.”14 Site-specific work focused on establishing an inseparable connection between the work and its site, which conceptually and perceptually reorganized the space with the presence of the viewer completing the work.15 Serra wanted to create a dialogue between a visitor’s perception of the entirety of the space and the relation to the field as it was walked, remarking, “The result is a way of measuring oneself against the indeterminacy of the land.”16 In works such as To Lift, Serra revealed an action implied on the work; a site-specific sculpture is revealed in its entirety, as well as information about the space, through a visitor’s action of walking.

Miss Cozy, Serra’s third-grade teacher, recognized Serra’s passion for art early on. Serra devoted a large share of his time to drawing that was traced back to his childhood. His commitment to drawing at such a young age was such that it could not otherwise be overlooked. Serra’s youthful play and development using drawing as a way to document his experiences certainly helped foster the importance of this practice, which carried into his professional and artistic career. She noticed his artistic potential and impressed upon his mother, Gladys, to take

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14 Kwon, “One Place after Another,” 86.
15 Kwon, “One Place after Another,” 86.
him to museums and reinforce what he was doing naturally. In addition to creating countless drawings at school, Serra drew on unraveled rolls of butcher paper his mother brought home. This unintentionally foreshadowed his applied actions to unroll a material in space, such as the rolled lead sculptures from the late 1960s and his large-scale ribbon-like sculptures completed in more recent years.

Time and time again in his career, Serra referenced memories from his youth, using them as an ever-constant resource for inspiration. He believed that these childhood memories held fleeting first impressions of new experiences. They would never be known as they had the first time, as Serra explains, “…when you’re a little kid, or a child, you see something fresh for the first time and you never know it again in the same way.” There is an untainted and pure quality associated with childhood memories and they provide a source of experiences Serra could return to and recall. Referencing a particular – not to mention frequently cited – childhood memory from which Serra pulls a great deal of inspiration, he summarizes:

One of my earliest recollections is that of driving with my father as the sun was coming up across the Golden Gate Bridge. We were going to Marine Shipyard, where my father worked as a pipe fitter, to watch the launching of a ship. It was on my birthday in the fall of 1943. I was four. When we arrived, the black, blue, and orange steel plated tanker was in way, balanced up on a perch. It was disproportionately horizontal and to a four year old it was like a skyscraper on its side…Then, in a sudden flurry of activity, the shoring props, beams, planks, poles, bars, keel blocks, all the dunnage was removed, the cables released, shackles dismantled, the come-alongs unlocked. There was a total incongruity between the displacement of this enormous tonnage and the quickness and agility with which it was carried out…Freed from its stays, the logs rolling, the ship slid off its cradle with an ever-increasing motion…Not only had the tanker collected itself, but so did the witnessing crowd as the ship went through a transformation from an enormous obdurate weight to a buoyant structure, free, afloat, and adrift.

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My awe and wonder of that moment remained...which has become a recurring dream.20

The skyscraper-like size of the ship from this memory was certainly a creditable
influence on Serra’s large-scale steel works that dwarf the viewer and blanket them within the
space of his steel sculptures. There was also a more subtle influence that was derived from this
memory: the witnessing crowd. The size of the tanker commanded attention and Serra noted the
awe and wonder it provoked. For Serra, the reactions and responses along with the size and
motion of the tanker were one and the same now and inseparable. The tanker made a formative
first-impression on Serra’s young psyche, but at that point, of course, young Serra would not
have had the resources to act on this encounter and comprehend the new ideas. He held on to
this memory, later recognizing that the possibility to influence a crowd through monumental
forms. His sculptural forms would create awe-inspiring encounters for visitors.21

Serra was between ten and fifteen years old during another formative memory from his
Californian childhood. He walked a two-mile stretch of beach, retracing his footsteps in the sand
as he returned the same way. As he followed his own tracks, he became aware that the shoreline
he had just passed was now in the reverse; what had been on the right was now on the left. As a
child, Serra’s experience on the beach confounded him. He was met with unanswerable
questions at that time. He felt his experience of walking in one direction had little to do with his
experience of walking in the opposite direction. “I depend on walking and looking, simple
observation,” Serra remarked, continuing to explain that the relationship between a visitor’s
direct experience, observation, and memory were the basis for his creating, or making, his

21 Kate Nesin, “Public Art for the Private Self: Time and the Viewer in the Sculpture of Richard Serra” (bachelor’s
work.22 Such experiences may have confounded a child and posed unanswerable questions, but they crystallized into well-defined thoughts that continued to develop in Serra’s mind.23 This memory is the genesis of Serra’s ideas regarding walking and looking and it would mature as he further explored the combination of space, sculpture, and visitor.

In the chapter entitled “Walking in the City,” from the book The Practice of Everyday Life, author de Certeau wrote that childhood experiences could determine how a maturing child would later develop private or public spaces.24 Serra, who may have been more susceptible to the details during his experiences walking and looking due to his sensitivity, was able to distinguish and determine the minute details of the space and likely later identify these differences for the viewer through the addition of his sculpture in the space. In the case of Áfangar, which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, and other works made leading up to it, Serra’s careful placement of the sculpture determined that it could not be moved. The placement and design are linked with the crafted visitor’s experience.

As Serra grew older, he took on more challenging responsibilities and opportunities, seeking new experiences. He strove to learn more, explaining why on one occasion he volunteered to fill an unfamiliar factory position that required additional training. When a colleague questioned this decision, Serra explained he did not mind taking on new tasks and, if anything, was expanding his skills and expertise.25 He worked in a ball bearing factory, briefly at a grocery store, and numerous steel factories, including Bethlehem, Pacific Judson and Murphy, Ryerson, and Kaiser.26 His experience in steel factories exposed him to working with heavy

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23 Serra, Plúsfilm, interview.
materials and would later influence his sculptural work. His years of working in factory settings prepared him to be able to handle the intimidating characteristics of industrial materials.

Serra entered the University of California, Berkeley in 1957 to study English literature. He later transferred to the University of California, Santa Barbara and graduated in 1961. During his education at Santa Barbara, Serra assisted art professors Howard Warshaw and Rico Lebrun as they worked on murals at the University. While under their guidance, Serra developed a strong work ethic and drawing practice. Drawing became and remains a daily practice throughout Serra’s student career. The professors encouraged using line and contour in ways that would describe three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface. They taught students to think about how to draw the path of an ant walking across the surface of a balloon on the paper, meaning that the path would not be flat. It would curve and arch, depending on the direction taken. Serra found their descriptions of drawing volume interesting and would later incorporate drawing ‘volume’ as he attempted to capture the weight of his sculptures on paper.

In 1960, Serra traveled to Mexico and studied the murals of José Clemente Orozco including Man of Fire, 1939, (Figure 6). The mural is located in a cupola nearly 200 feet above the floor, at the Hospicio Cabanas, now known as the Cabañas Cultural Institute, in Guadalajara,
Mexico. Viewing this mural was another experience that influenced Serra’s approach to organizing space. In Hombre de Fuego (Man of Fire), Orozco’s foreshortened center figure ascends upwardly with portions of the figure, including his head and arm, engulfed in rising flames. The other figures, whose hands and arms overlap, create an illusion of depth on the flat surface and encircle the outer edge of the cupola before disappearing beyond the defined edges of the architecture. A space beyond is implied, a technique used in illusionistic ceiling paintings. It is not tangible, but not impossible for viewers to see into the space of the painting. Serra was intrigued by the relationship between the painting and its site, feeling it was more interesting than a painting placed on an easel, but he felt it was merely a manipulation. It was an illusion and the viewer’s experience with the work was artificial.

After Serra graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara with a degree in English, he submitted twelve boldly drawn images of field scenes and cows to Yale University and would graduate with both his BFA in 1962 and MFA in 1964. During his time at Yale he was exposed to the early stages of Pop, Minimalism, and Hard-edge movements. Prominent artists such as Frank Stella and Robert Rauschenberg were invited to the university to give lectures and critiques. Such artists would influence Serra’s approach following his departure from the University. Shaped canvases, which is a notable quality of Stella’s work, was a dominant form of abstract painting in the 1960s and was described as being a hybrid of both

33 A “real” space beyond the architectural bounds is implied, for example, in Andrea Mantegna’s 1472-74 ceiling fresco in the Ducal Palace in Mantua, Italy. It suggests an outside space and figures resting on unreal and illusionistic architectural elements.
painting and sculpture. Serra, who was originally accepted into the painting program at Yale would eventually transition to sculpture, so understandably influenced by the concurrent artists working during those years. Similarly, Serra was exposed to the works of Robert Rauschenberg (who wanted to “defeat or avoid a spectacular representational presence…”), moved away from representational descriptions, as well.

Following the completion of his studies, Serra visited Europe on a Fulbright scholarship and a travel fellowship from the university. Paris was an important stop during this 1965 transatlantic trip because it was there that Serra was exposed to classical and modern works. While there, Serra also met the composer Philip Glass and frequented Brancusi’s reconstructed studio, which had been integrated into the design of the Musée National d’Art Moderne. Continuing his international travels, he visited Madrid, viewing more classical and modern works.

Serra was struck by the spatial complexity of Diego Rodriguez Velázquez’s Las Meninas (The Family of Felipe IV), 1656, (Figure 7). He was intrigued by the painting’s design in which the room where the principle characters stand – the painter, the princess, and her court – extends into the viewer’s space. This startled Serra, because in that instant standing before the painting he had become part of it. He had become the subject that Velázquez was painting on the canvas within the composition, in the process finding that Velázquez was looking at him. Even though Serra was puzzled by the relationships prompted between the painting and the viewer, he again realized that the product was essentially an illusion. He determined that painting would

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not be able to be the vehicle to reach his vision of interpreting and defining the space between the work and a visitor. Near the end of his European travels, Serra threw his canvases in the Arno River and stated his painting days were over.\textsuperscript{41} In the following years, Serra would explore other ways to create works that influenced space and the experiences it posed for visitors.

Donald Judd, who Serra met in New York, influenced Serra’s ideas about the physicality of space, increasing the sculptor’s scorn of illusionistic space. Real space, without the involvement of figural sculpture, removed problems of illusion and was more specific than paint on a flat surface.\textsuperscript{42} While Judd desired to get away from the history of sculpture and to make work that was neither sculpture nor painting, Serra arrived at a different set of assumptions regarding sculpture and came to consider a sculpture’s relationship with a space and the possibilities to structure it.\textsuperscript{43} The spatial relationship held potential.

Artistic Development in New York

Serra remembered the late nights in New York City filled with creative conversations and the friendships formed between artists and art enthusiasts alike. New York was a place of growth and a hub for networking. He quickly made ties with other artists, including Carl Andre, who was another artist very influential on Serra’s work.\textsuperscript{44} He also became friends with Eva Hesse (who was influenced by Abstract Expressionism during her time at Yale University working under Josef Albers), Nancy Holt (who was greatly immersed in Land Art), and Donald

\textsuperscript{42} Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” \textit{Arts Yearbook} 8 (1965): 80.
\textsuperscript{43} Sullivan, “Time in the Space in Between,” 22.
\textsuperscript{44} McShine, “A Conversation about Work,” 28.
Judd (who was involved with minimalism). Robert Smithson, another Land artist, would be another friend of great influence.45

The late 1960s was a very tumultuous era. In addition to a shifting artistic climate, from Modernism to Post Modernism and Minimalism to Post Minimalism, with Serra in the latter, the late 1960s was filled with a variety of revolutionary changes in the United States, especially in regard to racial strains. The Space Race between the United States and the Soviet Union was quite tense because of the underlying fear of Communism. Augmenting these fears, President Kennedy encouraged citizens to build fallout shelters at the start of the decade. While the Sixties had its fair share of turbulence it was also known for its stance on love and peace; the 1969 Woodstock gathering became an idealistic icon of harmony. Various new technologies and inventions were introduced in this decade, including the touch telephone, BASIC programming language, CDC 6600 computer, and the automatic teller machine. Xerox introduced its first automatic, plain-paper commercial copier allowing businesses, as well as artists, to reproduce identical documents with little effort.

Artists were not isolated from technological advancements. Naturally, many would explore these new resources, as progressive art is always a reflection of the era. Pop art, for example, was a movement that ran concurrent to Serra’s development in New York. It centered on mass media and popular culture, emphasizing commercialization and often imitating commercial means of reproduction. Andy Warhol, one of the premier Pop artists stated, “I want to be a machine,”46 underlining the use of new robot-like technology. Minimalism fit well with

the onslaught of 1960s technology, especially as artists began engineering art as if they were a technician or steel welder.  

The physical environment as an integral aspect of the artwork was increasingly acknowledged among artists in the 1960s. Judd’s sculpture, *Untitled*, 1969, (Figure 8) is composed of ten uniform highly polished copper boxes. The boxes, which had been ordered with precise specifications by Judd, are installed vertically along the wall and spaced in a particular manner so that they engage the space between. The arrangement of repetitive forms made up of copper and space created a pattern between positive and negative and both contributed to the totality of the work.

Judd distanced himself from working one-on-one with the material and instead embraced industrial manufacturing, priding himself on having abandoning artistic involvement in the production of sculpture. Judd did not install the work, as he wanted to create neither sculpture nor painting and he instead left detailed instructions that described how it should be installed, which aligned with the artist’s avoidance of a direct involvement with the making of the physical object. Tony Smith, another artist working during this period, also emphasized the object rather than the emotions of the artist of viewer, for example as he had done earlier with *Die*, a vast metal cube, which was cast in 1968. These actions hark back to an earlier, influential movement – Dada – specifically its readymade works, although the readymade works differed in that they

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49 Ragheb, “*Untitled*,” Guggenheim Collection Online, 1990.
were often taken from utilitarian, store-shelved products. On a similar plane, Andy Warhol’s
distance from physical art making became an issue in the early 1960s and his “Factory” soon
after. Serra, however, did not feel the need to remove himself from his work. Actions and
experience would remain an undercurrent in his development.

Carl Andre worked as a freight brakeman for the Pennsylvania Railroad,\(^{52}\) so similar to
Serra, much of his familiarity working with industrial materials and machinery came from
constant contact during his work there. Andre spent a large amount of time devoted to writing as
well, which was another shared interest with Serra.\(^{53}\) Andre was interested in the raw and natural
qualities of a material. Like Judd, these materials were ordered to his specifications and the artist
himself avoided cutting, changing, or fabricating the material.\(^{54}\) He did not alter the materials as
they came, but at the same time wanted to avoid the assisted readymade attempts that had been
explored by Duchamp.\(^{55}\) Initially, Andre chiseled away or changed the material, but he stopped
such alterations, deeming any change made to the material a failure.\(^{56-57}\) Like his contemporary
Judd, Andre aimed to have his work free of any human association. However, he concluded that
this separation was impossible and wanted to believe that the removal of human influence,
whether direct or indirect, was possible. He felt that the impossibility of removing this
connection was a failure.\(^{58}\)

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Schneider (Bregenz, Austria: Kunsthaus Bregenz, 2008), 31. Shiff writes, “Serra is an accomplished writer, perhaps
as sensitive to words as he is to visual form and material substance.”


\(^{56}\) Yasmine Raymond, “Carl Andre: Sculpture as Place, 1958-2010 Introduction,” *Dia Art Foundation,

\(^{57}\) Inaba, “Carl Andre’s Same Old Stuff,” 40.

\(^{58}\) Andre and Meyer, *Cuts*, 16.
Andre’s 1967 sculpture 5x20 Altstadt Rectangle, (Figure 9), was originally created for the Konrad Fischer Gallery in Düsseldorf, Germany. Among other works by Andre, the sculpture was visitor-interactive. Andre’s avoidance of pedestals or stanchions often left his work vulnerable to and undetected by visitors, further encouraging interaction (e.g., walking on the work), and reiterating the impossibility of his art being devoid of human association. The use of industrial materials was also a likely contributor to visitors stepping into the space of the work, or even occasionally walking right on it, because the material blended in with construction and building materials.\(^5\)\(^9\) The ground level was important to Andre, but not so that visitors would be able to interact with it, but instead because it helped to keep his art away from the paradigms of commercial, gallery-like work. Andre’s 5x20 Altstadt Rectangle is composed of 100 units of hot-rolled steel placed directly on the floor. When Andre started to create 5x20 Altstadt, he destroyed his initial plans because the work would not fit into the narrow alleyway designated as the location. Circumstances like this made Andre begin a work only after he saw the space it would occupy. Serra immediately adopted a similar practice of creating a work only after he saw the space. When the materials for 5x20 Altstadt Rectangles arrived, the work essentially generated itself and Andre “paved” the narrow alleyway with the material.\(^6\)\(^0\) Doorways were installed at either end of the alley so that the space was secure, but the doorways also suggested, if not encouraged, visitors to walk across the work (Figure 9). Andre did not oppose the intrusion and no longer

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battled the divorce of human interaction from the artwork. Visitors were invited to walk on and experience the work at its level on the ground.61

As Serra, influenced by Andre, began to believe that the floor functioned as a ground for the elements, essentially resulting in a figure-ground composition, which caused the sculpture to be pictorial, his approach diverged from his contemporaries.62 Andre believed that individual anti-illusionistic units of a material combined with no extraneous forces would make an individual unit stand out from the rest, as evident in Andre’s work Lever, 1966, a single line of 137 firebricks (Figure 11). However, this work could still be read as a line on the floor. Serra thought favorably of using the natural state of a material, like Andre, but he did not agree that this type of work could be anti-pictorial. Serra did not want to continue the fight against pictorial tendencies, in addition to separating human influence from a work, so instead focused his attention on pushing the limits of his own ideas and works.

Approaching Space

Serra returned to experiences he was familiar with when he opted to work in Kaiser Steel Corporation’s Skullcracker Yard for the Art and Technology program organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1969. As the artist, he commanded the resources available to him and began producing his “Skullcracker Stacking Series.” The works in this series were not planned in advance but were created on site. Serra served as a choreographer, giving direction to an overhead crane that responded to his direction and stacked large chunks of steel nearly fifteen to thirty feet high.63 The materials were heavy and dangerous, so his direction was essential for

61 Inaba, “Carl Andre’s Same Old Stuff,” 47.
both safety and completion. These stacked pieces were not considered by Serra to be site specific because they simply focused on the action of stacking. He stated, “The basic principles of building [these works] were stacking and counterbalance.”

From this point, the scale of Serra’s sculptural work increased and the design became more complex, although not yet to the involvedness of his later site-specific works. In *Strike: To Roberta and Rudy*, 1969-1971 (Figure 10), Serra explored actions enacted on the work. *Strike: To Roberta and Rudy*, measuring 8 feet in height and 24 feet in length, offers an early example of Serra’s development and exploration of sculpture and its relationship to its space. The hot-rolled steel sculpture diagonally cuts across the space, initiating the action “to cut” by wedging the steel plate into the corner of the room and cutting across the space as if the space of the room was laid across the steel and severed into sections. It is fitted into the corner of two walls, its only apparent mode of vertical support, requiring a visitor to walk through the space in order to experience it entirely. It divided the space of the room and brought attention to that which is above, below, to the left, and right. Lynne Cooke described the experience, “On entering the gallery, the viewer encounters the sculpture first as an oblique plane receding into the corner of the room, then as a vertical line that both cuts and sutures the space, and finally, after moving farther into the room, as a flat plane that now projects across her field of vision, occluding space.” The movement of the visitor caused the space to open, close, and open again.

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Serra identified *Strike: To Roberta and Rudy* as a turning point because it was a different concept of organizing space, or what he termed a ‘behavioral space,’ that created a new kind of relationship between the spectator and the artwork.\(^{69}\) Essentially since the piece was wedged into the corner of the gallery, visitors were limited to walk around it and could see only three of the four main angles of the work. Whenever visitors interacted with the metal wall, they did so in the confinement of the gallery. A singular plane sculpture such as this worked in a gallery setting, but a larger space would be necessary as the size of Serra’s work increased and he continued to explore the particularities and characteristics of a space.\(^ {70}\) However, not all spaces were ideal.

In addition to needing more space, Serra’s large-scale sculptures required a labor force of expert engineers, installers, and those willing to help with a variety of hauling and rigging tasks. No longer could he recruit friends to haul materials, such as when he had them carry large remnants of rubber to his studio early in his career. As Serra’s fame and size of work grew, he would become the master designer, commanding a skilled team to complete his work that would occupy the ultimate, privileged studio setting – the land.

Outdoor sites, particularly in urban cities, were limited for Serra’s sculpture and difficult to secure. Serra accepted a commission to complete his first outdoor work in the United States, entitled *To Encircle Base Plate Hexagram, Right Angles Inverted, 1970*, (Figure 3) in the Bronx\(^ {71}\) at 183\(^{rd}\) Street and Webster Avenue.\(^ {72}\) He was optimistic that art enthusiasts would seek out the work regardless of its location, but the dangers of the area discouraged many to do so.\(^ {73}\)

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\(^{69}\) Cooke, “Thinking on Your Feet,” 79.

\(^{70}\) Cooke, “Thinking on Your Feet,” 80.


\(^{72}\) Serra had previously completed an outdoor work in Ueno Park, Tokyo in 1970 during his trip to Japan. The work shares the likeness of both design and name with *To Encircle Base Plate Hexagram, Right Angles Inverted, 1970*.

\(^{73}\) Crimp, “Richard Serra’s Urban Sculpture,” 128.
The location provided an incredible amount of open space, which is quite rare in New York, but the area was not a suitable location. It was a dead-end street in a failing neighborhood made up of empty lots, vacant housing units, and broken down cars. It was sinister and frequented by criminals.\textsuperscript{74}

Viewing the work from above reduced the sculpture as a fixed image on the pavement. Serra explained his concern, “When pieces are viewed from above, the floor functions as a field or ground for the deployment of decorative linear and planar elements...in this case allows sculpture to be viewed pictorially – that is, as if the floor were the canvas plane.”\textsuperscript{75} It created a figure-ground relationship, where in the street served as a two-dimensional surface,\textsuperscript{76} similar to the linear-ground relationship of Andre’s \textit{Lever}, 1966, which Serra did not intend and wanted to avoid. Visitors who braved the trek to the Bronx should have experienced the sculpture in its own space at ground level. A visitor, the sculpture, and space would hold important roles in Serra’s sculpture. In the following years, the placement of his sculpture in a space was no longer arbitrary (particularly in \textit{Áfangar}) and made the work site specific.

\textsuperscript{74} Crimp, “Richard Serra’s Urban Sculpture;” 128.
\textsuperscript{76} Cooke, “Thinking on Your Feet;” 80.
CHAPTER II
ÁFANGAR
Acquaintance with Landscape

In this chapter, select examples from Serra’s sculptural works and influential events on his artistic development will be discussed. Attention will be given to works and events that were particularly influential on Serra’s approach to working in open spaces, such as landscapes. It is my hope that these examples will provide the reader with a better understanding as to how Serra arrived at placing his site-specific sculpture, Áfangar. It is beneficial for the reader to keep in mind that these examples, among many others not discussed, were not the sole reasons behind Serra’s development leading up to Áfangar. The analysis of an artist’s growth is quite complex and involves many factors.

As mentioned in chapter 2, Serra, like many of his contemporaries, produced work with the intent to exhibit in museums and galleries during his early years in New York. Particularly noted in Minimalists’ works, artists used unconventional approaches and untraditional industrial materials, but what they produced could nonetheless be exhibited in galleries or museums as independently displayed works of art. Many of these artists, including Serra, broke away from the traditional display of work on pedestals and began producing work in larger spaces. However, larger space did not guarantee a limitless design. It still had restrictions.

For example, works such as Serra’s molten lead Splash Series (Figure 12), which ranged from 1968 to 1970, or as commissions arose, moved away from the traditional pedestal but were still influenced by the confines of the space. Work from the Splash Series was created on site, and understandably, fitted that particular location best. Each differ from the other because the
pieces “are about working in the space and the space usually is a space that decides on the scale
and the activity,” Serra stated. The space of the room was the mold for the sculpture. With
protective clothing, Serra filled a ladle with molten lead and flung the hot liquid causing the
liquid to splash and fill the defined space, typically that between the floor and wall. Later work
produced by Serra did not rely on the fluidity of the material and instead required him to be
methodical concerning its design in the space. A firmer material did not rely on the room to act
as a mold, yet it still yielded to the room’s limitations.

With the assistance of riggers, Serra completed Circuit, 1972 (Figure 13). As his work
increased in size, it required additional assistance to install. Circuit was composed of four hot-
rolled steel plates. The plates pointed to the center of the space, fixed in the corners of the 36-
foot square room, and divided the room into four sections. The design of the plates composing
the sculpture was determined under the conditions of the room, and essentially, the size of the
room determined the length and position of them. As a result, the plates defined the space that
would be experienced by a visitor. Simply speaking, not just any design could fit in the space.
Following elements of Serra’s idea, it was site specific.

Circuit was carefully plotted, like other works, because plates too small would not
properly organize the space and plates too large would overwhelm the space and may prevent a
visitor from entering the room. To Lift, and earlier work, did not offer a larger-than-life scale
that would organize the space with its presence. Contemporaries working concurrently with
Serra, though may not have been as concerned as the sculptor in redefining and structuring the

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77 Richard Serra, “Richard Serra on His Splash Pieces,” uploaded by San Francisco Museum of Art YouTube, 0:45-
1:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjvVEN2v8rY (accessed May 27, 2015). He continued to explain that
Jasper Johns saw the Splash piece in the Whitney Museum and requested that Serra build one in his loft. When
Johns moved, he shared his intentions with Serra to donate the work to a museum. Serra explained, “It didn’t seem
to make sense to do that piece in this large space…it seemed better to try to build a piece that would hold the scale
of the room.”

78 Richard Serra, “Circuit II (1972 – 86),” Museum of Modern Art Acoustiguide, 01:15,
space via the work, also met similar challenges with the smaller size. Carl Andre’s *Lever*, 1966, this floor-hugging installation, did not have the dynamic size to influence the space.

Serra visited Kyoto, Japan in 1970, a few years prior to completing *Circuit*, staying at the temple of Myoshin-ji for six weeks. He found the addition of carefully placed elements in a deliberate garden layout more interesting than the temple, further influencing his ideas about organizing space. For example, the garden of the Ryoanji Temple is composed of fifteen rocks that are arranged within the space in a way to create, as the Temple describes, an “intuitive Zen puzzle,” leaving the interpretation and imagination up to the visitor (Figure 14). Like Serra’s realization at the Mexican murals, this too was another epiphanic moment, although he did not yet know how he would translate this into his work.

Serra realized that he responded to the Myoshin-ji’s garden space – its entire space – differently due to the arrangement and placement of its elements. The garden was organized in such a way that he, or a visitor, could only experience it completely through movement. The garden presented Serra with ideas to deal with the totality of the space, as well as ideas to organize the elements in the space. The garden did not have a single viewpoint like “Western” layouts, so it was necessary for Serra to walk the curvilinear paths snaking through it. Serra explained that the issue he faced following this experience was no longer to place an autonomous object in a field, but to place the objects to serve a purpose in the space. This would, as a result, require a visitor’s movement in order to see the entire space and its elements.

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80 In the paragraph entitled, “A True Work of Art,” questions are posed about what the designers had in mind, suggesting that the placed stones are of a tiger carrying her cubs across water, the rocks spell out the character ‘heart,’ or mountain peaks in a sea of clouds. Essentially, the interpretation is left to the viewer. http://www.ryoanji.jp/smph/eng/garden/making.html
82 Serra, “Serra at Yale,” 35.
Following his trip to Kyoto, Serra sought working in outdoor landscapes. Outdoor space offered a large “canvas” for his sculptural works. Unfortunately, there was a finite amount of suitable outdoor space, but this was not a problem for Serra alone. Many of his contemporaries also struggled to find vast amounts of space. The opportunities were rare, but the results of working in open land, the ultimate privileged studio setting, were remarkable. For example, Robert Smithson, a land artist, created works outside the confines of museums and galleries. He favored working in the open landscape, which was similar to other artists during the 1960s, such as Michael Heizer and Nancy Holt, who was married to Smithson in 1963. When a grant from the Virginia Dwan Gallery of New York provided Smithson with the opportunity to build a large work, which he called *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, (Figure 15) he again sought an outdoor landscape. Serra assisted staking out this work with Smithson, which proved to be another influential experience that encouraged Serra to rethink scale and seek outdoor venues for his own work.

Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, a spiral created as if on a sheet of paper, is located at Rozel Point peninsula on the northeastern shore of the Great Salt Lake. It is comprised of basalt stones formed eons ago by nearby extinct volcanoes. The stones, originally black, were discolored from exposure to the natural elements of the environment over the years. The work, with accretions, is fifteen feet wide and 1,500 feet long. It stretches away from the peninsula and coils counterclockwise into the lake. Soon after its completion, the water was occasionally colored pink, red, or purple due to the high concentration of microbes and crystallized salt deposits. A few years after *Spiral Jetty* was completed, the water level of the lake rose and the sculpture was entirely submerged for nearly three decades. A drought that spanned multiple

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84 Bear, “Sight,” 48. Serra remarked that in 1970 there was a convergence of events that made him rethink scale, including the completion of a series of large-scale stacking pieces at Kaiser Steel, the visit to the Kyoto Zen gardens, and helping Bob Smithson stake out the *Spiral Jetty*. 
years caused the water level to fall and the sculpture has been above water since 2002, though with fluctuating levels over the years.\textsuperscript{85} Áfangar, also an outdoor sculpture, would be exposed to the elements, however the city of Reykjavik (unlike the state of Utah) is cognizant of preserving Serra’s sculpture.

While helping Smithson stake out \textit{Spiral Jetty}, Serra observed his friend’s approach to create relationships between his work and its space, as well as with visitors. Smithson declared \textit{Spiral Jetty} was a site to walk on actively, not a sculpture to behold.\textsuperscript{86} In contrast, Serra’s approach was a bit more aggressive, while Smithson was concerned with “moving the earth,” and focused on entropy, geology, crystallography, and archeology.\textsuperscript{87} Serra placed his sculpture in the field in order to redefine the space and a visitor’s experience. His sculpture did not submit to the natural elements of the space and instead brought attention to the unique characteristics of the land, which would be more apparent when the field was walked.\textsuperscript{88}

The elements of Serra’s sculpture were not meant to blend into the space like Smithson’s work, which were more submissive as he did not want his work to impose itself on the land.\textsuperscript{89} Smithson’s work remained submerged for years and, if water levels rise again, will be submerged once more. \textit{Spiral Jetty} was designed to be part of the landscape, allowing the environment more control and submitting itself to the natural elements of the space.

\textsuperscript{87} McShine, “A Conversation about Work,” 26.
\textsuperscript{89} DIA, “Robert Smithson.”
Marking Spatial Boundaries

When land was made available to artists, it often implied working in less than favorable conditions that, typically, were not intended for an art audience, such as the Bronx where he constructed *To Encircle Base Plate Hexagram, Right Angles Inverted*. Serra’s preference was to build in Manhattan, but was not given permission. Serra felt that space in the United States was unforgiving to artists and that the excessive spread of suburbs gridded space in ways that, according to him, created a “technocratic nightmare.” It was thus a rare occasion when Emily and Joseph Pulitzer, Jr. approached Serra, asking him to build a sculpture on their three acres of property in the suburbs of St. Louis.

Serra, who was in his early 30s at the time, had yet to complete a work of this size and in the beginning he felt he was in over his head. The Pulitzer’s art collection, which included works by celebrated artists such as Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso, and Rothko, also intimidated him. To begin the sculpture, *Pulitzer Piece: Stepped Elevations, 1970-71*, (Figure 16), Serra simply walked the space. He looked to identify the weakest slope of the land’s topography. The completed sculpture consisted of three 2-inch by 5 feet Cor-Ten steel plates with lengths varying between 40, 50, and 62 feet. The plates acted as steps in the landscape, separated by the elevational falls. Serra explains, “Instead of following one right after the other in a straight, directional line, they take the quickest fall of the land to find their placement and their length.”

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90 Serra, “Richard Serra’s Urban Sculpture,” 166. Serra also did not want to build his work in a park because, he said, “I felt that a park would designate the sculpture as something different from what I wanted…It’s difficult to subvert those contexts.”
91 Serra, Plúsfilm, interview.
Serra also assessed the land’s characteristics with a topographical map, which provided Serra with an overview of the land’s rises and falls.\textsuperscript{95} Even though the map provided a bird’s view of the space, this should not imply that the work was to be viewed in this manner. Serra considered the view from above a failure, as observed in To Encircle Base Plate Hexagram, Right Angles Inverted, 1970, (Figure 3) in the Bronx; he also intended for a visitor to interact with the sculpture on its level and in its space. The map merely helped him assess the space.

Serra’s interest in identifying the rise and fall of the land with sculptural elements increased following this experience. Pulitzer Piece: Stepped Elevations marked the differences between the elevations from the ground up and served as a reference for a visitor to show what happened when the land shifted and there was no horizon to orient him as he moved.\textsuperscript{96} Serra explained that Pulitzer Piece: Stepped Elevations was “omnidirectional” because there were many ways a visitor could enter into the space of the sculpture. Like the Zen gardens, movement was a necessity to experience the entirety of this sculpture. This would also be the case in other landscape sculptures Serra would produce,\textsuperscript{97} such as Missouri Flats, 1996, in St. Louis, Missouri,\textsuperscript{98} Sea Level, 1988-96 in the Netherlands,\textsuperscript{99} and Lemgo Vectors (Elevations for Walter), 1998 in Germany.\textsuperscript{100} These are also examples where elevations and movement influence the design of the sculpture.

\textsuperscript{97} Senie, “The Tilted Arc Controversy,” 9-10.
\textsuperscript{98} Serra, et al., Richard Serra: Sculpture, 1985-1998, 161, describes this work. It is composed of four forged blocks that are sited in a rolling field that fronts a lake and are placed on elevational contours that vary by 1 foot. The blocks are leveled one to the other over the area and establish a horizontal measurement over the spread of the field.
\textsuperscript{99} Serra, et al., Richard Serra: Sculpture, 1985-1998, 173, describes Sea Level as a work built on the North Sea. The two-part sculpture begins at sea level at the slope’s top elevation and maintains the height of the sea level as it diagonally moves across the westward slope.
\textsuperscript{100} Serra, et al., Richard Serra: Sculpture, 1985-1998, 185, discusses Lemgo Vectors (Elevations for Walter), which is composed of three forged blocks placed on the same elevation across a considerable distance. A continuous path encircles the landscape in the space (passing through both the lowest and highest elevations) and all blocks are placed in relation to that path.
Serra began *Shift*, 1970-72, (Figure 17), which was created in a space that spanned an expansive field in rural King City, Ontario, Canada, shortly after finishing *Pulitzer Piece: Stepped Elevations*. While designing *Shift*, Serra realized that what he was trying to accomplish in *Pulitzer Piece: Stepped Elevations* was too abstract. He felt that walking across such a vast space and mentally connecting the three plates together was too demanding. It would be difficult for visitors to comprehend the piece as a whole. Serra felt the connection between the sculptural elements was not clear and his approach would become more focused as he continued to produce.

In the summer of 1970, Serra and artist Joan Jonas walked the space for *Shift*, making observations over five days. While keeping each other in view as they walked on opposite ends of the Canadian field, Serra and Jonas discovered they could create a topological definition of the space that was determined by the maximum distance at which two people could maintain sight of the other. This eye-level observation informed Serra how he would design the sculpture to fit into the landscape.

Serra’s approach to creating *Shift* was more refined than *Pulitzer Piece*, with the placement of *Shift*’s elements being anything but arbitrary. *Shift*’s inclining plates were not meant to bring attention to the sculpture’s horizontal, or planar, composition, but instead were meant to return a visitor’s eye to the top of the land. The sculpture marked the boundaries of the space. The addition of Serra’s sculpture exposed features of the land to a visitor, making him more aware of space and any changes resulting from his movement.

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104 McShine, “A Conversation about Work,” 31, with Serra remarking, “*Shift* made me realize that what I was doing at the Pulitzers’, though less complex, was more abstract…”
Serra spent two months staking out the layout for *Shift* and decided upon two sets of three (six total) concrete plates. The two sets did not touch and like *Pulitzer Piece: Stepped Elevations*, the visitor could start at either end of the sculpture. The six plates measured 60 inches by 8 inches by a range of 90 feet to 240 feet, with an overall measurement of 815 feet. Each set spanned two hills that were approximately 1,500 feet apart. The existing slopes of the land determined the direction of the plates. From the top of the eastern hill, a visitor saw the first three plates in a Z-like linear configuration. He continued to walk a continuous, zigzag route through the space of the sculpture because only through movement would he see what was behind the next rise in the land. Once at the end of the first group, a visitor walked half the total elements across the changing slopes and he then had the option to continue to walk the next set of three plates. The result of the full experience revealed the entirety of the space.\(^\text{107}\)

Serra used the pre-determined restrictions, or characteristics, of the space to determine the design of *Shift*, as he had done prior in *Circuit, Pulitzer Piece: Stepped Elevations*. *Circuit* was made to fit and function in the space. The space, determined by its architecture, could not be changed, at least not easily nor drastically. Land, too, had the potential to be changed both by natural and unnatural forces, but Serra did not impose unnatural changes, aside from installing the work. Serra’s works in landscape were approached in a similar manner to his work in the gallery, except on a larger scale.

**A Sculpture and Its Site**

Landscape sculptures such as the Neolithic menhirs, Great Pyramids at Giza, or the *Sun Tunnels* by Nancy Holt are often classified as site specific due to the nature of the design in

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relation to the placement of monuments in space.\textsuperscript{108} A site-specific sculpture for Serra existed simply as a material occupying, defining, and incorporating the unique attributes of its space, which made it unsuited for any other location. \textit{Shift} in any other space (unless a surrogate space was an exact replica of similar rises and falls) would not function as Serra’s original design intended. An analogous example is that of a patient’s molded dental crown. The crown was made to fit a particular tooth. It cannot be removed and used on another tooth, nor moved into another patient’s mouth. The design was made for a specific space and its function would be lost if removed. A site-specific sculpture was made similarly and was not designed for generalities. It cannot be generally placed, such as the public sculptures of Picasso’s \textit{Untitled} on West Washington Street in Chicago, IL (Figure 18) and Calder’s \textit{La Grande Vitesse} on Ottawa Avenue in Grand Rapids, MI (Figure 19).\textsuperscript{109}

In 1972, Serra entered a design competition and won with the intention to create a vertical sculpture, entitled \textit{Sight Point}. It was originally designed for an outdoor space at the Center of the Arts at Wesleyan University, Connecticut, but was not completed. It was site-specific, as Serra incorporated the spatial characteristics into the design of the sculpture. The original design of Serra’s sculpture transected a specific location that established spatial tensions.\textsuperscript{110} Financial circumstances, in addition to the towering sculpture’s close proximity to the university’s historical building, caused the campus architect to reject installation of the sculpture\textsuperscript{111} and \textit{Sight Point} was never completed at Wesleyan University.

\textsuperscript{108} Janet Saad-Cook, “Touching the Sky: Artworks Using Natural Phenomena, Earth, Sky and Connections to Astronomy,” \textit{Leonardo} 21, no. 2 (1988): 126. For example, Nancy Holt, speaking of her work, stated, “They are also made so that people can be a part of them and become more conscious of space, of their own visual perception.”


\textsuperscript{111} Senie, “The Tilted Arc Controversy,” 10.
However, in 1975 *Sight Point* was completed at another location: the rear garden of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (Figure 20). Serra agreed, wanting to see the work come to fruition, to have the sculpture installed there, but felt the change of location caused the sculpture to lose all its site-specific relationship. The sculpture’s design no longer incorporated the characteristics that were present in the original location at Wesleyan.\(^\text{112}\) Though it was not Serra’s original location, he felt the location at the Stedelijk was a suitable space for his sculpture.\(^\text{113}\)

The space at the Stedelijk Museum is generally flat and offered contrast with the towering sculpture.\(^\text{114}\) Working in a different space, Serra altered the sculpture’s original design. He changed the interior of the sculpture so that it was slightly larger, but did not consider this change enough to make the sculpture site-specific to its new location. Mentioning another change to the design, Serra explained, “No [in regard to this work being site-specific], but I located the openings to connect to the surrounding paths that come into the park and the one that goes toward the pool.”\(^\text{115}\) *Sight Point*, once completed, was composed of three steel plates that each measured 40 feet by 10 feet by 2.5 inches. The plates were fixed against the other to create an equilateral triangle at its apex. There were small variations that connected the work to the site, but its final design was not fully committed to the space. Further underlining that *Sight Point* was not firmly connected to its new space, when the construction on the new museum began Serra met with the former director of the museum and the architect to discuss the most

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\(^\text{115}\) Ottmann, “Interview with Richard Serra.”
appropriate placement of the sculpture. Stedelijk’s *Sight Point* was later removed in 1997 to accommodate the renovations and was relocated to the museum’s entrance hall where it served as a landmark and created a striking contrast against the white façade of the building.¹¹⁶

The fostered relationship between a sculpture and its site became more concrete as Serra continued, particularly when he was given the opportunity to work in larger spaces. For example, Serra came into a disagreement with architect Robert Venturi during the planning of a work for the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation (PADC) project in Washington D.C. Venturi and Serra disagreed on how the public sculpture would organize and revitalize the space on Pennsylvania Avenue.¹¹⁷ Serra remained frustrated and decided not to participate in the project. Venturi, Scott Brown, and Associates, as well as George E. Patton, completed the project in 1980, and was eventually renamed *Freedom Plaza* in 1988. The completed sculpture was made so that the plaza was raised above the street level, including a fountain. It was made mostly of stone and inlaid with parts that depicted Pierre Charles L’Enfant plan for the city of Washington. While relevant to the area, it was not site specific.

Serra quickly moved on to work on his next project, completing *St. John’s Rotary Arc* in 1980, (Figure 21), which was located at the Holland Tunnel exit in New York City until 1987 when it was removed and placed in storage.¹¹⁸ This sculpture continued to explore defining a space with sculptural elements and linking the sculpture to its site. Serra liked the Holland Tunnel space because it was free of any symbolic references, such as historic, commercial, or romantic pretensions, but he described the location as a polluted space of incessant change, a

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place of disorientation and permanent rotation, and further remarked, “the density of the traffic screens the inner center of the Rotary, enforcing the distinction between the inside and the outside of the space so that the space seems to open and close with the traffic flow.” He considered this characteristic as he designed the work, as the curve of the highway worked well with the arc, which measured 200 feet by 12 feet by 2.5 inches. The steel arc curve mimicked the shape of the highway’s loop, creating both a concave and convex composition in the space (Figure 22).

_Tilted Arc_, another curved and urban sculpture by Serra, was completed in 1981 (Figure 4). Serra was recommended by a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) panel to create a permanent, public sculpture. He was next approved by the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) to complete the sculpture in the Jacob Javits Federal Plaza in New York. While Serra often opposed corporate and government sponsorships due to his previous experiences, such as the Pennsylvania Avenue project, Serra realized this was a rare opportunity. Donald Thalacker also encouraged Serra to accept the project, emphasizing that this was Serra’s one opportunity to build a permanent work for a federal site in America.

With the location predetermined, Serra dissected the anatomy of Federal Plaza. The street was congested with traffic and there was a constant flux of activity that took place, but mostly in the morning and evening during rush hours. Workers dashed from the street, across the plaza’s brick foundation patterned with a curvilinear design, into the nearby entrances of buildings, and vice versa. A lifeless fountain rested on one end of the plaza, turned off because

120 Serra: Interviews: 160, states, “walking across the exit ramp onto Ericsson Street toward Hudson Street, the curve snakes back on itself and reads as a half circle. Moving further down the corner of Hudson, the concavity is overlapped, abridged. The convex curve moves outward and away in a seemingly unending arc.”
121 Krauss, Rubin, Rosenstock, and Crimp, Richard Serra: Sculpture, 35. Krauss writes that the landscape sculptures (such as Pulitzer Piece and Shift) married form to topography, with the form being a continuousness of the landscape. The arcs (such as _Tilted Arc_ and _St. John’s Rotary Arc_) were constructed in a presupposed flat site. The varying planes suggested a different subject and a different relationship.
the passing winds carried water across the plaza. This situation in winter caused the plaza to become quite icy. Supplementing Serra’s observations, a GSA contracting officer requested an environmental-impact study to determine the sculpture’s effect on pedestrian traffic patterns, surveillance inhibition, use of additional lighting, and drainage problems, but none that halted the project to move forward.

_Tilted Arc_ once designed and installed, sliced across the space of the plaza. Its arc that was slightly tilted – hence its name – was made of unfinished Cor-Ten steel. It measured 12 feet by 120 feet by 2.5 inches. The arc countered the curvilinear pattern of the plaza and created a physical divide of the space, separating work and leisure. This plaza had a high foot-traffic area, unlike _Pulitzer Piece: Stepped Elevations_ and _Shift_, but shared an urban context with _To Encircle Base Plate Hexagram, Right Angles Inverted_ from the Bronx. This time, however, Serra had the chance of working in an urban space that would not make a visitor fearful of exploring the sculpture on its own level.

The design of _Tilted Arc_ made a visitor aware of himself and of his movement through and across the plaza. Serra explained that the sculpture was meant to interact with the commuter passing through the plaza, which otherwise was a location not given a second thought. The sculpture was not meant to be the content. Instead, as a result of a visitor walking and looking as defined by the sculpture, the content was the experience of a visitor. As a visitor moved, the sculpture and the entire environment changed. However, not all visitors to this sculpture reflected positively on the experience. The sculpture was removed a few years later, in 1989.

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124 Richard Serra, “Tilted Arc Destroyed,” in _Writings, Interviews_ (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 193. Serra remarked, following the removal of the sculpture, “The final desecrations followed over five years of misrepresentations, false promises, and show trials in the media and in the courtroom, deceptions which in the end
In 1982, Serra completed *Colombino di Firenzuola* (Figure 23), located at Fattoria di Celle in Santomato di Pistoia, Italy. Rather than using steel or other industrial materials here, Serra used stone, remarking that when using steel one accepts “technological materialism either directly in terms of assembly or construction, or indirectly as allusion,” while the use of stones does not permit this association because stones have a life of their own.\(^{125}\) Any imported material, such as steel, was foreign to what was naturally available in the Italian hillside. *Colombino di Firenzuola* is composed of eight stones, measuring approximately 7 feet high that cascade down the Italian hillside. The work shares a direct connection with the geology of the site, as the stones used in the sculpture also were used in historical buildings in the region and throughout Florence.\(^{126}\)

As its environment was quite different from that of urban spaces, Serra’s approach and design of *Colombino di Firenzuola* was also quite different. The use of stone also deviated from his signature steel. Working in stone supported Serra’s attempt to explore unique features of a place and to draw more links between a sculpture and its site. Like his first attempt in *Pulitzer Piece: Stepped Elevations*, which became easier to perceive in *Shift*, this new exploration of using individual stones rather than steel plates or arcs would also become clearer to understand with practice.

In a second attempt using stone in his sculpture, Serra completed *Standing Stones* in 1989, (Figure 24) located in Des Moines, Iowa. *Standing Stones* was composed of six individual granite stones that cascaded across the hillside. Like *Colombino di Firenzuola*, or in the Neolithic menhirs, the stones of *Standing Stones* were individually spaced across the 30-foot

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\(^{126}\) Cooke, “Thinking on your Feet,” 104.
sloping hillside; however, the placement of *Standing Stones* was more calculated as they criss-crossed the hill. Starting with the highest elevation in the landscape, each successive stone was placed five feet down the slope at the steepest incline in relation to the one above, meaning that the bottom of the first stone visually aligns with the top of the second stone and so on.\(^{127}\) As a visitor walked through the space of the sculpture, he would be able to identify the changes in the land’s elevation by five-foot marked increments, making his experience and observations the content of the site-specific sculpture.

Áfangar

Serra returned to using stones once more when he created his Icelandic site-specific sculpture for the city of Reykjavik. Throughout history, stone held an important and lasting status. Laws, like in the *Code of Hammurabi*, were carved in stone. Stone monuments such as *Stonehenge* have withstood the passage of time. Stone represented permanence and held a deep connection to the land. It will continue to last well into the future.

Just like the Grand Canyon is an iconic figure for the United States, the clusters of columnar basalt stones Serra opted to use were an iconic and easily recognized feature of Iceland. The shapes of the stones were occasionally incorporated into the city’s architecture. For example, Hallgrímskirkja is a well-known church that opened in 1986, designed by the architect Guðjón Samúelsson (Figure 25). Its design incorporated the characteristics of Iceland’s basalt columns into the church’s façade, imitating the natural formation of the stone’s clusters (Figure 26).

In addition to the physical attributes of the columnar basalt stones that linked the Serra sculpture to its Icelandic space, a literary connection was also shared between the sculpture and

its location. Dr. Valgardur Egilsson, the Chairman of the Reykjavik Arts Festival at the time, identified this literary connection and shared it with Serra.\(^{128}\) Serra agreed that Áfangar was a suitable name for his work. Jón Helgason (1899-1986), one of Iceland’s most beloved Icelandic poets, wrote “Áfangar,” a poem that was the source behind the title of Serra’s Icelandic sculpture. The Icelandic poem is included in the appendix. The full title of the sculpture translates to mean Áfangar: Stations, Stops On The Road, To Stop And Look: Forward And Back, To Take It All In. Through the narrative stanzas of the poem, Helgason led the reader clockwise around the country of Iceland, stopping at specific places. The circular movement of the poem is similar to the movement of a visitor walking around Viðey, stopping at the specific locations of the sculpture that were determined by Serra.

Discussion for a commissioned sculpture for the Reykjavik Arts Festival began in 1988.\(^{129}\) Bera Nordal, the Director of the National Gallery of Iceland at that time, first approached Serra to create a sculpture for the festival, and although this followed on the heels of Tilted Arc’s removal from Federal Plaza, Serra did not discuss it or the difficulties he faced with public work.\(^{130}\) Even in Reykjavik, space was limited. Dr. Egilsson accompanied Serra and his wife, Clara Weyergraf-Serra, to potential locations for the sculpture, as the location was undetermined at this point. Possible sites Serra saw included Laugarnes (Figure 27), which was located on the north coast of Reykjavik, was near the sculpture museum of Sigurjón Ólafsson. Another location included Seltjarnarnes near the western top of the peninsula towards the outskirts of the city of Reykjavik (Figure 27).\(^{131}\)

\(^{128}\) Valgarður Egilsson, interview by author, Reykjavik, Iceland, November 30, 2013.
\(^{130}\) Valgarður Egilsson, e-mail message to author, February 12, 2015.
\(^{131}\) Egilsson, e-mail message.
To Serra, the windblown and open landscape captured his interests. The land was very unlike that of North America. Iceland offered a unique geological landscape that Serra wanted to explore. After Serra viewed the sites of Laugarnes and Seltjamarnes within and near the city of Reykjavik, he visited Geldinganes, which was linked to the mainland by a very narrow stretch of land surrounded by water on each side (Figure 27). Geldinganes was a generally spacious landscape and included views of the mountains, city, and ocean. Near the end of Serra’s visit to Geldinganes, a nor’easter storm closed in on Reykjavik. What had initially been grey clouds and wet mists turned into fierce winds and heavy rains. When Serra, as well as the others, reached the narrow stretch of land that would lead them back to the city, he found that the water had risen and, like Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, the narrow stretch of land was submerged beneath the water. Dr. Egilsson, who was familiar with Geldinganes, and despite the circumstances, led them through shin-high water for nearly 100 meters to return to the city.

Egilsson believed that this experience awoke Serra’s interest and desire to work in the open Icelandic landscape, but Geldinganes was unavailable as a potential location for the sculpture because it was saved for future city development. However, with approval from the city another location was proposed: Viðey’s northern landmass called Vesturey (Figure 27). This proposed site was also protected due to its natural and historical significance, but upon learning the relationship the sculpture would have with the landscape, Serra was granted special permission. Serra felt the relatively unchanged landscape and the lack of urbanization on Viðey held qualities unique to Iceland. He believed the landscape of Viðey was how it had

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132 Serra, Plúsfilm, interview.
133 Egilsson, interview.
134 Egilsson, interview.
135 Cooke, “Thinking on Your Feet,” 97.
always been, regardless of any farming and fishing industry that occurred in the past. A walk around the island would reveal views of Reykjavík’s cityscape, the dark surrounding ocean, and the distant mountains.

The resulting sculpture, Áfangar, 1990, spanned the entire northwestern landmass of Viðey, an island located northeast of the city of Reykjavik (Figure 5). Áfangar was comprised of a total of nine pairs (eighteen stones total) of columnar basalt pillars. The stones were all placed along elevations that have largely been published as nine and ten meters, but were instead installed at ten and eleven meters around the periphery of Vesturey. This change followed a letter from Ragnar Árnason. In his memorandum, he wrote about the preparatory survey on March 9, 1990 and informed Serra that the original proposed elevations of nine and ten would be difficult and impossible at some locations and suggested that the sculpture be carried out at elevations of ten and eleven instead. The letter indicating this change is located in the appendix, while figure 28 provides an example of the placement change.

Magnús Sædal Svavarsson, the Chief Engineer in Reykjavik’s Office of Engineering, directed the installation of the sculpture. Collaborating with Svavarsson, Serra agreed to use Árnason’s proposed contours, or elevations, that traced around the island. Regardless of this change, the stones were still cut and measured to be three and four meters high. As in Serra’s original design, the tops of all stones shared the same height.

The columnar basalt stones of Áfangar, formed in clusters as lava cools, created a unique connection with Iceland’s present, past, and future. The stones are a unique link to the history of

136 Serra, Plúsfilm, interview.
137 In figure 28, the adjusted placement of the stones at some locations can be distinguished because, as Árnason indicated in his letter, the lower elevation would have been past the edge of the cliff. The installation at this site was still very close to the edge of the island. The stones also appear slightly farther apart than initially planned.
the island on a geologic time scale. According to Serra, they bring into play an opposite quality of time and, unlike man-made materials, they seem to exist outside of a bracketed temporality and in a time that implies infinity. In regard to another site-specific sculpture, but applicable across his oeuvre, Serra stated, “I can think of that piece as being there when people won’t even know who did it. Where it went up, why it went up, and what it’s for? I think you understand when you’re there, that that’s probably going to be there longer than you are… whether it will remain and if it remains.”

After walking and looking at the space on Vesturey, Serra mapped the positions of the stones on a topographical model (Figures 29-38). Again, the topographical map was an important step in laying out the sculpture, but this was not the way the sculpture was to be viewed. It is worth noting that the placement of the stones documented on this model was not followed in the final installation. The original placement was nine and ten meters, rather than the installed contours of ten and eleven meters.

Serra selected a total of eighteen stones from a quarry at Hreppholar (Figure 39). The city wanted to maintain the appearance of Viðey, so the stones were not able to be taken directly from the landscape. Regardless, the stones were an unarguable link to Iceland’s natural landscape. The girth of the stones was not carved or altered. The only inflicted change made to the stone was the cut made to Serra’s desired length of three or four meters in height (Figure 40). Nine stones measured three meters (9.8 feet) and nine stones measured four meters (13.1 feet). The large stones were prone to breaking when pulled from the tightly formed clusters, which made them difficult to remove. Once cut to the proper size, the stones were delivered on

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141 Svavarsson, interview.
the beach of the southeast side of Vesturey. Eighteen stones were the precise amount needed for the sculpture, so the installation crew had no room for error.\textsuperscript{143}

The first pair of the basalt stones was installed during the tail end of winter (Figure 41). The air was cold and the land was frozen. Installing the work in winter made both transporting the stones across the land and digging its foundation easier, as wet and soggy ground would have made digging and transporting difficult. The installation crew worked under the leadership of Magnús Sædal Svavarsson, who was familiar with Viðey’s landscape because he had previously led the renovation of a historical house on the island.\textsuperscript{144}

Special flat ropes were used rather than round ones to limit the damage inflicted on the stone as it was moved and rotated into place. The bottom of the stone was also adapted to ensure safe and secure installation, but this portion of the stone remains hidden under ground (Figures 42-44).\textsuperscript{145} All other features of the stone were natural. Once the stone was secured in the ground, the ground was vibrated with a plate compactor and vibratory soil plate to ensure the soil compacted (Figure 45). The remainder of the installation continued without problems. To ensure installation followed his intentions, Serra provided Svavarsson with instructions (Figures 46-50).

The locations of the stones were not randomly selected. Serra selected each location based upon how the landscape rose and fell in addition to what can be seen in the distance. The stone pairs also would serve as frames that captured distant views: On the eastern side of Vesturey the stone pairs frame the mountains, and on the western side of Vesturey the stone pairs frame the city of Reykjavik and beyond. Serra wanted the landscape to be a key part of his design through his incorporated sculptural elements. He did not want the focus of visitors to be

\textsuperscript{143} Svavarsson, interview.  
\textsuperscript{144} Svavarsson, interview.  
\textsuperscript{145} Svavarsson, interview.
upon the sculpture alone. The pairs, according to Serra, could be read as “portals and passageways as well as demarcations in the open field.” Emphasizing his method of framing, Serra instructed that the angle of the top of the stone should point inwardly (Figure 48).

The installation crew risked hitting solid rock beneath the surface as they dug the foundation for the stones, and if this occurred, it would have prevented them from digging at the locations chosen by Serra. Preparing an alternative plan, Serra provided Svavarsson with instructions to complete the sculpture. The instructions detailed the actions that should be taken if the crew were to hit a rock foundation (Figure 49). If a stone’s placement had to be adjusted, the “frame” would still essentially be aimed in the same direction as originally planned. Fortunately this never occurred, and all nine pairs of stones were installed around the edge of the island at all intended locations.

Due to its specific placement, Áfangar is a site-specific sculpture and is strongly connected to its location. Vesturey was the mold for Áfangar, as the room of the museum was the mold for Serra’s molten lead pieces. The rise and fall of Viðey was seen against the fixed measures of the stones and, in a way, the stones created a constant horizontal plane and held the space within its invisible grid. The landscape had predetermined characteristics that would then inform the design of the sculpture, like the room of the museum where Serra created his splashed lead works. Surrounding Vesturey, the ocean and mountains were resilient against time. The stones remain constant against the entire space that they encompassed and defined and are a steady measure as generations of visitors pass across the landscape of Viðey. They are a reliable frame.

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147 Svavarsson, interview.
148 Svavarsson, interview.
With a love for the Icelandic landscape, Serra knew the sculpture he created for the city of Reykjavik would incorporate the existing environment. As with his other works (such as *Shift* and *Tilted Arc*), which brought out the unique characteristics of the space, the elements of Áfangar would certainly be used to bring attention to the space. The sculpture would serve as an aid in defining the experience for a visitor, causing him to stop and look at such unique surroundings.

The acts of walking and looking were woven into Serra’s history and have continually carried through many of his works including Serra’s experiences walking down Taraval Street to Seal Rock, passing through the tunnel and across the sandy shoe, as well as his exploration of the Zen gardens. These were among the experiences that Serra often referenced as he created his work. Walking was an action that Serra embraced in Áfangar’s design. The connection that made between all nine pairs had a clear, circular design around Viðey. This is underlined by the circular literary connection in the poem. Walking was required to experience the entirety of the sculpture, but the act of doing so would also reveal various features in the landscape: the mountains, the ocean, Viðey, and the city. It is a personal experience walked by each visitor; regardless of how many years pass between each visit; the stones remain a constant measure of the land.
CHAPTER III
PERIPATETICALLY PERSONAL

The hum of the ferry’s engine was muffled through the windows of Skarfabakki Harbor’s ticket office where I purchased my fare as rain pattered on the windows of the office, flipping through various brochures and searching for information about Richard Serra’s Áfangar. The white historical house rested on the island in the distance, but the sculpture was hidden by the central section of the island called Heimaey and was unreachable by mere sight (Figure 51). The slender stones of Áfangar rested on the northern part of Viðey, called Vesturey.

The ferry shuddered forward, shifting its occupants sitting on the bench. The dock continued to shrink in the distance as the ferry moved across the small stretch of ocean water toward Viðey, and we docked a few minutes past 1:30 in the afternoon at the Bæjavör pier located on Heimaey. I followed a bricked path upward and away from the dock, the hum of the ferry’s idling engine fading. That ferry was the first to arrive, as operation hours during the winter months were limited.

The path linked the historical landmarks, including the renovated white house that operated as a modern café, a church, and then led northward to Vesturey and around the island. The dreary clouds and rain were a striking contrast to the pleasant and sunny weather depicted in photographs of Áfangar but reminded me of Iceland’s temperamental weather. By the afternoon, the rain would dissipate and the grey clouds would disappear. Heading north toward Vesturey, I walked on a path covered with a patchwork of horse hooves and shoe impressions, pockmarked grey and black stones, clumps of wet grass, and muddy puddles. The North Atlantic Ocean pooled on either side of the isthmus, the neck of land connecting Vesturey to Heimaey. The
brick path turned to gravel as I came closer to Vesturey. For a moment, standing at the top of the narrow strip of land, the hills of the terrain unfolded, and then rolling back behind each other as I descended into Vesturey. Multiple pairs of Áfangar’s stones could be seen, but not all nine pairs at once.

The gravel path traced around the perimeter of Vesturey but was a considerable distance away from Áfangar, so for closer interaction with the work, I needed to leave the pebbled path and trek through ankle-twisting knobs of grass (Figure 52). Stepping from one grass clump to the next was challenging and exacerbated by the wind blowing cold mist and rain. The land was soaked with water, so any misstep would have landed my shoes in ankle-deep puddles. The treeless landscape offered no resistance against the cold, wet wind and it would not be long before the rain turned to snow, freezing the ground beneath and blanketing it in ice and snow.

Like Serra’s *Shift*, in which a visitor had the choice to enter the sculpture’s space from either direction, the direction to take was not specified in Áfangar. Jón Helgason’s poem, which was the inspiration for the title of the sculpture, took readers clockwise around Iceland, stopping at particular locations, but the sculpture could be explored in either direction.

Once I was past the dark, stony beach, the first pair of Áfangar’s stones came into view with the second pair peeking above the hill (Figure 53). For over two decades, the columnar basalt stones stood poised and stiff amidst the curving and rolling landscape. Strides away from the first pair of stones, their heights towered over a visitor. It was not difficult to deduce which stone had been cut to three and four meters, done so that the heights were level when the stones rested on differing elevation contours. Continuing clockwise around Vesturey, the first four

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151 The pairs of stones in the model for Áfangar were numerically labeled counter clockwise, but this reinforced the idea that the work could be experienced from either direction. A visitor could also cut across the space and determine his experience.
pairs I encountered framed scenes of Reykjavik within Serra’s defined stone portals. The distant city spanned far enough along the horizon that it was constantly in sight from the western side of the island (Figure 54). Another pair of stones and two more pairs of stones waited across the central path (Figure 55).

Looking ahead, beyond the second pair of stones, the third and fourth pairs rested in the distance (Figure 56). Only by walking across the land’s varying elevations did the pairs reveal themselves from behind the golden grassy hills. Nearing the fourth pair, which was the first element of the sculpture installed on Vesturey, I observed that the stones of the fourth pair were closer together, capturing views of the island’s landscape and distant views of Reykjavik. Its location at the northern peak of the island also opened its views to the east, but the thick mist hid the distant mountains (Figure 57). One stone belonging to the fourth pair had a slight lean (Figure 58), a reminder that nature would be a persistent adversary for the sculpture. For as long as the stones would stand, the sculpture would serve as a constant measurement against all changes, framing its surroundings.

The fifth pair of stones, with the sixth barely noticeable over the hill, came next (Figure 59). The width of the fifth pair was farther apart\textsuperscript{152} than the other pairs passed up to that point. The sixth pair’s stones were even more spread apart, but remain considerably closer to the edge of the island. The wet ground was slippery and the waves from the North Atlantic Ocean crashed loudly below. From this side of the island, facing to the west, the mountains held the main focus of the stone portals. As the rain let up, the massive mountain ranges began to emerge from the cloud and mist in the distance. Blue skies continued to crack through the grey sky with each minute that passed. As the cloudy sky cleared, the bulk and outline of the mountain’s peaks

\textsuperscript{152} This placement was different that in the planned topographical map, showing that the placement changed when Serra had to adjust the design to accommodate the newly suggested elevations.
appeared. Nearing the seventh pair, a slightly steep hill led to where the pair rested (Figure 60). The grass was nested around the bottom of the slender, dark stones. The cityscape was in the southern distance as I neared the eighth pair. This pair was installed at the ledge of the hill, and a flat black beach was at the bottom of the hillside, which was where all eighteen stones had been delivered (Figure 61). Facing south and walking in the direction of the last pair, the first and final pair aligned, completing my walk (Figure 62).
CHAPTER IV
THE NOTEBOOK DRAWINGS

Introduction to Drawings

Serra’s sculptures, as he described, were a way of ‘drawing’ in space, but he also practiced drawing in the traditional sense. The notebook, also referred to as notational drawings, were created at the site of the sculpture and provided Serra with the means to filter the information collected through his observations. They allowed Serra to extract what was most important about the sculpture.\(^{153}\) As Serra’s sculptural works increased in size and became more compositionally complex, drawing became a necessary step for him to process his progress and understand the work. It slowed him down to reflect on what he had completed.\(^{154}\) The drawings represented the purest form visual translation of his experience. They are Serra’s attempt to uncover and document a sculpture’s volume and edge as he moved through the space\(^{155}\) and are, as a result, very much connected to the sculpture’s site-specific nature.

The notebook drawings for Áfangar were completed in Iceland.\(^{156}\) Select drawings from the collection donated to the National Gallery of Iceland will be discussed. Notably, only small portions of the existing Áfangar notebook drawings are publicly available. Few had been exhibited and published thus far with many others held in Serra’s private collection. He did not intend to exhibit them, considering them to be unrefined.\(^{157}\) The notebook drawings were finished in a distinguishable style from other types of Serra’s drawings, such as his installation

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\(^{153}\) Serra, “Notes on Drawings,” 12.
\(^{154}\) Other sculptors, such as Henri Moore and A. Giacometti and many more, also used drawing as an evaluator.
\(^{155}\) Serra, “Notes on Drawings,” 11.
drawings that hang from ceiling to floor or the more formal paint-stik drawings where thick medium is pressed through a screen to build texture on the paper. While the styles of the notebook drawings and his other formal drawings differed, Serra relied on a single color in each: black.

The color black offered neutrality, which is why Serra employed this color in his work. Color, at times, did not allow a work to be neutral. For example, van Gogh used yellows and greens in his painting, *Night Café*, to create a seedy climate and Picasso employed somber colors during his blue period during the early 1900s as he struggled with poverty and depression.

Serra’s drawings were not meant to be architecturally accurate. He considered the latter to be informal, but necessary. Situation often arose that required precise illustrations to guide the progress of the sculpture.\(^{158}\) He generally avoided intricate compositions because large amounts of detail interfered with the distilled, black lines and the purest information he wanted to capture.

Serra thought of black as a primordial and fundamental color. According to Bernice Rose, it was a color that existed since the beginning of time,\(^ {159}\) connecting the color to timelessness, which was certainly shared with Áfangar’s dark, ageless stones. The notebook drawings, of course, lacked the full mass and weight of the sculpture’s tangible stones, but Serra attempted to suggest the weight of the heavy material in the notebook drawings through thick, black marks (Figure 63).\(^ {160}\) They were a way for Serra to overcome the problem of how to activate memory. He stated that they made “buried material available, to learn how to re-scan what has been rejected or suppressed. If memory is to function recollections must be triggered


again and again to rediscover the trail of footprints.” Like reviewing class notes, a student recalls the most important points from a lecture, and in a similar way, Serra referred to the notebook drawings at a later time to revisit the work and search for a deeper understanding of his experience with the sculpture.

The notebook drawings provided Serra with a repository of ideas all based on his observational experiences. They were an index of forms for him to understand the elevation and placement of the basalt stones in the open field and how they rotated within that field as it was walked. He explained, “Often, if you want to understand something, you have either to take it apart or to apply another kind of language to it.” Serra applied the language – his language – of drawing as he interpreted Áfangar.

The notebook drawing, entitled Icelandic Sketchbook, 1989, (Figure 64) was not part of the drawings donated to the National Gallery of Iceland but is an appropriate first example to illustrate here due to its shared qualities to the donated drawings and his earlier works. Icelandic Sketchbook includes two notebook pages yet the order in which they were created remains unclear. The first page of Icelandic Sketchbook includes four marks totaling two pairs and the page below contains six marks totaling three pairs. These marks represent the columnar basalt stones as Serra saw them in the landscape but without the details of Viðey’s terrain, explaining why some of the marks appear longer than others and float on the white page. In reality, the stones are all the same height.

The National Gallery of Iceland notebook drawings are composed of a few, quick, gestural lines. Serra had to sketch quickly in order to capture such fleeting moments, so the

165 The sculpture was completed in 1990, so this date may reference a time during the project’s early planning.
rapid black marks acted as shorthand abbreviations documenting his movement in the space of the sculpture. Serra said he did not want to create drawings where the line appeared to simply “ice-skate” across the surface, but this, of course, conflicted with the linear nature of the medium. Regardless, Serra wanted the information contained in the drawings to be substantial and informative through the use of a minimal amount of marks.

Serra drew what he observed as he walked around the periphery of the island, then back and forth again across its width. He sketched the columnar basalt stones from different angles. The movement captured in the linear marks of Icelandic Sketchbook was similar to the drawings Serra made after the completion of Circuit in 1972. To create the series of these drawings, entitled 9 Views of a Quarter Section 4 Plate Piece (Circuit), 1972 (Figure 65), Serra walked through the space of the room. The drawings were displayed with the intention to be viewed sequentially and the vertical lines marked the sequence of opened and closed spaces of the sculpture.

Drawing was integrated into Serra’s daily routine and was a way he could practice hand-eye coordination. Maintaining such an exercise required self-discipline and consistency, which was underlined by the habit of carrying a notebook with him on a daily basis. The notebooks spanned days or weeks without limit to the number of notebooks used for a particular work or location. Serra had notebooks shipped in advance to Iceland, filling one after the other to document the largest site-specific work that he had ever attempted up to that point.

The series of drawings, 9 Views of a Quarter Section 4 Plate Piece (Circuit), illustrated Serra’s movement in the space of the sculpture were not meant to be cinematic but rather to document the process of Serra’s observations and experiences with the sculpture as he moved.

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166 Serra, Richard Serra: Áfangar Icelandic Series, introduction.
The drawings helped Serra interpret how *Circuit* organized and redefined the space, providing a visual reference of the sculpture. As discussed in the previous chapter, the restrictions of the space that were imposed on the sculpture were also imposed on the drawings. The drawings were, after all, the consequence of the sculpture’s spatial organization. Had *Circuit* been installed in a space with different properties, or different restrictions, the drawings produced would have also been obviously different.

**Notebook Drawings from the National Gallery of Iceland**

The number of pages included in the original *Áfangar* notebook gifted to the gallery by Serra was unrecorded at the time of the donation, as was the issue of whether they were all from the same notebook. The nineteen drawings were removed from the binding so that the loose-leaf pages could be exhibited individually. When the donated drawings were exhibited at the museum they were displayed in an order not related to the original drawn sequence. 169 The loose-leaf pages, which not all will be discussed in this paper, measured 31 cm (12.2 inches) by 27.5 cm (10.8 inches), each separated with a sheet of opaque, archival glassine and contained in a hardback grey cloth cover. The outside edges of the grey exterior were heavily dabbed and smeared with black fingerprints left by the artist. The paint stick, thickly drawn, had a waxy smell that filled the air as the pages were turned. 170 Even though the drawings were created over two decades ago, the smell of the oily marks was still strong.

Unlike *Icelandic Sketchbook*, which focused on only the stones without any marks indicating the landscape, the drawings from the National Gallery of Iceland included ground

lines from the landscape and suggested depth (foreground, middle ground, and background). Information about the surroundings, the cityscape, ocean, or distant mountains was not included but this was inferred and could be imagined. The lines used to create the drawing were simple linear strokes rather than detailed sketches that indicated blades of the golden grass or cast shadows on the land. It is unknown whether these drawings were made in the morning or at dusk, in the winter or in spring.\textsuperscript{171} Multiple overlapping lines created depth in the field (Figure 66) and others included only a single horizon plane (Figure 67).

The rise and fall of the landscape, a shared elevation, a shared spatial plane, and framed views were all features (in addition to movement) that Serra captured in his notebook drawings. To ensure similar elevations, Serra selected the stones to be installed on parallel contours that wrapped around the island. All pairs are on the same contours, or track.\textsuperscript{172} As a result of this uniformity, the stones enclose a space beneath their heights, creating an invisible enclosure for visitors entering the space. Finally, Serra mentioned that he selected the locations intentionally, and the pairs acted as “portals” for specific views both into the distance. Additionally, a result of this design connects one pair of stones to the next. These are views that are unique to Iceland.

\textsuperscript{171} We can assume that the drawings donated to the National Gallery of Iceland were completed in a time closely following the sculpture’s completion. Other notebook drawings may have been completed at other times because Serra had visited the location multiple times. However, without this prior knowledge of the timeline, the views of these drawings could only be speculated.

\textsuperscript{172} Serra, Plûsfilm, interview. Serra remarked, “The nature of this piece really isn’t about looking at the stones, although if one wants to go and look at individual stones and realize its width and girt and its butt ends, or whatever, and understand the elevation fall between the stones in a very close proximity, there’s a certain fulfillment in doing that. But really the piece is about measuring the land and the fall of the land and following two elevational folds continuously around the periphery of the island and what I enjoyed about the piece walking today is it makes you look into the elevations of the land in a way that you would not if the pieces were not there. It makes you see into the landscape and concentrate on the landscape and pay attention to the landscape in a way that one doesn’t do because of one’s laziness or of one’s inability to have a device or a measure to bring you into some concentrated focus on the land. Particularly in a landscape like this where there are very few vertical elevations, trees or whatever, this piece sets a very definite measure in relation to your walking and looking. I found the movement of the entire island at some points it would expand and at other points it would contract, some distances seemed very short and some distances, which I thought were short, seemed very long, stones are framed within stones,” 1:29-2:49.
and they will serve as a constant tool for visitors as the landscape and cityscape change over time.

The first group of drawings, guided by the impressions on the reverse side of the paper, was selected to discuss the rise and fall of the landscape (Figure 68). This figure is meant to illustrate the uneven land of Viðey yet also show the level tops of the stones. Indications of distant views, such as the cityscape or the mountains, were not included, so the correct direction corresponding with each drawing was essentially unknown; however, this allowed creativity and flexibility in ordering the drawings.

Figure 68, illustrating the rise and fall of the land, include three pairs of stones. The first pair rests on the left, near the edge of the cliffs that taper into the implied ocean below. The second and third pairs of stones were drawn in varied placements in the hilly landscape, with one appearing in the center and the other farther to the right. This compilation suggests what Serra, or a visitor, may see as he passes across the highest point on Viðey’s isthmus. Looking at the land below from this point showcases only a few pairs of stones, yet not all pairs are visible at once (Figure 69) due to the spanning distance.

The combination of these images together provide an example of the varying rises and falls in the landscape and how the stones acted as a constant point of measurement across the land. The shared elevations of all the pairs across the rolling and hilly landscape was evident in Figure 68, but more so in the next rendering (Figure 70). The two heights of the stone can be identified in the pair on the left (one is taller than the other, with one at 4 and the other at 3 meters). The pair on the right remains hidden behind the hill. Even though these two pairs rest in different spots in the landscape, they both share the same height. The green line in the
rendering shows that the stones of the drawing share this same height, the same level, despite the hilly ground around around them.

The shared elevations also create a plane across the stones, like an invisible grid that connects all the stones and contains the landscape in this gridded space (Figure 71). The plane is a constant height, while the ground below it varies. The stones are much taller than the average person, so a visitor is contained within the defined space of the sculpture, walking within the imaginary grid that stretches across Viðey as the stones act as the points of connection.

An additional feature of the constant pairs of stones is that they are placed to “frame” particular points of view (Figure 72). In this example, the foreground stones frame a distant pair, providing the next location for the visitor to walk to around Viðey. What is in the distance could be imagined, whether it was views of the mountains or city. The pairs create a dialogue between the landscape, elevation, and surroundings, which is also a characteristic that appeared in other sculpture by Serra, such as *Elevations for Mies*, 1985-88\(^{173}\) (Figure 73) in which two forged blocks are placed on axis with the center of the Garden of Haus Esters and are leveled in relation to the architecture; *Maillart Extended*, 1988,\(^{174}\) (Figure 74) which is composed of post-and-lintel steel beams connecting the ground to the main walkway, over the staircases, and its material linking to the iron framing of the surrounding structure; and lastly, *Equal Elevations On and In (To Kathy and Keith)*, 1988\(^{175}\) (Figure 75) where two plates are set at a distance opposite each other in a sloping field that frames the house and driveway, and each plate is placed in a particular location to prompt a different reading of the field.

Movement

Áfangar simultaneously means “stations, stops on the road, to stop and look: forward and back, to take it all in.” On the grounds of the sculpture, Serra experienced these actions firsthand. As he hurriedly moved across the landscape of Viðey he did not have time to protect his notebook pages from smears, ghost-impressions, or his own fingerprints. Even specks of grass also became stuck in the thick, black medium (Figure 76). Using the ghost impressions as a reference, movement can be identified in the drawings by piecing together the order in which the drawings were made. As in the drawings 9 Views of a Quarter Section 4 Plate Piece (Circuit), the sequential movement was not meant to be calculated or stop-motion animation but rather to illustrate the changes that occurred in the landscape as Serra moved. “By turning the pages,” Serra explained, “the unfolding sequence gives a vivid sense of travelling through the site… they provide a mapping of observations en route.”

While a handful of the nineteen drawings from the National Gallery of Iceland remain independent from the order, others follow a sequence. Selected groups of drawings illustrate this sequence and movement, which is indicated by the ghost impressions on the reverse side of the drawing. The first group includes four drawings (Figures 77-83). The ghost impressions on the back of the pages indicate the sequence that Serra drew them in the notebook (Figures 78, 80, 82, 85, 88, 90, 93). Serra used two simple lines in the first drawing to imply a hill rising above the ground-level line. Two pairs can be seen, but the right pair is mostly hidden behind the hill (Figure 77). Both pairs share the same height. The impression on the reverse side of

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176 These images are interspersed between the drawings included in the figures and are labeled accordingly.
178 These are independent from the sequence because the ghost impressions on the reverse side of the pages do not match the drawings included in the collection. Particularly, Figure 148 is unique because a columnar basalt stone is drawing with suggested volume of a three-dimensional object, similar to how artists draw cubes.
179 Sandi Thouvenin, 2013.
Figure 77 indicates the next drawing (Figure 79), which includes three pairs of stones. The front pair frames the distant pair, which mostly is hidden behind the hill. The pair in the middle of the landscape rests to the right of the composition. Interpreting the movement to get from the first image to the second image, Serra walked closer to the stones (Figure 79) and gained higher ground to see more around him. This would allow the front pair of stones to frame the stones in the far distance. Unlike the preceding drawing, the tops of the stones in this drawing do not match, yet in reality they share the same height. These drawings help to illustrate the complexity of Viðey’s rolling and changing landscape as the land is walked.

The impression (Figure 80) next leads to a drawing of a single ground line (Figure 81). Continuing forward, Serra moves past the stones in the foreground, which leave his view as he walks away from them. The pair of stones that had once rested on the right, in the middle ground, becomes the pair of stones in the foreground. The distant pair barely peeks over the line of the hill. The distance between the stones can be deceiving in the drawings. The trek from one pair to the next is a longer and tiring journey. The last drawing in this group is a bit different than the others (Figure 82-83) because it implies the ocean surrounding the edges of the island, filling in the spaces between the fore-, middle-, and background in the composition with very few lines. The stones rest on the sloping cliff.

Recalling Serra’s childhood memory of walking across the beach in California where he identified that traveling in one direction was quite different than the return, the first of two sequential drawings of another example begin with a single pair of stones nestled in the landscape (Figure 84), followed by the impression on the reverse side of the page (Figure 85). In this image, the two stones are different lengths (3 and 4 meters), yet share similar heights due to

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180 Serra, Plúsfilm, interview. Serra stated, “The fact that the stones are placed perpendicularly to the land, if you’re far away from them and you can’t see over a ridge, it’ll tell you what that next piece of landscape is doing, which you’re deprived of seeing.”
the slope of the land, which descends towards the right side of the page, suggesting the edge of the island. If the edge of the island was on the right side in the first image, it seems strange for the edge of the island to be suggested on the left in the second image (Figure 86). The lines zigzag sharply on the left. However, if Serra (who was facing forward in Figure 84) turned to face behind him, it would be accurate for the land to descend on the left. These drawings are made one after the other, but Serra did not make the drawings by following a strict, straight path. He walked forward, back, and side to side. It is plausible that the second drawing depicted what he saw behind him.

Three drawings also follow a sequence in a third grouping. The first of the three drawings (Figure 87-88) includes two pairs of stones. The pair on the left is another example of the stones cut to 3 and 4 meters. The pair in the distance is hidden behind the hill, yet the tops of the stones share the same height. A single, curving line creates the ground of Viðey. As Serra moved forward, the pair that had been mostly hidden behind the curving hill rises above it (Figure 89-90). The arch in the land is still included in the illustration. Continuing to move, he turned his attention to one pair of stones in his next sketch (Figure 91). This figure still has the same arching hill that the pair of stones on the left rested upon, but the hill is more pronounced. The different measurements of the stones are more evident.

A final sequential example shows that Serra also used the drawings as studies. In the first (Figure 92-93), Serra drew two pairs of stones (one framing the other in the distance). His marks suggested ground lines and also implied that the edge of the island on the right. The following drawing captured the same scene of three more studies (Figure 94). While the placement of the stones is the same, the compositions differ slightly from the other. In particular, the top drawing uses fewer lines to describe the landscape while the bottom drawing uses more lines to detail it.
This example provides scholars with more information about the role Serra’s notebook drawings
served, using them for capturing sequences, distant views, and small studies.
CONCLUSION

In his youth, Serra took careful note of his surroundings while walking across the sand shore in California, marveling at the changing environment depending on his movement. Serra has developed a renowned sculptural oeuvre by his outlining natural settings; he highlights what is there without disruption. He remarked, “I don’t see [Áfangar] as anything detracting from the landscape. If anything, it describes what the land does.”181 With the features of the island highlighted, it was no wonder that the city of Reykjavik opted to have the sculpture built in the openness of Viðey. Landscape and horizon expand and contract, sea and sky become an overwhelming presence, and the stark vastness of Viðey is exposed in this site-specific installation.

Beginning with his professional artistic career in New York, Serra developed his views to making site-specific sculpture. He started working on a more epic scale and eventually outgrew many interior gallery spaces. Outdoor spaces, while they offered a larger amount of space, may have included characteristics that were not ideal for sculpture. For Serra, his site-specific sculptures could not simply be placed on any site and be expected to function properly. The design of the sculpture took into consideration the characteristics of a specific site and would, in turn, redefine the location and also the experience for visitors.

Áfangar was quite exemplary in this aspect as it spread out over the western part of Viðey, strongly influencing visitors’ experiences of the natural surroundings. Columnar basalt stones, the result of intense heat and cooling following a volcanic event, were used to reference the geological history of the island. The nine pairs of stones, each installed at the elevational contours of ten meters and the other eleven meters above sea level around Vesturey, a change

181 Serra, Plúsfilm, interview.
made prior to the installation of the sculpture. It would have been impossible at some of the pair’s original locations to install them at nine and ten meters. However, this change did not impact the most essential qualities of the sculpture.

More importantly the purpose of the pairs was to frame particularly selected views and make the visitor more aware of his landscape as it changed due to movement. The pillar that stands lower is four meters long and the other three meters, so the tops of the pillars are level. The distance between is determined based upon the varying elevation of the land. From any given vantage point, visitors see one or two, sometimes more, pairs of stones. The pairs, as my research revealed, were placed so that the shortest side of the stone faced inward and the longer side outward. This caused the pair to accentuate what was seen between to two stones.

With the support of the city of Reykjavik, Serra constructed Áfangar keeping in mind all the elements that had currently been in play around the site, pulling from his past experiences building work in open spaces. Though, this open treeless landscape was not the first location for Serra’s sculpture to be explored in Reykjavik. Before this, as Dr. Valgarður Egilsson revealed during our interview, Serra was shown site within the city that included Seltjarnarnes and Laugarnes. Serra felt the open landscape of Viðey would work best as the sculpture would highlight features unique to Iceland. Yet again, Serra saw the sculpture as an augmentation to the land, dealing with what was available and creating a perception of it.

The notational drawings, reflecting the sculpture’s integrated design, were very much connected and dependent on the site. Serra’s drawings were described by Lynne Cooke as a two-dimensional “peripatetic vision,” illustrating a combination of walking and looking that led Serra to think about the relationship between space and his sculpture.182 They were intertwined with Serra’s movement and each drawing was based on the characteristics of the sculpture as it

was positioned in a particular place in the landscape, helping to interpret it. Referencing a
handful of the drawings from the National Gallery of Iceland, it was helpful to group together
several sequences that occurred. These sequences reveal that movement was a key feature of this
work (essentially, it must be explored entirely to be fully experienced) and that the movement
was determined by visitors. There was not a correct way to experience the work.

The sculpture, which celebrates its quarter-of-a-century anniversary this year, will
continue to connect land, sculpture, and visitor, just as it has in the past, well into the future. The
landscape, which the sculpture brings attention to, changes as a result of the visitor’s movement
and creates a behavioral space. While a visitor likely does not carry notebooks to document his
experience, he will still make observations about the changing landscape and become aware of
himself in the space.

Regarding Áfangar, Serra remarked, “This is a very satisfying experience to walk this
island and have these stones measure the land and measure your relation to your footfalls as you
walk the path here…I think there are a lot of ways of knowing and understanding the piece and I
hope people take the time to enjoy it for what it’s worth.”183 Just as Serra admired the size of the
tanker in his youth, visitors across all generations have the opportunity to walk around the
perimeter of Vesturey and find the surroundings awe-inspiring.

183 Serra, Plúsfilm, interview.
Appendixes

a. Letter from Ragnar Árnason

Environmental Art Work in Viðey island

A short memorandum about the preparatory survey

An approximate location of the nine pairs of sculpture was made, and marked with a 3/4" iron pipe at a place, which was supposed to be approximately 3 m from the 10 m contour line, as it is shown in the map 1:2000. (Points x12) The heights of the pipe ends have been levelled with a relative accuracy of appr. + - 4 m between sites. After the levelling, it was obvious, that the contour lines of the map were wrong of about 0 to + 1.4 m. The 9 and 10 m points were located at each site, but at some sites it is very difficult or even impossible (Site 5) or dangerous to find appropriate 9 m places. It may therefore be suggested, that Mr. Serra's idea could be better carried out at the contours 10 and 11 m, instead of the 9 and 10 m lines. This might be discussed already at the beginning of a tour to Viðey island with Mr. Serra.

The reference level of the Reykjavik height measuring system, on which the contour lines of the map are based, is about one feet (0.326 m) under the Mean Sea Level (MSL), as it is calculated by the IceI. Hydrographic Service (Sjómælingar Islands) from observations during the years 1956-1975. There is a secular trend of rising of the MSL, so that at the present time the difference between the reference level of the height measuring system and the MSL might now be about 41 cm. More exact information could be obtained from the IceI. Hydrographic Service if necessary. - This - of course - might be irrelevant to Mr. Serra, but I think it should be pointed out to him anyhow.

Ragnar Árnason
Original Icelandic poem, Áfangar, by Jón Helgason

b. Original Icelandic poem, Áfangar, by Jón Helgason

Liðið er hátt á aðra öld;
enn mun þó reimit á Kili,
þar sem í snjónum bræðra beið
beisklegur aldurtíli;
skuggar lyftast og líða um hjarn
likt eins og mynd á þilí;
hleypur svo einn með hærusekk,
 hverfur í dimmu gili.

Þverhöggvið gnaprí þúfubjarg
þrútið af lamstri veðra;
Ægir greiðir þvi önnur slóg,
ekki er hann mildur héðra;
iðkuð var þar á eftsu brún
þröttin vorra feðra:
Kolbeinn sat hæst á klettasnös,
kváðst á við hann úr neðra.

Nú er í Drítvik dauðleg vist,
drungalegt nesið kalda;
þjást ekki lengur seglin hvít
sjóndeildarhringinn þjálða;
Tröllakirkjunnar tíðasöng
tóna þau Hlér og Alda;
Fullsterk mun þungt að færa á stall,
fair sem honum valda.

Upp undir hvelfing Helgafell's
hlýlegum geislum stafar;
frænda sem þangað fór í kvöld
fagna hans liðnir afar;
situr að teiti sveitin öll,
saman við langeld skrafar,
meðan oss hina hremmir fast
helkuldi myrkrar gráfar.

Alvotur stendur upp að knjámr
öldubrjóturinn kargi
kagandi fram á kalda röst
kvikuð af fugløþvargi;
býsn eru meðan broðhætt jórð
brestur ekki undir fargi
þar sem á hennar holu skurn
hlaðið var Látrabjargi.

Kögur og Horn og Heljarvik
huga minn seíða lóngum;
tæíst hið salta sjávarbrim
sundur á grýttum lóngum;

Hljóðabunga við Hrollaugsborg
herðið á stríðum söngrum,
meðan sinn ólma organleik
ofvíðrið heyr á Dröngum.

Ærið er bratt við Ólafsfjörð,
ógurleg klettahöllin;
teygist hinn myrki múli fram,
minnist við bøðafollin;
kennd er við Hálflán hurðin raðð,
hér mundi gengt í fjöllin;
ein er þar kona krossi viðgð
komin í blæð við tröllin.

Liggur við Krepplittil rúst,
leiðirna ekki greiðar;
kyrja þar dimman kvéðason
Kverkfjallavættir reiðar;
frið var í draumum fjallahjófs
farsældin norðan heiðar,
þegar hann sá eitt samfellt hjarn
sunnam til Herðubreiðar.

Séð hef ég skrautleg suðræn blóm
sölvermd í hlýjum garði;
þubró og ljós og aðra vírkt
enginn til þeirra sparóði;
mér var þo lóngum meir í hug
melgrasskúfurinn herðið,
runninn upp þar sem Kaldakvisl
kemur úr Vonarskarði.

Eldflóðið steypist ofan hlið,
undaðar moldir flaka;
logandi standa í langri röð
ljósin á gigastíka;
hnjúkarnir sjálfir hrikta við,
hornsteinar landsins braka,
þegar hin rámur regindjúp
ræskja sig upp um Laka.

Vötnin byltast að Brunasandi,
bólgnar þar kvikan gljúp;
landið ber sér á breiðum herðum
bjartan og svalan hjúp;
þótunninn stendur með jarnstaf i hendi
jaðarfna við Lómagnúp,
kallar hann mig, og kallar hann þig
kuldaeg rödd og djúp.
Over a century has passed;  
Kjölur is haunted still,  
where two brothers in the snow  
met their bitter end;  
shadows rise and flow over the white  
like an image being cast;  
one runs with a sack of wool,  
and disappears in the rocks.

Þúfubjarg jagged stands  
bruised by winds and weather;  
beaten by Ægir’s hand  
harsh as any master;  
on its highest peak  
the site of ancient sport:  
Kolbeinn sat on the cliff,  
matching his wit with the nether.

Glory has abandoned Dritvík,  
Empty and cold on the point;  
white sails paint no more  
the horizon around;  
The tune of Tröllakirkja  
sung by the waves;  
heavy is Fullsterkur on its throne,  
few are the men who best it.

By the dome of Helgafell  
warm columns bathe;  
cousin who departed tonight  
hailed by those long passed;  
his neighbours feast tonight,  
at warm flames they dine,  
while we who remain bitterly feel cold bite of the dark grave.

Alvotur in knee deep seas  
dauntless wavebreaker  
stands in the cold spray of swell  
home to countless birds;  
it is a wonder that the fragile earth does not shatter and crack  
where its hollow shell was burdened with the weight of Látrabjarg.

Kögur and Horn and Heljarvík  
long have they drawn me in;  
the salty waters break and shatter  
on the stony shore;  
Hljóðabunga at Hrollaugsborg  
sings it harsh melody,  
while the storm plays its feisty sound  
on the organ on Drangar  
Steep are the slopes at Ólafsfjörður  
terrifying mountain halls;  
the dark cliff reaches out,  
stoping at the troubled water;  
red door with Hálfðán’s name,  
a mountain entrance holds;  
a woman of the cross was there to be found  
but now is one with the trolls.

Small ruins at Kreppa lie,  
it is no easy way;  
dark poetry there recites  
euneasy wights of Kverkfjöll;  
the mountain thief dreamt of the land up north,  
when his gaze set upon endless snow south to Herðubreið.

Fancy southern blossoms  
warmed by light of sun;  
tenderness and care none has spared;  
my thoughts dwell rather on the sturdy lyme,  
struggling where Kaldakvísl breaks from Vonarskarð.

The lava pours down the hill,  
twisting the earth and turning;  
flaming bright row upon row  
lights on crater candles;  
the peaks themselves shudder,  
cornerstones of the land creak,  
when the husky depths rumble and hem up Laki.

Unrest is in the water at Brunasandur,  
unfirm magma swells;  
the land is covered wide and far in a black and chilly shroud;  
the giant stands with an iron staff resides at Lómagnúpur,  
calling my name, calling your name in his husky cool voice.
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