



Report on the sculpture network Xth International Forum

10 through 12 November 2011 - Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Spain

*Written by **Anne Berk**, art critic, writer, curator, advisor and correspondent for sculpture network in The Netherlands*

"Sculpture Today, A Space for Inquiry – Experience Re-Codified"

Seven years ago artist Hartmut Stielow and businessman and collector Ralph Kirberg put their heads together: wouldn't it be wonderful if there were a European network for sculptors, intermediaries and collectors, like the one in America? Ralf Kirberg, just retired, threw himself into setting up an organisation, which he also partly financed. Seven years later the sculpture network has almost 1.000 members in 43 countries. Congratulations are in order!

sculpture network is run for and by the members. Besides the website, a channel for information and promotion, there are regional and international meetings culminating in the annual symposium. Here you can meet each other in the flesh, establish contacts and exchange ideas about sculpture. However, as Ralf Kirberg stated at the Members Meeting, there's still a way to go. For a sound financial basis the organisation needs 1.500 members, particularly collectors and Friends of the Arts who can sponsor the organisation and provide the sculptors with a potential market. So spread the word!

The 10th International Forum, programmed by our Spanish correspondent Beatriz Blanch, was a climax in sculpture network's existence. 250 participants from 19 nations were made very welcome by the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, where the Forum took place. Frank Gehry's sculptural building, which in itself justifies a trip to Bilbao, showed an exhibition of Constantin Brancusi (1876 – 1957) and Richard Serra (1938), the fathers of 20th century sculpture.

On the second day we visited the workshops of Alfa Arte, where artworks employing various techniques can be manufactured. Next stop was the birthplace of the Basque sculptor Eduardo Chillida (1924 – 2002). The Chillida-Leku Museum was recently closed due to the economic crisis, but opened its doors for the sculpture network. The touring day finished with a visit of Chillida's famous art work "Peine del viento" in San Sebastian.

What is sculpture today? What is the significance of Brancusi's and Serra's work? These questions arose during the Forum "**Sculpture Today, A Space for Inquiry –Experience Re-Codified**". Friedrich Teja Bach (AT) Professor at the Institute of Art History at the University of Vienna, and Oliver Wick (CH), Curator at Large at the Fondation Beyerler in Riehen, Basel, examined the similarities and differences between Brancusi and Serra. Other art historians and artists gave their vision of sculpture today. 30 members of sculpture network presented themselves in a varied One Minute Show. Two speakers, the artists Tony Cragg and Miroslav Balka, couldn't make it at the last minute. Perhaps that wasn't such a bad thing, because there was a huge amount of information and subject matter to digest in one day.



Richard Serra, House of Cards, 1969, Lead, each plate 155,8 x 155,8 x 3 cm, Collection of the artist, Photo: Serra Studio, New York

The sculptures of Brancusi and Serra: a space for inquiry

The Serra – Brancusi exhibition is impressive. Curator Oliver Wick has combined Brancusi's refined and polished work with the eroded steel sculptures of Richard Serra. This juxtaposition makes Brancusi's figures seem more delicate and Serra's steel plates more robust. But there are also parallels. Oliver Wick put two "Muses" together with Serra's key work from 1969, "House of Cards". In Brancusi's "Muse" the oval head resting on the hand balances on a long cylindrical neck. You experience the same balancing of volume and weight in "House of Cards", but this time it's a literal

balancing act. Serra leans four lead plates against each other so that they form a cube. The plates are not fixed and that creates a feeling of suspense.

With this form of presentation Oliver Wick emphasises the formal and sculptural qualities of the works. He lets the sculptures speak for themselves, without all too much historical back ground or personal stories. "I hate text." An interesting experiment. It's the visual power of a work of art that determines if it can stand the test of time and which allows it to take on new significance time and again.

But what is the meaning of these sculptures? What was the intention of Brancusi and Serra themselves?



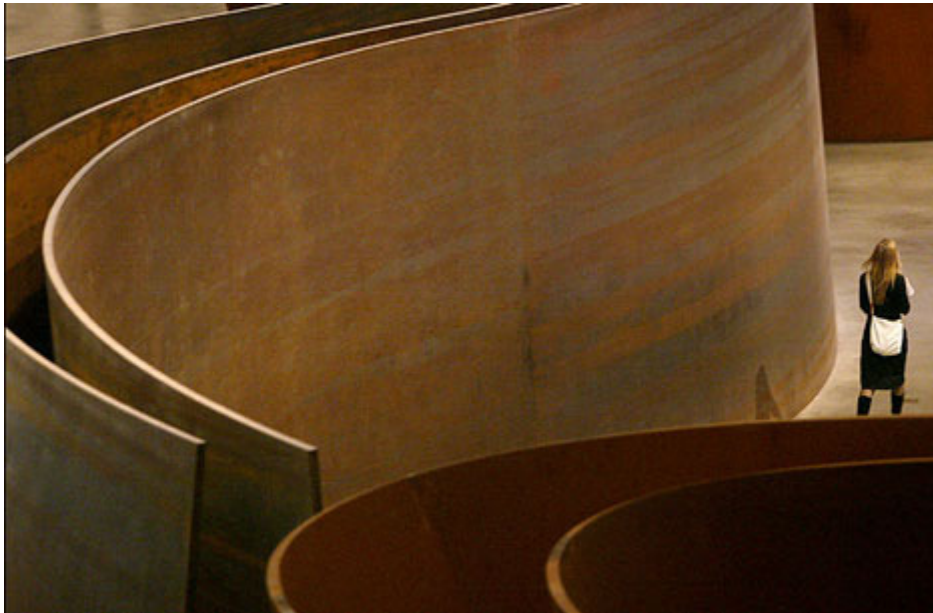
Brancusi, Une muse, 1912, white marble, 17 cm. Photo: Fondation Beyeler

Brancusi and Serra played a crucial role in the development of modernist abstract sculpture. One stood at the beginning, the other formed an end point.

Brancusi began his career in Rodin's studio in 1907, but turned his back on naturalism. He gained no satisfaction from copying external appearances. In the Guggenheim there's a moving film of his, of a model who slowly moves her neck from left to right and back again. You become aware of the neck's column and the slight tilt of the head. It could be a study for Muse, where Brancusi succeeds in abstracting eternal woman from an elegant woman of the 1920s. Brancusi was a mystic with sympathy for the theosophical movement of Madame Blavatsky. *"I am no longer of this world. I am detached from my person. I am among the essential things."*

Serra was inspired by Brancusi, in whose studio he stayed for some months in 1964. There he saw 'a manual of possibilities', but he has a very different attitude to life than his Rumanian predecessor. Serra carries abstraction to its extreme. His rational sculptures are the logical result of actions performed on material - stacking, leaning, propping up, cutting, rolling and so forth. They don't refer to

the world. They are 'autonomous', physical experiences of form and space by the viewer. *'My pieces are most involved with walking and looking. The focus for me is the experience of living through the pieces.'* That bodily experience of the here and now is appropriate to a secular era. Or do Serra's installations allow for an experience of the sublime, as professor Teja Bach posited in his lecture?



Richard Serra, "The Matter of Time" (1994-2005), coll. Museum Guggenheim Bilbao

Whoever walks through Serra's largest work, "The Matter of Time" (1994-2005), in the Guggenheim, loses his grip on space. The eight enormous sculptures of forged steel form a labyrinth of curved spaces in which your footsteps echo. Sometimes the high leaning walls enclose you. Imagine if one of those sheets weighing tons fell over! There wouldn't be much more of you left than a smear on the floor. You heave a sigh of relief when the space opens up.

"While I hope that the viewer senses the general logic of the work's structure, the logic of engineering tectonic is not the content of the sculptural experience...One has to give oneself over to the journey," Serra says about this installation. "The Matter of Time" is more than an objective experience of space. The journey through this labyrinth also has a mental impact on the observer. You are seized by feelings of fear, anguish and deliverance. Could you call this a sublime experience?

The exhibition texts are inconclusive. Oliver Wick holds up a mirror up and leaves it up to the viewer to look for meaning. During the symposium Gertrud Sandqvist, Professor of Theory and History of Ideas of Visual Art at Malmö Art Academy, examined the interpretation of art works. Meaning is not a fixed and inflexible thing. Sandqvist pointed to Wittgenstein's "Philosophical Investigations". The meaning of words and art are determined during their use. We sit in a post-secular era and that puts Serra's work in a different light.



Sun Cinema, Clemens Von Wedemeyer, 2010, realized in cooperation with architect Gürden Gür
Courtesy of the artist & galerie Wolff

Sun-cinema: between illusion and physical experience

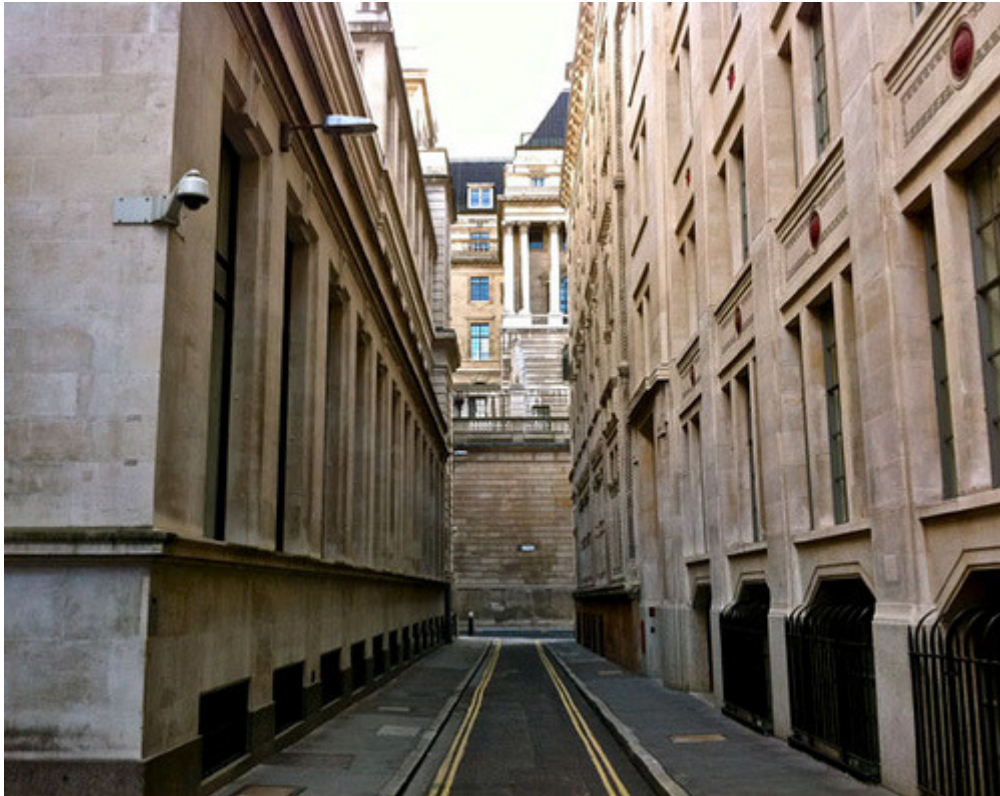
The symposium's afternoon programme was devoted to broadening the notion of sculpture. In the sixties and seventies sculpture was enriched by installations, Body Art and Land Art. That process continues. Are words sculpture? The human voice?

Brigitte Franzen (DE), Director of Ludwig Forum in Cologne and co-curator of Skulptur Projekte Münster 2007 talked about "Sun Cinema" by Clemens von Wedemeyer (1974, Germany). This installation navigates between the illusory world of film and the concrete, physical experience of sculpture. Von Wedemeyer has made an open-air cinema/installation in Mardin, a place on the border between Turkey and Syria. In the evening it's a theatre where the local residents can dream away to a film. During the day it's a spatial sculpture with a blank screen. The spectator himself becomes the actor. The intense sunlight projects his shadow on the white surface and confronts him with reality, his life in the here and now. Every movement is recorded. What to do? How to act?



Jaume Plensa: the human mind as inspiration

Jaume Plensa (1955, Spain) gave a presentation on his varied oeuvre in which language plays a major role. His human figures are not about reproducing the outside of the human body. *‘I want to explore what we have inside. We pour our thoughts into words so that we can communicate with others. That’s beautiful, together we form a community.’* It seems an impossible task. How can you as sculptor give form to the immaterial world of thought? Heads, the seat of our thoughts, are magnified. Some heads are transparent structures consisting of materialized words. In others the eyes are closed, inviting introspection. Take “Echo”, the portrait of a young girl that was exhibited in a New York park this summer. The nymph Echo was punished by Zeus. Thereafter she could only repeat the words of others. *“That’s the problem of today,”* says Plensa. *“We are doomed to continuously regurgitate the sound bites of others. It’s so noisy. We have to introduce silence.”*



Susan Philipsz, "Surround me- A Song Cycle for the City of London", commissioned by Art Angel, 2010

Susan Philipsz: the human voice as material

Plensa processes words and thoughts in his images; Susan Philipsz (Scotland, 1965) uses the human voice. She received the Turner Prize in 2010 for her ground-breaking sound art. Philipsz trained as sculptor. *'Singing has a physical aspect. What happens when you sing and project your voice in space?'* People turn round in surprise when they hear her singing pop songs through the intercom at the supermarket. The rigid shopping routine is temporarily interrupted. Where is that fragile, yearning voice coming from? "Surround Me" (2010) consists of 6 sound installations in London's financial heart. Philipsz drew from the rich English history of songs and poems, including "Lacrimae", a lament by John Dowland, "Death, death, death/ Nobody to be seen" by Daniel Defoe and the telling "Bubble" from Jonathan Swift: "Ye wise philosophers explain /What magick makes your money rise?" The environment enhances the potency of Philipsz' sound art. She brings historic figures to life, bodiless, ghostly voices that float through old London. "Bubble" could have been written today. Once can only hope that it gives today's stockbrokers pause for thought.

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