

A Conversation with Richard Serra and Carmen Giménez

Moderated by Matthias Waschek

September 24, 2005

Edited by Camran Mani

The following conversation took place at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis on September 25, 2005, on the occasion of the exhibition Brancusi and Serra in Dialogue at the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts. The Pulitzer wishes to thank Richard Serra and Carmen Giménez for allowing the publication of this piece.

Matthias Waschek: Richard, would you like to begin by talking about your impressions of *Brancusi and Serra in Dialogue*, or is there something more general that you would like to say?

Richard Serra: If you're a sculptor and you think of the 20th century, it probably comes down to a couple of people in the first half; whether it's Picasso, Giacometti, Brancusi or Duchamp, you put those people on a level that you don't think, in your lifetime, you ought to stand next to. So when Emmy [Pulitzer] told me there was to be an exhibition of my work with that of Brancusi, I was a little apprehensive. I didn't know what connections could be made and how useful they were going to be to an audience and, personally, how I was going to stack up next to someone who was the person responsible for my becoming a sculptor.

I started as a painter at Yale. I went to Paris on a Yale Traveling Fellowship and the thing that I found most interesting in Paris was Brancusi's studio intact. I found myself drawing every day in Brancusi's studio, trying to figure out volume in sculpture. For my early years, maybe the first two or three, Brancusi provided the aspiration for me to move from painting to sculpture (along later with Velázquez, who really stopped me). He was my first look at sculpture and, at that moment in my life, really instrumental. To end up here after thirty-four years of making work, next to Brancusi, is something I could never have anticipated, and it's humbling.

On the other hand, as any artist grows, you grow in different contexts in relation to different artists. Right now Brancusi doesn't hold as much interest for me as he did when I first started making work. Having said that, there are a few pieces in this show that are absolutely breathtaking. I think we can probably get to them later.



Installation of *Brancusi and Serra in Dialogue*, 2003
Brancusi sculpture © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ASAGP, Paris

MW: Carmen, when you put our installation at the Pulitzer in the context of exhibitions you have curated or Brancusi exhibitions you have seen, what would be a major difference in regard to it? What fits into that history?

Carmen Giménez: First of all, when [Tate director] Nick Serota suggested that I do a Brancusi exhibition, I was very surprised. I said, “Why not ask Margit Rowell or Friedrich Teja Bach? They are the big specialists.” But he insisted, saying he really admires the way I deal with sculpture. I thought, perhaps it will be the occasion for me to show Brancusi in a new way. That is, in a small exhibition, mostly with what I consider unique works, mainly those in marble and wood. I tried to avoid his masterworks, except I included a *Bird* because the reflections in a *Bird’s* metal can really play with space. The exhibition moved toward abstraction, taking the muses, the torsos, the birds, going up to the famous *Endless Column*, which was unfortunately unavailable in any of its incarnations. Because Brancusi never considered himself an abstract artist, I called the exhibition *The Essence of Things*. If you look at his aphorisms, that’s the way he described himself.



Serra, *Standpoint*, 1987, and Brancusi, *Adam and Eve*, 1921
Brancusi sculpture © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ASAGP, Paris

This exhibition is another interesting idea: Richard Serra with Brancusi. It works. I know that when I told Richard I was doing a Brancusi exhibition, he was extremely happy for me and excited.

MW: Let me just say, it was quite a privilege to work with these high quality works by Richard Serra and Constantin Brancusi. Still, if this installation is a success, the success is due also to the third partner, Tadao Ando. His architecture determines what you can do as a curator. Really it is Brancusi, Serra, and Ando in a dialogue. But let’s go to the exhibition because you wanted to say something about specific works in the exhibition, Richard?

RS: I think what I admired most about Brancusi, and it’s probably why I really admired Carmen’s show, is Carmen stuck with the early work, the direct carving either in wood or marble. After that point with Brancusi it gets a little problematic for me. I think what happens with Brancusi has to do with what Walter Benjamin called “the aura of the original.” The aura of the original, probably from the Renaissance right up till postmodernism, had a certain value in and of itself that is the immediacy of the act of a person—the traces of that act in the work, whether it’s a Redon drawing or a Cézanne watercolor or Brancusi carving away on a piece of wood. When it starts turning into the mass-production of—the industrialization of—the product, then it loses that aura.

Early on, Brancusi studied with Rodin. In studying with Rodin, he was exposed to the fact that Rodin was no longer casting, making things off his fingertips in clay, which he did better than anyone had done for centuries. Rodin instead would take a clay model, build it up in various scales, and then have them mass-produced. So he had hundreds of people working for him, Brancusi being one of them. Brancusi turned his back on that and went back to direct carving. I think it took everybody's breath away because he got into forms that seem to be universally acknowledged as not only reduced but also sublime. There's one torso downstairs in the corner [*Torso of a Young Girl*, 1922], which you just look at and think, "If ever anybody made a perfect contour shape that is balanced, and a form and body in relation to my body, and a sign and symbol, that's it." You can take nothing away from Brancusi. Absolutely nothing.

I think what happens is that Brancusi almost ends up retroactively providing a critique of his own work when he gets into casting. Even if he is polishing himself, it loses that aura. Carmen and I were talking about this earlier, and I think she has a different take on it than I do, so maybe she ought to say what she thinks about it.

CG: My point was that someone else cast the *Bird* and other pieces in metal, but each cast was very rough and Brancusi worked on all of them. That makes them unique. He really made a point of having control of his work. When you bring many of his pieces together, it is apparent that they are all different. Think of the famous triumph in 1927. Brancusi had a show in America organized by Marcel Duchamp, and *Bird* was held up at customs because the officials thought it was "commercial." They had a trial and Brancusi won it. That victory had to do with the way he was working. Each *Bird* is a unique work of art. You can see that.



Brancusi, *Torso of a Young Girl*, 1922, Stone, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums
Brancusi sculpture © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ASAGP, Paris



Brancusi, *Sleeping Muse II*, 1926, Bronze, Private collection
Brancusi sculpture © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ASAGP, Paris

MW: Let's go to the dialogue between Brancusi and Serra. In the exhibition, does this dialogue seem meaningful? What effect do the juxtapositions have on the work of each artist?

RS: There are a couple of pieces that might work better in dialogue. There is an early piece of mine downstairs, *Chunk*. It's a shard that I picked up from a rubber warehouse that was emptying out. I took it downtown and I had it cut off again. What happens when it gets cut off is it reveals the body on the inside as if you were cutting a cross-section of a piece of meat. If you look at the very first piece that's to the left when you go into the museum, there's a plaster body part of a Brancusi that, in a sense, is the same [*Torso*, 1909]: it's the outer skin to the inner cut. You have the revelation of interior and exterior. If those two pieces had been juxtaposed, I think it would have made more sense.

For the most part, I think what you have to look at is two sculptors sixty-eight years apart, one at the beginning of the last century, one at the close of this century, involved in two different aspects of coming at work. I don't know what kinds of useful connections can be made. I would think it's about surprise. The way that *Adam and Eve* is placed between the early three-plate piece [*Joplin*, 1971] and the corner piece [*Stand Point*, 1987] I found very satisfying. I can't tell you why. I thought, "Well, that's very satisfying," and then I walked into the back room. There's something about the Agnes Meyer, which is kind of pseudo-African for me, and I don't even think it's a very good Brancusi, but in that room it looks as if it's a personage looking into the corner piece [*Pacific Judson Murphy*, 1978]. And they're both black. When you walk in the room, you feel like you've walked into a private space where somebody else is viewing somebody else's work. You become implicated in a kind of setup there that takes on another kind of institutional relationship that puts a different meaning on both works. I found that not only curious, but I also found myself more



Serra, *Chunk*, 1967, Vulcanized rubber, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Promised gift of Emily Rauh Pulitzer and Purchase



Brancusi, *Torso*, 1909, Plaster, Private collection
Brancusi sculpture © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ASAGP, Paris

interested in my corner piece there than in other exhibitions I've seen. For that reason, I particularly liked it today.

But I don't want to critique the show. Is it a useful and interesting show for people to see? I don't know. I can't fill in that blank. It's kind of an honor for me to be in a show with Brancusi, but I think there is such a long span of time between what art has become and what it was that maybe those connections can't be made. On the other hand, I was in Altamira about four months ago. That's 16,500 years ago when they were painting bison on the top of a wall, and basically we're doing the same thing. It really hasn't changed that much. There's something where you sense that the time you are in is important.

It's hard to get out of that habit and have a longer look at things and see connections. It's possible that this juxtaposition may give one an overview and reduce things to a kind of simplicity of statement that one can recognize, and if it hadn't been there, one wouldn't. That may be useful.

MW: Could I ask you the same question, Carmen? Does the dialogue in this installation seem meaningful to you?

CG: It's a very interesting idea for an exhibition. I think it works. In Tadao Ando's space the light, the whole atmosphere—some purity goes into the work of Brancusi and Serra. Brancusi was born in Romania, in the Carpathians in Western Europe, and he came from that background. He was a peasant. Richard Serra was born in San Francisco. He comes from the era of industrialization, a completely different time, as Richard just said. But there is something going on between them. Yes, very much. Brancusi, for me, is the last classical artist. His work is about line, like Ingres. I would say the same thing about Richard's. Standing by the fantastic window that looks out over the spiral sculpture [*Joe*, 2000] just now, I was struck by the line of its upper edge. It's such heavy steel, but when you see this line, it's as if it is floating. Yet Brancusi and Serra are also modernists, like Cézanne. They measure themselves with the past and then they go forward.

RS: I'd like to say something that hadn't occurred to me. There's a certain orthodoxy in terms of the scene you enter into, given the date you're born and who the other artists are around and what becomes an issue at the time. Myself and [Bruce] Nauman and [Robert] Smithson and Eva Hesse, we came right after the minimalists. The minimalists pretty much expunged any kind of libidinous psychological content in their work, and maybe for the good because what came before was over-the-top romantic. One of the reasons they were interested in Brancusi was because of his stacking and the reduction of form and the purity of form. I think one of the things they missed in Brancusi is the sexiness of it all.



Serra, *Pacific Judson Murphy*, 1978, and Brancusi, *Agnes E. Meyer*, 1930-33
Brancusi sculpture © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ASAGP, Paris

If you look at the *Adam and Eve*, Eve is kind of bisexual. I mean, basically you have the phallus with the vagina on top and then you have Adam below. It's a double pedestal piece and it's a very radical sexual object and no one ever talks about it. The minimalists would never go there and talk about it. I don't know if people talk about it today. If you take that line on Brancusi and say, let's get out of the purity of form here, the classicism of it all, and start thinking about what drives this guy, you start looking at how he really handles the surface of that work, how he cuts into that work, the relish he takes in his own matter, how he deals with the modeling of these pieces, how he carves. I came to the conclusion today that there was something about Brancusi's drive—not unlike Matisse's drive and Picasso's drive—that has a lot to do with sublimating sex. Now it could be that Eva Hesse and other people did look at Brancusi that way. But as far as I know, that is not the way he has been received, and that is not the way he has been of use to artists.

MW: Do you see *Stand Point* with different eyes now that you've seen it with *Adam and Eve*?

RS: No. I was just happy to see the juxtaposition. To tell you the truth, I was just happy that I could look at *Stand Point* and think that it was worth looking at next to Adam and Eve. Do I think that *Stand Point* is in the same range of *Adam and Eve*? No. No. Not nearly close. I think *Adam and Eve* is an absolutely great work. I think, for me, *Stand Point* is okay, but it's not a great, great work. Maybe I'd put—I'd put *Joe* out there in the garden next to *Adam and Eve*. I just think *Adam and Eve* is a particularly great work. And a particularly great work for having been done at that time and particularly courageous, actually. I think the problem is we've grown up with Brancusi, so he's like an implant. Really there is a certain contradiction in his aura of being, you know, this peasant who was just this pure carver.



Brancusi, *Caryatid II*, 1914, reworked 1926, Wood, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums
Brancusi sculpture © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ASAGP, Paris



Serra, *Joe*, 2000, Weathering steel, The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts

He was definitely that, but then he also took advantage of that by saying, “Okay, here we have my pure carved pedestal with a shiny piece of metal that reflects this shiny iconic form down in it.” He had primitivism and the industrial revolution of the multiple plugged together in one piece.

Now whether those pedestals are pedestals or furniture is an argument that has gone back and forth throughout the last half of the century—that’s another one of the contradictions you have to look at. In some pieces it seems like the pedestals were—particularly in *Adam and Eve*—not a pedestal but two works put on top of each other to make one work. In others it’s obvious that the pedestals are just that: pedestals. I think that is something my generation had to digest in relation to how do you get up off the ground without a base.

MW: Carmen, when you curated your Brancusi exhibition, you dealt with the question of the base. Could you tell us a bit about this?

CG: I think there are two crucial elements in Brancusi’s work. The first is his way of fragmenting the human body. I think this is Brancusi’s response to Rodin. He gave an autonomous identity to the fragment, transforming it in a work like the torso mentioned earlier. The second crucial element is his reinvention of the base. He converts it into an essential part of the sculpture. But still I believe Brancusi has somehow a [conventional] base. It’s very tricky. I think the *Endless Column* is a unique piece, a true sculpture without a base. I am thinking of the one at Târgu-Jiu in particular. That’s a very special site-specific sculpture. Brancusi orchestrated its placement, the patina, and what it was going to provoke. The physical confrontation creates a very strong emotion. It’s like when you enter one of Richard’s pieces.



Brancusi, *Adam and Eve*, 1921, Chestnut (Adam) and oak (Eve) on limestone base, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Brancusi sculpture © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ASAGP, Paris



Brancusi, *Stool*, 1928, and *Watchdog*, 1916

© Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ASAGP, Paris

RS: I think we can harp on Brancusi's relationship to the base until he does the show in New York—he does this show at the Brummer Gallery—and he knows what the ceiling height is and he cuts an *Endless Column* from floor to ceiling, so that it measures the space from floor to ceiling as separate module units. When you think of Judd going floor to ceiling with units, no base, it's not a very big move from Brancusi. I think that is where all the Minimalists took their cue, not only [Carl] Andre, but Don Judd also from Brancusi.

For me, the interesting thing about Brancusi was the indication of abstraction even though he remains figural. I think it's probably why I got into sculpture. I don't think I saw anyone who made a drawing that well until I went to Brancusi's studio. By "drawing" what I mean is, how does a volume hit an edge, whether it's on a flat piece of paper or whether it's something drawn in space. What I really admired about Brancusi is how he was able to articulate a body in space by where he found the edge and where he cut the edge. That's where what I've taken from Brancusi has been crucial. Not the sexuality or the body part or the base, but how Brancusi articulates a form in space, how he draws a volume. Volume in space has been something that has been primary in terms of what I think I've directed my energy toward. Brancusi was certainly instrumental in sparking that interest because, up to that time, I didn't have that interest.

After going to France, I went to Italy on a Fulbright. Michelangelo didn't do it [articulate a form in space], but Donatello did, and I think for the same reason. I like the way Donatello made—the way he drew, the way he could draw in *Judith and Holofernes*, the way he could turn the wrist, the way you could follow the line. Or if I went to Piazza del Santo [in Padua] and saw the *Gattamelata*, the way he could hold the volume, the way he could draw a figure in space. My interest has always been drawing volume or drawing space, not particularly caring what the psychological or figurative element was. On the other hand, you realize that people's drive for what they do comes from a lot of masked sources. You don't see the source of the energy because they would just as soon keep that private.



Donald Judd, *Stack*, 1970, Stainless steel with purple Plexiglas wrap-around, Private collection

Judd Art © Judd Foundation, Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

While we were eating lunch it occurred to me I think a lot about Mantegna. I can't even tell you why, but there is something about how Mantegna sets up a strategy for making a volume in a very closed interior space that, since I went to Mantua—and I must have gone there thirty, forty years ago—I've never forgotten. What artists have to get over, what they have to get through or go around or misinterpret is very, very difficult to figure out. It's hard to make those connections. In this show I still don't know what connections one can make in relation to myself and Brancusi, but it was interesting for me to see because I've made connections I wouldn't have made before.

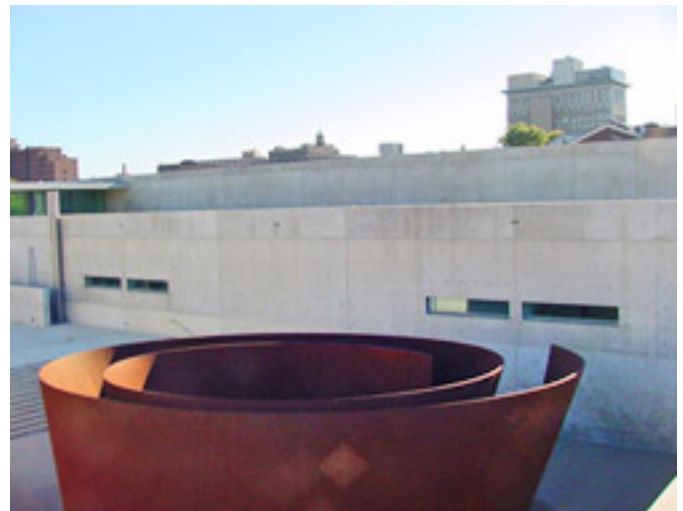
MW: Would you say, when you installed a selection of your works at the Pulitzer in 2003, that the architecture disappeared? Or were you working with the architecture? What was your take when you explored our space?

RS: The first time I came here was for the opening show (and I was here when they were building the building). They hung the opening show and they put paintings on both those walls [in the Main Gallery]. The space pulled you through it, but it was very difficult to stop and look at the paintings. It was like the paintings became a kind of continuous—I'm not going to say wallpaper—but they didn't hold the space. I thought, this space really directs your gaze toward the stairway, toward the Kelly [*Blue Black*, 2000], and down. The light flooding in makes the space light, and it's really a kind of ambulatory space. You can't help but take a big stride when you walk that space. You needed, if you were going to have an intimate relationship with a work of art or an aesthetic relationship with a work of art, a certain kind of time that's different than real time. So something had to coalesce there to close that space or stop that space. I thought, how could we put works together in a way that would move you through the room and hold different aspects of that room (even though we had to divide it in kind of like



Brancusi, *Arch*, 1914-1916, and *Mademoiselle Pogany III*, 1933

Brancusi sculpture © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ASAGP, Paris



View of *Joe* from the southwest corner of the Pulitzer-Contemporary Courtyard

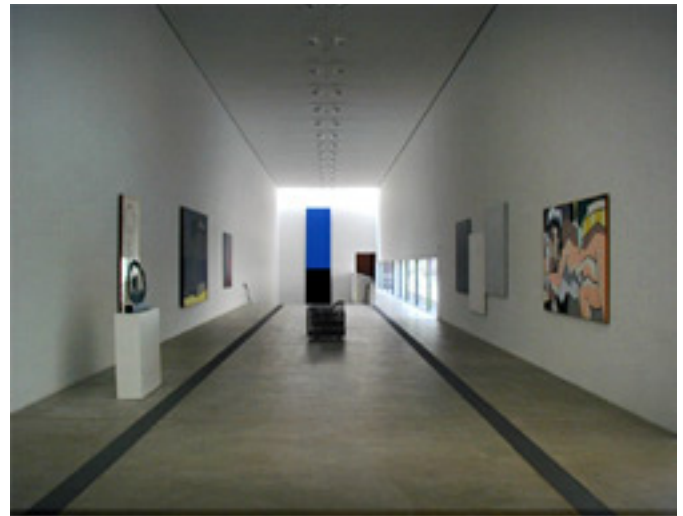
thirds—a piece on the wall here, an open space, a piece on the floor, a piece back here, a piece in the corner) to make the space function in a different way in terms of how you would walk it, in terms of your own path and your own rhythm, in terms of how your bodily rhythm through the space would organize how you view the space?

MW: I would like to read a quotation from one of your interviews that interests me. On museum architecture:

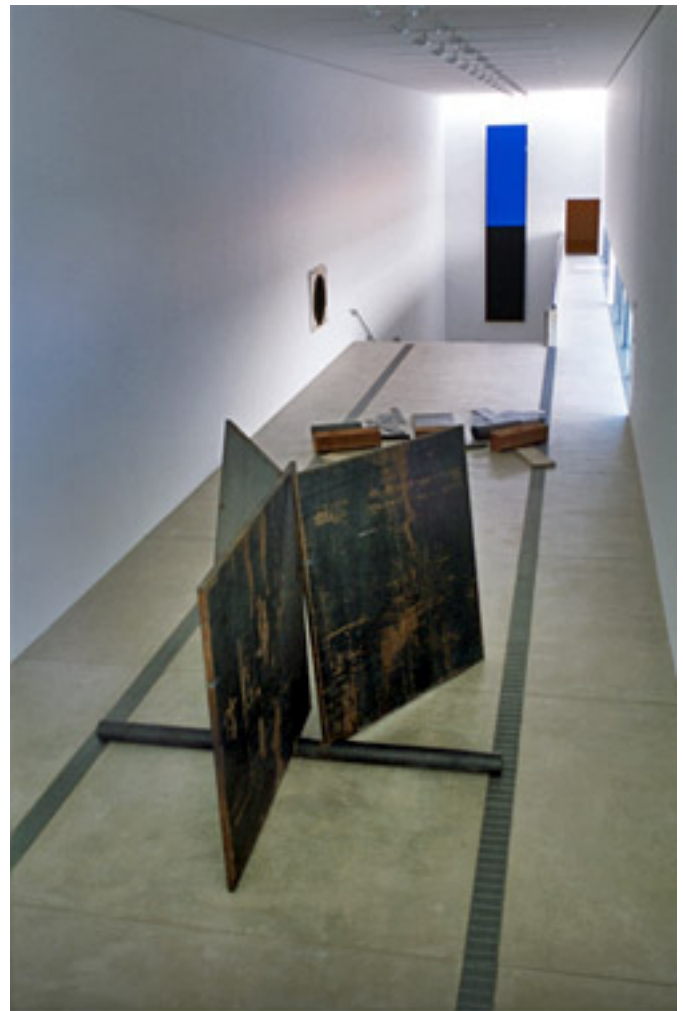
I would prefer to discuss different options for museum architecture and how they do, or don't, function in relation to the art they are to accommodate. Should a museum be a closed structure consisting of rooms, corridors, bookstands, storage facilities, a cafeteria, etc., or should it be a very open, flexible structure that would allow for a continuous adjustment to a broad conceptual variety of works? I would definitely opt for the flexible open-ended museum, although I don't exactly know what I am talking about because there are no precedents.¹

Are there now precedents that you can think of? If I twist your arm, will you maybe say the Pulitzer?

RS: The Pulitzer is a place where you can have a personal, private relationship [with works of art] in a fairly rarified atmosphere. If there is something called an aesthetic response, it is conducive to an aesthetic response. What I think is that museums—these large institutions—have to have the ability to grow and be flexible. I can't think of, off hand, too many that work well. It's particularly a problem right now when you have the architect functioning as a kind of stand-in artist doing lots of frivolous ornamental things. It works against the viewing of the art.



Installation of the Main Gallery, The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, 2001



Installation of *Sculpture and Drawings* by Richard Serra, 2003

¹ Richard Serra and Alan Colquhoun, "A Conversation with Richard Serra and Alan Colquhoun," *Carnegie International 1991*, vol. I (New York: Rizzoli, 1991): 23; reprinted in Richard Serra, *Writings/Interviews* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 229.

I think for architects to build museums now in relationship to contemporary art they would probably have to study the art and the artists who are upcoming. But they don't seem to be doing that. They seem to be building buildings that are about something in relation to public response, not in relation to the potential for unidentified youth.



Front to back: Serra, *Willie Dixon*, 1997; *Cutting Device*: Base Plate Measure, 1969; Joplin, 1971; *Standpoint*, 1987

Selections from the question and answer section of the program follow.

MW: A question for Richard: "You've talked about volume and line in Brancusi being meaningful to you and the sexuality of his work. What about the emotional qualities conveyed in your work?"

RS: They reside in other people. I can't tell you about that. You make work and then you see things in your work and you want to either critique it or find a way to extend it. It may have to do with—it certainly does have to do with—your responses in every way, not particularly your emotional ones, but certainly that is a part. I don't try to predicate the work on other people's emotional responses.

I do find something interesting, though. Children respond to the work very, very differently than older people. And people who have no background in sculpture respond to it differently than other people who do. I can't tell you about the quality of how they respond, but I've noticed that the intensity is different, particularly with children. Children immediately get involved in it, immediately dope it out, immediately accept it. Does that mean I'm making fun parks for kids? No. But it is interesting that, if they grow up with that idea of sculpture, it changes the idea of what sculpture was in the previous generations because, basically, they're exploring the mapping through their bodily movement.

MW: This is a question for Carmen following a statement: "More and more curators have organized shows pairing up the work of different artists. Beyond the modern death of the aura of the artwork, this practice seems to confirm the postmodern death of the author. Isn't this kind of curatorial practice a paradox considering the fact that museums often inscribe both shows and artists in a circuit of consumption and celebrity?"

CG: Today you have curators who simply use artists for their own ideas. I find this behavior problematic. I don't think curators are artists. Curators should be at the service of artists. The moderate help of a curator is crucial—not for someone like Richard Serra, because he is his own curator, but for certain artists. Also, museums

and curators have to continue making people think. Exhibitions around artists of the past expose people to what has come before them and allow the past to be seen in a different light. That is essential. I really believe that's the job of a curator.

Audience: My question is more about the purpose of creating these exhibitions that we see all over the world—"Ingres and Picasso" and "Picasso and Bacon" and "Brancusi and Serra" and so on. To me it seems related to the fact that museums insist on making familiar art consumable in new ways, thereby inscribing artwork in a circuit of consumption and celebrity. I'm not saying that this is bad, but there is a negativity, certainly, in reorganizing the way that we perceive works of art.

RS: In every museum you're going to find juxtapositions. The fact that some museums put more of one person and more of another person together doesn't deny the fact that you're always going to have juxtapositions. You'll always see things amongst things. They're just being more specific about it.



Adam and Eve between Standpoint and Joplin
Brancusi sculpture © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ASAGP, Paris