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Interpretive Conventions in Site-Specific and Experimental Art: An analysis of Richard Serra's Sculptures and Joseph McElroy's Fictions

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- 1 In his essay "9/11 emerging," Joseph McElroy brings into his comments on the destruction of the World Trade Center reflections on a quite different New York destruction, that of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* in 1989. This gigantic work becomes a locus of questions about the role of art in the twenty-first century, especially after the terrorist attack of September eleventh. Likewise, it may suggest parallels between Serra's sculpture and McElroy's fiction, as both artists derange our perceptual and interpretive structures.
- 2 Serra's work has focused on the use of industrial material to question our relationship to space. As he states regarding the sculpture *Shift* (1970-72),
 what [he] wanted was a dialectic between one's perception of the place in totality and one's relation to the field as walked [....]. The intent of the work is an awareness of physicality in time, space, and motion (*Writings* 11-12).
- 3 He later produced large sculptures involving gigantic pieces of steel combined into "Torqued Ellipses" (1996-99), for example.
- 4 *Tilted Arc*, a 12-foot high, 2.5 inches thick, and 12-foot long curved plate installed in Federal Plaza in 1981, is an example of such site-specific sculptures. In 1980, Serra explains in an interview with Douglas Crimp that
 the intention is to bring the viewer into the sculpture. The placement of the sculpture will change the space of the plaza. After the piece is created, the space will be understood primarily as a function of the sculpture (*Writings* 127).

- 5 The change in people's relationship to space did have an impact on New Yorkers: upon its installation, the sculpture was instantly controversial. In 1984, Judge Edward Re, Chief Judge of the U.S. International Court of Trade, started a campaign to take the sculpture away on the basis of the obstruction of the plaza and its aesthetic unpleasantness. Regional Administrator of the Federal General Services Administration, William Diamond, built a case against Serra's work, emphasizing that the sculpture disturbed people's movements on the Plaza, attracted graffiti and homeless populations, made it impossible to hold public events, and put the Plaza in danger of terrorist attacks (the steel plate could be used to propel a bomb toward the federal office buildings). Serra fought the General Services Administration until 1989, when the sculpture was removed. The *Tilted Arc* controversy asks questions about the power of art and its function in public places.
- 6 Comparable questions resurfaced after the destruction of the World Trade Center, when Serra insisted on the relationship between art and ethics. In a letter to the *New York Times* responding to Karlheinz Stockhausen's remarks after September 11th 2001, Serra confronts "Mr. Stockhausen[s]'s] postulat[ion of] an equation between an art performance and mass murder, thereby transforming mass murder into an art spectacle" (2). Serra warns us about such "nihilistic distortion[s] of the ethical imperatives to make art" through "the aestheticization of reality; in this instance, the aestheticization of terror" (2). While Serra's work has often been controversial, he refuses "Mr. Stockhausen's ambition [. . .] to compete with the spectacle of destruction and its effect on its 'audience,' which he described as the necessity for all of us 'to rearrange our brains'" (2). Serra's insistence on the role of art in a post 9/11 world and its ethical imperatives concurs with McElroy's reflections about the destruction of the World Trade Center. He writes in "9/11 emerging":

The reality of the attack [. . .] isn't the only reality, as Serra, a brave maker and strong writer, knows. And the distinction he makes so incisively reminds me that the dialogue doesn't end here in languages strict like Serra's or metaphorically loose like Stockhausen's" ("9/11").
- 7 McElroy's comments question the boundaries between art and social life, particularly in a postmodern context in which the relationship between art and reality are complex. In this context, McElroy asks about his experience of the 9/11 attack: "How do I make use of this change?", "What use is my experience?"
- 8 Pondering the use of art after the destruction of the twin towers, McElroy brings up the destruction of Serra's sculpture which, for him, is another mode of terrorism that interrogates the role of artists today. McElroy thinks of *Tilted Arc* as

an outside work, conceived not for a clean, well-lighted art museum space but for the public to see in relation to that site and hopefully (to name one feeling) think about it in a context Serra has called 'reality' ("9/11").
- 9 McElroy adds that *Tilted Arc* is

a way of being in that space that might with art challenge, not without complementing, an architecture that has nothing to do with art except as it might complement the art that arises in its vicinity ("9/11").
- 10 Here, McElroy asserts that *Tilted Arc* called for new perceptions.
- 11 McElroy remembers that Serra, on the other hand, stated that art is not useful. In differentiating architecture and sculpture, Serra explains, "I don't think [my sculptures] ever become architecture because they have no architectural purpose. By

definition, architecture has a utilitarian function; sculpture does not" (*Writings* 162). McElroy takes issues with Serra's statement:

Serra sets out to change the way you look at (and are in) space. How you are used to seeing it. I believe I could speak of that change of perception. What use it is, how it adds to me. What you could do with it. The change in how we might see. Through, nonetheless, as Serra would have it, the supposed non-usefulness of art" ("9/11").

- 12 Although McElroy grants that, literally, art has no use, he thinks that art is "useful indirectly." He explains that "being exposed to a work of art adds to a person in a way that can't be separated from usefulness" ("Personal"). Here, McElroy elucidates a contradiction in Serra's vision on the use of art. Indeed, it might appear surprising to think of Serra's work as art for art's sake. *Tilted Arc* provoked a political turmoil in New York City during the trials about its destruction, and Serra himself reminds us of the ethical urgency of art in his letter of October 21st, 2001 to *The New York Times*. It thus seems strange that the sculptor denies any usefulness in sculptures.
- 13 When experiencing Serra's work, "all [we] can do is look at it" (McElroy "Personal"). But during this experience, we wonder about "what it is that [we] feel [about the work of art]? How does it change [us]?" (McElroy "Personal"). For McElroy, the way art changes us becomes part of a building process, and perhaps it allows a re-building process after the destruction of his neighborhood. This interest in the possibility for different, and at times apparently disconnected, parts of our lives to indirectly influence one another is a recurrent theme in McElroy's essays and fictions. In his essay "Neural Neighborhoods and Other Concrete Abstracts" (1975), he writes of connective networks that join seemingly opposite realms in our lives: the inside and the outside, the abstract and the concrete, the urban and the pastoral, and the scientific and the intimate. While these poles may not obviously relate, they unite in his fiction in complex and elusive ways. McElroy expands on the relationship between abstractions and experiences in his essay, "Socrates on the Beach. Thought and Thing" (2002), in which he explains how the abstract thinking of philosophy and architecture joins the impulses of practical life in his work. In his short story "Canoe Repair," the physical work of the protagonist, Zanes, on his son's canoe becomes a mode of reflection on life, change, movements, and politics. The story focuses on Zanes's activities while he repairs the object. This material endeavor branches into immaterial realms: the patching of the surface of the canoe that merges different pieces of wood informs the transitions the protagonist goes through — his move from New York City to New Hampshire, his new job in a new town, and his son's maturing. In a parallel way, Serra's sculpture, McElroy implies in "9/11 emerging," reached New Yorkers' lives: the raw material asked more immaterial questions about the ways in which we conceive of art, the ways in which we perceive it, and the ways in which it can be useful in a public place. These kinds of questions can also metaphorically construct something — a re-conceptualization of our interpretive modes and the ideologies behind them.
- 14 When experiencing Serra's work, this re-conceptualization relies on a change of perception. Serra explains how this change works in relation to his sculptures:

When you walk into the center of these Ellipses, without thinking about it, you keep turning your body in order to understand their space. Even when you're standing still in the center, it's destabilizing because you don't quite know how the steel is torquing, toward you or away from you. The disorientation you might feel, or the 'destabilization' of the space, seems to be part and parcel of your movement. [. . .] You become implicated in the tremendous centrifugal force of the pieces. In relation to the space of the entire exhibition, there is a decentering (*Torqued* 20-22).

- 15 Serra explores the torque of the steel, or the torsion and rotation of its force about an axis. Hence, the viewer's walk follows the torsion of the steel, which engages the viewer physically through "disorienting" movements. The experience of *Torqued Ellipses* thus exposes the viewer to a new relationship to sculpture: the sculptures ask that the viewer do not just stop and look at the work. Indeed, during one's walk through the gigantic steel objects, one sees the space differently and one thinks of the role of art that changes spatial experiences. *Torqued Ellipses* engages a physical de-centering that pairs with a more conceptual de-centering since the physical experience re-models our perceptive habits. Serra states,

I am interested in restructuring the perception of a given space through the way my work organizes the space, or in restructuring the apprehension of my work in terms of its boundary (*Writings* 109).

- 16 This "restructuring" occurs when one walks around the sculptures, and in his later work, when losing oneself in the immensity of the sculptures. As he transforms the ways we explore space, Serra defines a new relationship between the body and the metal he sculpts.
- 17 Here, the material and the immaterial at the center of the experience of Serra's sculptures, through our walk and our re-conceptualization of sculpture and space, enlarge upon the relationship McElroy often undertakes. In his own work, McElroy ponders this relationship by changing the narrative patterns and structural organization of his novels, thus asking questions about the ways in which we represent perception in writing. These questions involve a re-examination of our perceptive mechanisms and of the literary conventions used to depict them. Such challenges of narrative patterns and structural organization through fragmentation, repetitions, and circularity are often found in experimental works of fiction, which has led critics to regard McElroy's novels as innovative and field-based; his style is full of "rapid interruptions and saturation," and his "sentences are small worlds" (Leclair 144, Siemion 137). These characterizations of McElroy's work describe his dense prose, his interest in the relationship between scientific and narrative models, and his use of technical vocabulary to address intimate life. Such a merging of seemingly dichotomous realms through a transformation of narrative and sentence structures invites readers to re-explore the ways in which they process information and perceive their environment, and, also, what is at stake in the ideologies behind these processes.
- 18 Although Serra and McElroy have different approaches, both artists' interests meet when they disrupt the conventional forms of their art to derange our perceptual structures. As I hope to show, both artists transform our modes of perception and interpretation in order to challenge the ideologies on which they are based. In his site-specific works, by disrupting how we usually approach sculptures, Serra, never an admirer of museum pedestals, asks questions about what has been taken for granted about his sculpture's site. In his fiction, McElroy demands that we also confront social constructions, in particular those that dichotomize our world into opposite poles: material and immaterial, scientific and personal, organic and constructed, etc. Serra's and McElroy's works create comparable artistic experiences even though they are based in different media so that, in exploring both works, we can clarify the impact of innovative works of art.

- 19 I emphasize Serra and McElroy's dialogue within the twenty-first century because I consider them as part of a similar discourse. Here, I build on Lauren S. Weingarden's discursive art historiography, that is,
- a method of viewing the work of art as an encoded articulation of a historically-bound, yet multi-faceted, matrix of social systems or cultural events (49).
- 20 Such methodology builds on Michel Foucault's *The Archeology of Knowledge*. In his exploration of human knowledge, Foucault proposes an archeological method: his work relies on an
- enquiry whose aim is to rediscover on what basis knowledge and theory became possible; within what space of order knowledge is constituted [...] Such an enterprise is not so much a history, in the traditional meaning of the word, as an 'archaeology' (*Order*, xxi-xxii).
- 21 This archeological method focuses on the proliferation of discontinuities in the history of ideas. Because Foucault disagrees with the historians' emphasis on a centered history, he focuses on "a group of statements" made in a society and their organization, thus providing an individualization of discursive formations (117). For Foucault,
- discourse [is] a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation; it does not form a rhetorical or formal unity, endlessly repeatable, whose appearance or use in history might be indicated (and, if necessary, explained); it is made up of a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined (*Archaeology* 116-117).
- 22 According to Weingarden, an exploration of discursive practices allows "more precise descriptive and interpretive tools for comparing pictorial and verbal representation" (49). She roots her analysis in visual and verbal realms in order to define appropriately discursive practices of an era. Following Weingarden's comparative method, I will explore literary theories — primarily reader-response theory — and art history theories — Norman Bryson's work — to examine the discursive space McElroy and Serra share.
- 23 McElroy's and Serra's view of art practices validates this word and image methodology. Besides, McElroy himself sees affinities between his experience of 9/11 and his wish to write about the use he can make of this experience and Serra's art. Serra himself guides us toward such an analysis. In the following excerpt, he parallels sculpture and architecture and languages, confirming the importance of comparative analyses developed in word and image studies. Serra implies a rejection of traditional distinctions between word and image, a basis on which this essay relies:
- 24 When sculpture enters the realm of the non-institution, when it leaves the gallery or museum to occupy the same space and place as architecture, when it redefines space and place in terms of sculptural necessities, architects become annoyed. [...] The criticism can come into effect only when architectural scales, methods, materials, and procedures are being used. Comparisons are provoked. Every language has a structure about which nothing critical in that language can be said. To criticize a language, there must be a second language dealing with the structure of the first but possessing a new structure (*Writings* 146).
- 25 I do not wish to confront Serra's statement on architecture, an issue he considers at length in *Writings, Interviews*. I am interested, however, in his word choice when dealing with *language* to address problems in art, which creates an analogy between two systems of representations.

- 26 Although I consider McElroy's and Serra's interest in the restructuring of perception an invitation to use a discursive methodology, it would be a mistake to ignore the differences between the two artists. There are, however, parallels to be examined in their approach to art that clarify their positions on the role of art in the twenty-first century. As a result, their divergences and similarities arrive at different ways to participate in a common postmodern discourse.
- 27 Richard Serra's later work questions traditional perception and asks us to re-examine the ways in which we conceive of space and time:
- I think to have the viewer's experience of space changed by going through my work or seeing my work as a potential of what the work can do. If it can communicate some potential for understanding time and space differently than we normally understand it, then I've made something. And I think that's one of the things that is part of what we call art. That's what art does (Interview).
- 28 Serra changes conceptions of space and time by demanding that we be physically involved with the shapes of his work. This involvement emphasizes the process of the viewer's experience instead of the "finished" product.
- 29 Viewers discovering his works have elaborated on the "walking and looking" process at play in his art. Roald Nasgaard proposes that, after the late 1970s, the understanding of sculptures
- has become centered in the body of the perceiver, who for an extended time undergoes the sensation of being suspended in the act of perceiving and transparent to its process and texture (37).
- 30 He adds that
- to a considerable extent the interacting perceiver-work unit is not in kind different from other activity of ordinary life. It is living, however, kept before one in the present, not allowed to sink into the past or to become fixed as knowledge or habit (37).
- 31 In his interpretation of Serra's Minimal sculptures (1970-77), Nasgaard emphasizes an intense awareness of the *present* which affects one's perception of the environment. His observations accentuate the viewer's role in communion with the artwork. Such an emphasis on the process that the sculpture calls for, as opposed to an emphasis on the finished project, evokes the interpretative techniques of reception theory.
- 32 Wolfgang Iser rejects the traditional assumption that the literary text possesses a fixed and final meaning or value. Instead, he claims that the interaction between reader and text creates meaning. When one reads a text, one *performs* an activity: one "sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion, too" (106). Therefore, reading is like an event for each reader. Nasgaard's insistence on the viewer who "for extended time undergoes the sensation of being suspended," on the importance of "interacting perceiver-work unit," and on the significance of the *present* demonstrates that Serra's work allows the viewer to "set the work in motion," as Iser puts it. Mark Taylor adds to this interpretation of Serra's work in his comment on *Torqued Ellipses*:
- rather than an *a priori* structure [...] space and time, as well as their experiential apprehension, are inseparable from bodily movement. Space-time, in other words, is a corporeal event, which is never fixed but always in transition" (Taylor 35).
- 33 He asserts the understanding of Serra's work as a present and unique experience for each viewer when explaining that "the work of art becomes an event or process that occurs between the art object and the subject drawn (in)to it" (40). Consequently, there

is no ready-made interpretation of Serra's work since it relies on each viewer's experience of the work as an event.

- 34 The viewer's active role is central in experiencing Serra's work. When introducing Serra's 1965-1986 sculptures in the catalogue for the 1986 Museum of Modern Art retrospective of Serra's work, Serra Laura Rosenstock explains,

Serra's works involve the viewer in this creative, exploratory process. They heighten perceptual awareness and virtually force interaction. They compel the viewer to confront his experience and perception of them in relation to both space and time and to focus on their physical properties and the manner in which they were created. All Serra's sculptures are concerned with what can actually be experienced and observed. Some reveal the process of their making, some clarify aspects of their physical properties, and others redefine the nature of the space they occupy. It is only in tracing these interactions, in 'working' to understand the pieces, that they become fully comprehensible and meaningful (11).

- 35 Rosenstock stresses the viewer's essential role in the *making* of the meaning of the sculpture, as she refers to the "creative, exploratory process," the "forces of interaction," and "the 'working' to understand the pieces." While Rosenstock's comments on Serra's work are compelling, she does not define in full the viewer's "working" activity. What does it involve? How does it function? And what is at stake in this "work"?

- 36 These questions suggest that the phenomenological accounts of Serra's sculptures are limited. Nasgaard's, Taylor's and Rosenstock's accounts of Serra's work are in line with Rosalind Krauss's 1986 essay applying Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to Serra's films and sculptures (1969-1983). Because Serra's sculptures ask that we relate to space physically rather than optically, Serra establishes a "chiasma," or "a relationship of crossing exchanges," which relies on "the indissoluble marriage of the spatial with the temporal" (Krauss 133,140). I find this phenomenological understanding of Serra's work true to the experience of Serra's sculptures. Serra himself confirmed the important relationship between phenomenology and his work, saying about *Delineator* (1974-75),

it's not opting for opticality as its content. It has more to do with a field force that's being generated, so that the space is discerned physically rather than optically (*Serra: Interviews* 62).

- 37 Hence, my goal is not to deny the strength of the phenomenological approach to Serra's work. I have emphasized the parallels between this approach and reception theory to reveal what Iser's account of texts may add to these previous analyses of the sculptures.

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- 38 This emphasis on blanks and gaps in works of art is valuable when one looks at Serra's work because it elucidates what art critics leave unaccounted for. In her description of the experience of Serra's works, Rosenstock does not specify the procedure of perception and implies that the sculptures "reveal the process of their making, [...] clarify aspects of their physical properties, and [...] redefine the nature of the space they occupy" (11). I would argue that this process is not as simple as she presents it. An exploration of the ways in which the viewer takes part in the "redefinitions of the nature of the space they occupy" reveals how exactly Serra's sculptures derange perceptive models. My emphasis on the blank-filling activity clarifies how Serra's sculptures are able to question viewers' perceptual habits and, in turn, to invite them to ponder the ideological implications of such habits. As I will show, this turns out to be

even more important in his site-specific pieces since the questioning of such ideological implications will extend to the site itself.

- 39 Instead of focusing only on the text, Iser elaborates on what is missing in a text and how these missing parts construct meaning. I find this emphasis particularly useful in understanding the processes of perception that Serra's work involves because reception theory envisions the relationship between the viewer and the sculptures as a dialogue where the viewer is as involved as the sculpture. Iser reveals that "the imbalance between text and reader [...] is undefined, and it is this very indeterminacy that increases the variety of communication possible" (110). He contends that blanks and gaps construct meaning, i.e. what is missing in a text produces meaning. The reader, an active participant in the construction of meaning, fills "the blanks with projections" and "expand[s] to take on greater significance" (111).
- 40 Serra himself underlines the filling of the gaps and the blanks of his work when he talks about the *Torqued Ellipses* (they literally are "Torqued Ellipses"), an exhibition taking place at the Dia Center for the Arts in 1997:
- You are to imagine an oval void on the floor and the same oval void at the height of twelve or fourteen feet overhead turned at a ninety degree angle in relation to the oval on the floor. The steel skin is wrapped around these two voids ("Richard Serra with Phong Bui" 24).
- 41 The experience of the sculptures is based on an oval "void," which compares to "blanks [that] indicate that the different segments and patterns of the text are to be connected even though the text itself does not say so" (Iser 112). In Serra's work, the sculptures do not explicitly tell the viewer to imagine the void, but in filling in the blanks, the viewer becomes part of the process that questions his or her interpretive methods. The sculptures do not explicitly give statements about themselves, but, in their complexity and elliptical nature, they invite the viewer to fill in gaps and blanks. After this process, the viewer comes to conclusions such as those Rosenstock mentions (i.e. "All Serra's sculptures are concerned with what can actually be experienced and observed" (11)).
- 42 The importance of the gap-filling activity is also present in McElroy's fictions. McElroy's novels challenge a traditional deciphering of signs, which calls for the reader's blank-filling activity. *Lookout Cartridge* (1974) focuses on the life of Cartwright after the making of a movie that has, quite by chance, recorded, terrorist activities. The film has disappeared, and Cartwright puts his life in danger to find it and understand its disappearance. However, this outline is understood progressively when the reader reintegrates a general idea of the fragmented narrative. It is impossible to achieve a unified and coherent understanding of the narration when reading the novel, because it is fractured into different times and spaces so that the reader loses his or her coherent axis of chronological elements. The uncommon narrative provides reflections on perception and on the transcription of perception into words. The plot elaborates on Cartwright's questions about what he has seen and the ways in which he has interpreted his perceptions.
- 43 In addition, the narration is told at times from the point of view of Cartwright and at other times as a cartridge presenting the recorded and un-edited activities of the characters, which are left for the reader to decipher. Consequently, the question of the reliability of the narrator and the effect of multiplying the focus are at stake. Because McElroy conceives of a narrator whose unreliable voice shifts from Cartwright's point of view to that of a cartridge, I find the novel a good example of his challenge of

narrative structures and conventions. McElroy's innovation of the narrative structures interrogates how we represent perception and how it can be manipulated. He asks such questions by forcing his readers to create connections between the canals of data.

- 44 In *Lookout Cartridge*, we are forced to perceive things differently because of the lack of chronology in the narration. The book is a thick mass of data in which elements appear separately in pieces and never as a whole. But as fragments of information somehow relate to each another, they constantly transport the reader into new networks of information. The comings and goings of Cartwright punctuate the narrative. Within seven days, Cartwright arrives in New York from London, flies back to London, goes to New York again, and returns to London. Then, he takes a train to Glasgow, flies to the Hebrides where he goes to the Stones of Callanish and Mount Clisham. Back in London, he loops in New York where he goes back and forth within a labyrinthine space (apartments, lofts, warehouses, and cabs). The movements in space are rendered more complicated if we take into account the temporal structure coexisting with it. Indeed, Cartwright mentally moves from one subject to another depending on the places he goes to or due to other implicit connections. The omission of the relation between two events leaves room for the reader so that he or she can fill in the blanks. McElroy once stated that he “never hid the gaps” and he provokes in his texts “connections composed of disconnections” (“Neural” 204, 206). The disconnection paradoxically creates a connection. The text's fragmented structure, disconnected actions, and syntactic disjunctions reveal that the coherence of the text lies in the reader's control.
- 45 McElroy relies on a vision of prose fiction close to the one illuminated by Iser. For Iser, literature [. . .] is a process set in motion and regulated, not by a given code, but by mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment (111).
- 46 Paradoxically, what is lacking in a text creates more meaning thanks to the reader's activity. McElroy explains that his texts are “designed to break so that the reader would feel pieces reforming as if attracting and acting at distances from each other” (“Neural” 205). This demand upon the reader to order events and make sense of the text forces readers to question their reading habits. In other words, McElroy's fiction makes us reflect on what we have taken for granted — a coherent syntax, a chronological plot, a clear narrative voice — and the ways in which we automatically respond to literature. Thus, as Frederick Karl points out, what McElroy is after is nothing less than a complete defamiliarization of our normal expectations, weather data, information theory, linear accessibility, spatial and temporal dimensions (383).
- 47 The first scene of the book illustrates this defamiliarization method. *Lookout Cartridge* opens by immersing the reader in a new vision that questions the relationship between perception and writing. The reader enters the text through a visual representation of the world, which directly relates to the problems that the writing of a perception involves:
- It is a silent flash there in the city's grid, and as I happen to look down at that precise point I am thinking of the real estate prices.
From my height the detonation noise is a signal of light only. My cabin responds by at once easing its forward motion so we're barely moving. We hover level with the 900-foot tower at 40 Wall Street, three quarters of a mile to our right. We have a new purpose.

We dip, and the controls alter the tilt of the rotor head's swash-plate ring, which is above my head out of sight in the open air (3).

- 48 From the beginning, the text is visual: the phrase “silent flash” echoes “the detonation noise is a signal of light only” and “I did not hear the flash, I saw it.” This flash alludes to the visual elements marking the narrative. But they are disconnected from the sound they were linked to. The repetition of this absence of sound underlines the inadequacy between the two. It prepares the reader for the key question:

This light without sound is not the beginning.

Was there a beginning?

Sound without illumination maybe. (5)

- 49 Two systems of perception stand opposed. They are linked in the event of the explosion but they cannot be perceived together. The different modes of perception disrupt traditional unified visions. In *Lookout Cartridge*, the shifts from macrostructure to microstructure require that one constantly readapt one's perception, stand by, and then zoom. It prepares the reader for the central problem of the text: “knowing is not knowing,” a phrase that is repeated in the novel. What we see is not what we know, and we have to adapt to the book's different visions, questioning what we have taken for granted in the way fiction depicts perception.

- 50 The abstract vision of the scene adds to this new mode of vision. “City's grid” gives a technical vision of the city — New York, in this case. From the sky, the city looks like a map; it is not connected to life or human activities. The abstraction provides a new mode of vision. When writing that they “hover level with the 900-foot tower at 40 Wall Street, three quarters of a mile to our right,” McElroy offers a technical vision of space. It is impossible to picture a general description of the city or at least what Cartwright is watching. The text gives locations that are precise but unclear; they are not significant because they are too abstract. Thus, the phrase does not really refer to a specific image, although it uses specific terms. That is why Frederick Karl underlines that

there is a different language (as in the computer), a different sense of space and time (banked, cartridge, enclosed, housed, and inserted) and a serial-like source of materials which will make up the narrative (383).

- 51 The reader has to learn this “different language.”

- 52 In this sense, McElroy

assumes the society's codes of recognition, and performs his [...] activity within their constraints, but the codes permit the elaboration of new combinations of the sign, further evolution in the discursive formation (Bryson 70).

- 53 While Bryson focuses here on figurative painting in his critique of perceptualist models following E.H.Gombrich's theories, his emphasis on the “elaboration of new combinations of signs” is useful when dealing with McElroy's work.² McElroy uses the fictional medium to make us aware of what Bryson theorizes in “Semiology and Visual Interpretations” (1991). In other words, McElroy exposes society's codes and the ways in which we usually construct representations framed in these codes. In creating a new mode to render perception involving shifts from macro to micro structures and the alternation of narrative voices, and in designing the narrative as a network of information, McElroy also proposes “further evolution in the discursive formation” (70).

- 54 For Bryson, this change in discursive formation is important because art is not separate from political concerns:

- power is an external that moves in, and the forcefulness of power is measured by the degree to which it penetrates and overtakes the private transmission of precepts, where the essence of power manifests exactly in its exteriority (64).
- 55 While McElroy himself is influenced by “legal, political, economical forms in the social world,” he also works on it, “elaborate[s] it, transform[s] it through its labour, and return[s] it to the social domain as an alternation or revision of the society’s discursive field” (68, 69). This revision lies in McElroy’s challenge of cultural assumptions regarding our construction of knowledge, what influences it, what manipulates it, and how and why we may resist such manipulations.
- 56 In *Lookout Cartridge*, the manipulation of codes is performed by McElroy’s disruption of the detective mode of writing, which ultimately asks questions about how we present, read, interpret, construct, and manipulate knowledge. Here, a parallel can be drawn between the plot of the story (dealing with networks of terrorists where everyone is connected, even if we think, at first, that they are not) and the larger epistemological concerns of the novel. In trying to connect the fragmented and, at times, puzzling pieces of the novel, the reader, like the protagonist who tries to make sense of the data his film has recorded and of how it relates to his life, works as a detective. The work of the reader and the narrator, like that of a detective, is to restore order and truth, establishing correspondences between people’s actions and their hidden motivations. While McElroy invites us to coordinate the plot, the devices of detective stories are used without achieving the goal of a detective plot: the ending of *Lookout Cartridge* does not offer a climactic explanation of what happened through the narrative.
- 57 In the end, we are not given the keys to understand what was important and what was not: it is impossible to create a hierarchy of the events of the novel. Therefore, the detective activity of the reader is used for another goal. The last sentence concludes, “Everyone was looking up at me and Sub, and I was not sure what I had seen but I knew what we had done” (531). As John Johnston writes, “Cartwright’s last words (...) give iteration of the gap between perception (‘what I had seen’) and what can be narrativized (‘what we had done’)” (Johnston 107). This gap between perception and action, perception and narration, is one of the central problems of the text because, ultimately, “knowing is not knowing.” Thus, the “solution” of the book, while not expressed in its plot, is performed by the reader’s connecting activity: our reading practice makes us aware of the limits of knowledge. By means of coordination, the reader understands that what is at stake is not resolution. What matters is that “knowing is not knowing” and that one “will not have both power and the understanding of it” (504). We expect that the book will evolve as a detective novel, but we realize that there is a discrepancy between what we think we know and what exists in reality. This mode of thinking invites readers to be on the lookout for “hidden” and perhaps surprising connections between various realms in their lives. It also playfully warns readers against the manipulation of information and asks that we reconsider interpretive conventions.
- 58 Serra, too, invites us to challenge our interpretive processes when he shows what we have taken for granted in the places where his sculptures are installed. Unlike McElroy, he does not emphasize the implicit connections between contrasting realms, but, like McElroy, he confronts predetermined perceptions through three-dimensional objects in tangible space. In Serra’s work, the “alternation or revision of the society’s discursive field” (Bryson 69), lies in the creation of an “‘anti-environment’ which takes

its own place or makes its own situation, or divides or declares its own area" (*Writings* 100). When showing his work in galleries, Serra reorients perceptual experiences: "Serra's sculptures worked not 'for and toward' but against" commercial galleries and museums (Crimp 45). As Douglas Crimp reveals, the imposing still plates of *Slice* (1980), *Waxing Arcs* (1980), *Marilyn Monroe—Greta Garbo* (1981), and *Wall to Wall* (1983) disrupt the comfortable Bourgeois environment of exhibition locales. Consequently, Serra holds "the site of the gallery hostage to sculpture, [declaring] it a site of struggle" (Crimp 46). This struggle relies on Serra's perspective on art and on the scale of his sculptures: In 2004, when the Museum of Modern Art was expanded, a 200-foot gallery was specifically created to exhibit large-scale art, such as Richard Serra's sculptures. MoMA worked on a structure that would be able to support the weight of Serra's work, which made the 2007 retrospective of Serra's sculpture possible. This transformation of exhibition sites into places of struggle became even more controversial in Serra's site-specific work, as it summons us to question the political and artistic forces that shape those sites.

- 59 With his sculpture *Clara-Clara* (1983) installed in the Tuileries, Serra created an "anti-environment" that confronted the artistic convention of the site:

At the center of a resolutely baroque complex of spaces (elliptical, axial, surrounded by contrasting curves) and borrowing its vocabulary from the baroque, *Clara-Clara* insistently yet delicately pointed up the precariousness of the type of illusionism upon which this system is grounded. Causing the vertical of the obelisk of the Place de la Concorde to jump like a compass needle, *Clara-Clara* affirmed that baroque axiality, an authoritarian structure, is a flexible thing that one can play with without being trapped by it (Blois 91).

- 60 In making a sculpture that employs but also plays with baroque artistic conventions, Serra confronts conventions on which interpretations are based. As Armin Zweite has it, "Serra is not concerned in his art with functions or uses, he is concerned with truth" (24). This truth relies on Serra's wish to reveal the hidden realities of the sculptures' sites. Indeed, "Serra's sculpture is not concerned merely with intensification of perception, but with the critical transformation of the physical and institutional context of the site" (Freidman 68). For Serra,

sculptures by Noguchi and Calder fail [...] They have nothing to do with the contexts in which they're placed. At best, they are studio made and site adjusted. They are displaced, homeless, overblown objects that say, 'We represent modern art' (*Writings* 126).

- 61 Serra wants to avoid such displacement so that his sculptures establish a dialogue with the environment they are in: when working on *Tilted Arc*, he did not create a sculpture that could be shown in various places, and, as he reminded Edward Re and William Diamond, moving it to another location would destroy it. Hence, as Serra states, "When a known space changes through the inclusion of a site-specific sculpture, one is called upon to relate to the space differently [...] This experience may stale some people" ("Selected" 65-66). *Tilted Arc* asked that we reconsider the Federal Plaza, challenge its architectural choices, ask questions about the motives behind such choices, and perhaps even challenge the activities going on in the buildings themselves. Serra does not celebrate the power of the state and the justice system housed in the federal bureaucracies of the government buildings and the United States Court of International Trade offices surrounding the plaza. In choosing to show his work on the Federal Plaza, Serra was aware that it was "a problematic site" and "hop[ed] that the work [would] not become the symbol of that plaza" (*Writings* 163). Instead, Serra's goal was to "work

in opposition to the constraints of the context, so that the work [could not] be read as an affirmation of questionable ideologies and political power” (*Writings* 203). Because Serra is “not interested in art as affirmation or in art as a manifestation of complicity,” *Tilted Arc* aimed at challenging its site (*Writings* 203).

- 62 Instead of disguising the material conditions of his art and of the institution that supported it, Serra confronted the power relations of this project: *Tilted Arc* was not a façade or a symbol of the federal plaza, but a “redefinition of the site of the work of art as the site of power struggle” (Crimp 55). The sculpture obtruded the passage of the pedestrians on the plaza, which forced them to actively reconsider their position in the plaza and the way the latter was constructed. Through this reconsideration, as Gregg Horowitz demonstrates, *Tilted Arc* destroyed people’s embellished vision of the Federal plaza and its role in urban life. The arguments in favor of the removal of *Tilted Arc* emphasized

1)an improper symbol of function housed in the courthouse [...]; 2) the sculpture destroyed the original beauty of the plaza; and 3) it prevented the plaza from being used for other purposes (Horowitz 9).

- 63 In analyzing the rhetoric behind these accusations, Horowitz reveals that the sculpture “deprived people of the privilege of their illusion”: it questioned the role of the courthouse, called attention to the ugliness of the plaza, and reminded people of the lack of activities in a postmodern city (10).³ The sculpture asked people to re-observe the plaza, revealing what the viewers had taken for granted before but now felt uncomfortable about. Indeed,

Serra’s sculpture made the conditions of homelessness visible; it underlined the prevalent sense of hostile, dangerous urban environment; and it challenged the illusion of personal freedom by seeming to curtail movement (Sinie 94).

- 64 *Tilted Arc* made evident the conditions of the urban setting that were usually hidden or ignored, just as *Lookout Cartridge* made apparent the implicit principles of fiction-writing and the interpretive modes linked to them.

- 65 As McElroy points out in “9/11 emerging,” *Tilted Arc*’s invitation for a critical exploration of the site made it politically useful. Hal Foster contends that

Serra has always stressed the ‘internal necessity of sculpture, always insisted on the ‘uselessness’ of art in general. Here this necessity, that uselessness, does not void the political criticality of art; Serra shows they can also underwrite it (195).

- 66 Because Serra’s sculptures confront the social and political values and the ideologies of their sites, they bear the marks of critical questions that make them political. In asking questions about the power of public art, the freedom of speech, the relationship between the legal system and art, and the value of aesthetic choices, *Tilted Arc* — and its destruction — accounts for the usefulness of art. As Thomas Crow points out, the Federal Plaza can

be seen in no other way than as deficient, as subtracted-from. The only vocabularies in which *Tilted Arc* can now be grasped are ones adequate to account for historical events and conflicts that surrounded it (150).

- 67 In a century when terrorist attacks seem to immobilize a nation, Serra’s art and McElroy’s art are useful because they ask viewers and readers to make connections between art and the world, so that “a new behavioral and perceptual orientation [. . .] demand[ing] a new critical adjustment” becomes necessary (Serra, *Writings* 202-3). While these connections may destroy social myths, they allow another kind of

construction. Serra's sculptures, as McElroy puts it, "[create] the occasion for thought in experience, which transforms the experience of thought" ("9/11"). In his own writing, McElroy also transforms the experience of thought, exploring how our mechanisms of perception work and what influences them. These transformations allow for a reconsideration of social presuppositions and of the interpretive tools we use to approach them.

NOTES

1. For Iser, a reader participates in the making of the meaning of any literary work. Thus, although I apply Iser's work to experimental or innovative art, I do not wish to claim that only experimental works of art create such response from a reader. However, Iser's theory is particularly useful in approaching Serra's work as it clarifies the viewer's interpretive techniques and reveals what the art critics imply in their comments on Serra's sculptures.
2. Gombrich, in his exploration of Renaissance art, shows that artists construct their representations of reality through a use of schemata that are available to them. The time and the place when and where they live determine the nature of the schemata. Gombrich refuses to accept that art relies on the expression of the artist who has an individual and unique vision of the world. The artist uses conventions to represent reality. In contrast, for Bryson, "what Perceptualism leads to is a picture of art in isolation from the rest of society's concern, since essentially the artist is alone, watching the world as an ocular spectacle but never reacting to the world's meanings" (66).
3. Harriet Senie reminds us of several accounts of the ugliness of the plaza before the *Tilted Arc* was constructed: "Robert Hughes described the Federal Plaza as 'one of the ugliest public spaces in America'.[...] Goldberg was similarly scathing: 'the fact is that, in a city of bad plazas in front of bad skyscrapers, this is one of the worst. Federal Plaza is a dreary stretch of concrete, punctuated by a poorly placed and a poorly designed fountain' [...]. Michael Sorkin of the Village Voice summed it up as 'horrible plaza, horrible buildings, horrible bureaucratic interiors, the worst.' And in the 'Notes and Comments' section of *The New Yorker* magazine, it was characterized as 'an environment so ugly and inhumane that it would disgrace the Ministry of Truth in an East Bloc capital'" (Senie 91).

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