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Enduring Ornament

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ABSTRACT: This is an essay about rust. Iron usually plays the part of strength, stubbornness, and impenetrability, but rust registers the dimension of time in the material, reminding us that it always carries the potential for its own decomposition. While great expense is incurred to stave off iron's oxidation, we read the uselessness that rust precipitates as an interruption of the instrumental logics that sustain racial capitalism. Looking to the rusted ring that became Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's *Enduring Ornament* (1913), we consider how the discarded and defunctionalized lend themselves to ornamental redeployment. The essay then turns to works by the contemporary American artists David Hammons and Andrea Fraser, both of which transform Richard Serra's rusty steel sculptures into a backdrop for fleeting gestures of impromptu reclamation. Attending to questions of susceptibility and monumental weathering, these reflections look to rusty leakages that play out the impossibility of refusing the environment. Rust, we suggest, is a material archive of exposure that does not keep itself, but flakes apart and seeps away.

Enduring Ornament

AMELIA GROOM AND M. TY

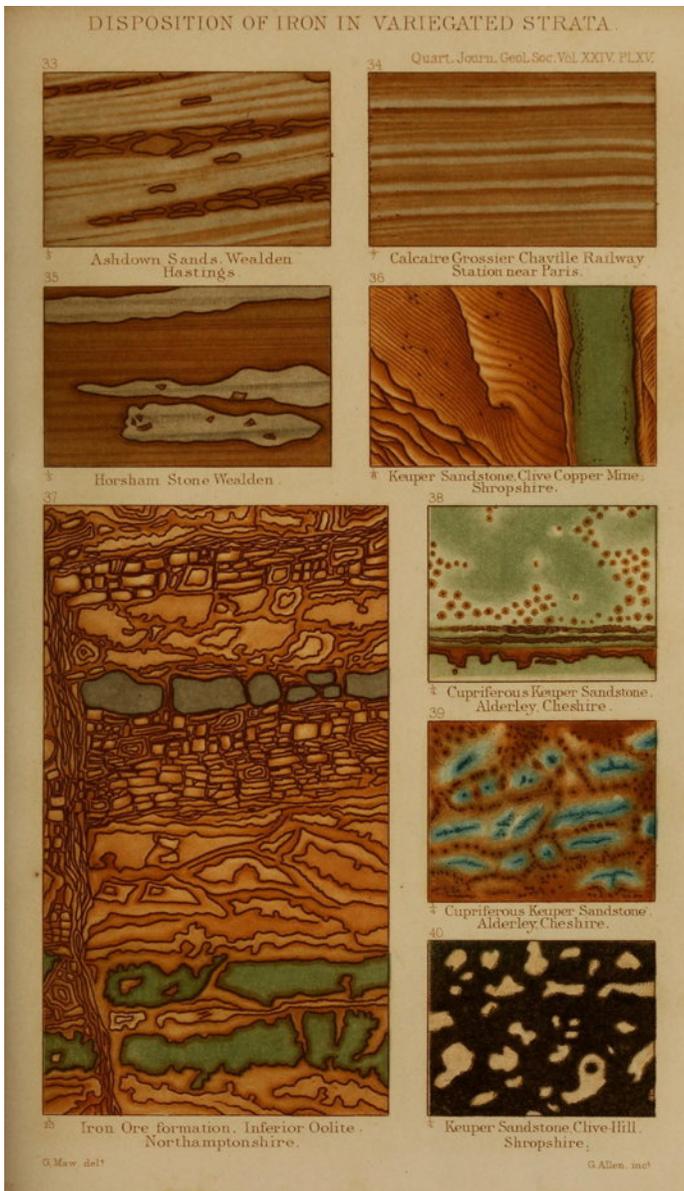
Truly great actor more seriously in character he carries — slips
into: than you — W.C. — are in what you try to show off
in: force.

Force ripples — vibrates life — muscle in action one visible form.
You: brittle — breaking — decaying iron — eaten by rustworm.

Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, 'Mineself — Minesoul — And
— Mine — Cast-Iron Lover' (1919)

There have been occasional accidental spills onto the works, including two separate vomiting incidents. Despite immediate attention from on-site conservation staff, the acidity of the vomit caused spots of clean etched metal to appear on the surface, which were impossible to blend in with the rest of the work without polishing the entire surface. A few brightly etched areas therefore remain.

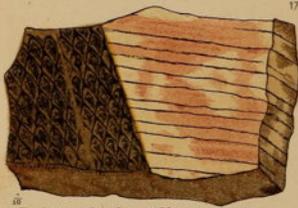
Sculpture conservators at the Tate reporting on the condition of
Carl Andre's Minimalist metal floor sculptures (2013)



Figures 1 and 2. *Ferruginous Variation*, colour plates included in the publication of George Maw's paper 'On the Disposition of Iron in Variegated Strata', *The Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society of London*, 24 (1868), pp. 351-400.

DISPOSITION OF IRON IN VARIEGATED STRATA

Quart. Journ. Geol. Soc. Vol XXIV. Pl. XIII.



17 Environs of Ardenay, Marne et Loire, Museum of Jardin des Plantes, Paris.



18 Terrain houiller, Sarrebruck Museum of Jardin des Plantes, Paris.



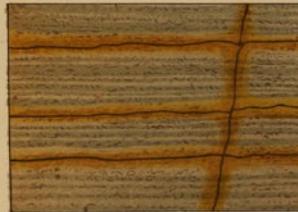
19 Great Oolite, Kingsthorpe, Northampton.



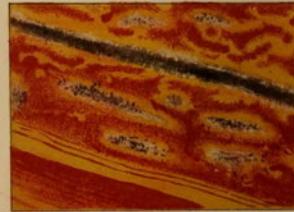
20 Marl under Glaises-Vertes, Butte-Chaumont, Paris.



21 Argile Plastique, Vaugirard, Paris.



22 Upper Purbeck Marble, Woody-Hyde, Swanage.



23 Lower Bagshot Clays, N. Wareham.



24 Cambrian Bayston Hill, near Strewsbury.



25 Surface Clay, Benhall, Shropshire.



26 Lower Green Sand, West of Folkstone.

C. Mox. del.

Hanshart. Chromo lith.

Maw's paper begins: 'Of those secondary changes which have modified the original chemical and physical constitution of rocks none seem to have more largely affected their aspect than the recombinations and rearrangements of iron.'

In his *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin remarks on the enthusiasm with which capitalist modernity would come to greet iron construction.¹ Celebrated for its strength, versatility, and durability, iron served as the innumerable vertebrate of the railway system and as the ballast of transitory spaces of exchange: bridges, shopping arcades, exhibition halls, train stations, luxury restaurants, and the reading rooms of eminent libraries. When checkered by glass, iron allowed interior spaces to be both sheltered and cascaded in light; trees could be housed indoors, and greenhouses could grow gardens even in the freeze of winter. Architecture also found a gateway to unprecedented verticality; by force of iron, colonial modernity extended its horizontal and upward reach, with train tracks going distant and buildings breaching the sky.

In the nineteenth century, iron also comes to exceed its functional role and to assume an ascendant place in the capitalist imaginary. Cultural investment in its magical properties amplifies to the extent that the rings of Saturn were imagined as a cast-iron balcony, on which the inhabitants of that faraway planet would step out for an evening stroll.² Meanwhile, in symbolist literature, hairstyles were said to take inspiration from the wrought-iron designs found in the built environment.³

When entering into metaphor, iron usually plays the part of strength, stubbornness, impenetrability, tyranny — think of ‘iron man’, an ‘iron will’, the ‘iron curtain’, ‘ruling with an iron fist’, or ‘the iron control of the slavedriver’, as Frederick Douglass would name it.⁴ Lying in wait within iron, though, is the potential for its decomposition into rust. As a gradual transition into soft powdery flakes, rust registers the dimension of time in the material, reminding us that even iron is susceptible to its own undoing.

Iron, thus, presents particular problems for the long term. For archivists, paperclips and staples are prime enemies because, when they start to rust, they discolour and erode the pages they fasten. For

1 See convoluted F of Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

2 Ibid., p. 8. Benjamin refers here to an illustration from Jean Ignace Isidore Gérard Grandville's 1844 *Un autre monde* (1844).

3 André Thérive, ‘Les Livres’, *Le Temps*, 25 June 1936, cited in *ibid.*, p. 553 [S5a,1].

4 Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Boston: De Wolfe, Fiske & Co., 1892), p. 47.

someone restoring an old house, small metal hinges, screws and latches are an issue because, once rust comes onto the scene, it augments and accelerates ruination. Similarly, a cotton jacket with plenty of life left in it can be worsted by its metal buttons, fusing with rust and then bleeding out, staining and eating away at the rest of the garment.⁵ While iron is thought of as a stronger material than the likes of paper, wood, and cloth, its sensitivity to the elements can mark it out as the centre of fragility. '[I]f there be one crevice through which a single drop can fall,' Douglass writes, 'it will certainly rust off the slave's chain.'⁶

Along with its etymological affiliation with red, the word 'rust' is coloured by a history of uses, which include the sense of 'degenerating in idleness' or becoming 'impaired by inaction.'⁷ In old slang, to be 'in rust', meant to be out of work or resting; today we talk about an acquired language or skill becoming 'a little rusty' when it seizes up through disuse. Sometimes actual rust and its metaphoric senses of dereliction and decay collapse into one another, as in the Rust Belt — a derogatory epithet for the deindustrialized cityscapes of the United States, stretching from the Great Lakes to New York, where economic and population decline are signalled through enormous abandoned mills and weapons plants that are literally rusting away.

At the same time, rust has also been an emblem of relentlessness: it is a renowned insomniac. The title of Neil Young's live album *Rust Never Sleeps* (1979) came from the band Devo, whose members had previously done graphic design work for Rust-Oleum, a company that manufactures rust-preventative coatings.⁸

Like dust, rust puts everyone who has to deal with it into a Sisyphean situation. 'Stainless steel' is a misleading name; it's an iron-derived metal that stains *less*, but it isn't stain proof. 'Rustproofing' is also an impossibility — it's an optimistic term in the auto industry for

5 Recommended remedy, successfully tested by the authors on a sunny day on Tempelhofer Feld: saturate the rust stains with lemon juice and leave the garment in direct sunlight. The stains will vanish, but the metal buttons will need to be removed and replaced, or the rust will make a comeback.

6 Douglass, p. 130.

7 Cf. 'Rust, n.1 and adj.' and 'Rust, v.1', in *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/169112>> and <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/169115>> [accessed 2 July 2020].

8 Jimmy McDonough, *Shakey: Neil Young's Biography* (New York: Random House, 2010), p. 531.

techniques of delay that always require periodic re-enactment. While the oxides of other metals can form ‘passivating’ layers (which make the metal *less active* by forming a stable sealant, cutting off further oxidation), the default behaviour of rust is to expand on the surface and then flake away, exposing new layers for further corrosion. Rust keeps iron active, by always reaching out into the world and then breaking off and inviting the world in, to keep gnawing away at the material’s insides.

In modern economic and militaristic terms, this spells disaster. The US government spends tens of billions of dollars every year in direct costs in the fight against rust. In 2004, the Department of Defense declared *war on rust* with their new ‘corrosion prevention and control program’, CorrDefense.⁹ As Jonathan Waldman chronicles in his book *Rust: The Longest War*, rust has been called ‘the pervasive menace’, ‘the great destroyer’, ‘the ruthless enemy’, and ‘the evil’.¹⁰

Rusts are also pathogenic fungi, named so because of their powdery, storm of Jupiter colour. Plants who have contracted rust really do appear as though their stems and leaves are corroding away, and when these fungi show up on crops they can wreak havoc. In the nineteenth century, the arrival of a rust fungus on the island of Sri Lanka led to the rapid and total collapse of its coffee industry, which the British had coercively cultivated into one of the largest and most lucrative in the world.¹¹ After examining spores that had been collected from plantations abroad, a chief botanist at Kew Gardens named the fungus *Hemileia vastatrix*, the ‘half-smooth devastator’.

Enabled by colonial networks of transit, and by the imperial imperative to consign land to monoculture, coffee rust threatened to become a global epidemic. Spores of rust could ride on railways, steamships, and airplanes trafficking the spoils of the plantation — could hang on the clothes and bodies of labourers who travelled routes of trade.

9 See the hilariously bad video ‘Pentagon declares War on Rust’, uploaded to YouTube by user noahmax6000 <<https://youtu.be/qoME4gFEWFQ>> [accessed 1 July 2020].

10 Jonathan Waldman, *Rust: The Longest War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), pp. 6–7.

11 British forces prepared the island for large-scale coffee production by destroying native rice fields, carrying out massacres to deter rebellion, and placing the land at the disposal of British planters, who recruited labour from a population that, until that point, had largely practiced diversified subsistence farming within local communities.

By 1920, the rust had reached many of the coffee-producing countries in Asia and Africa; by the 1970s it was starting to show up in South America.¹² Since then, fungicides and new strains of crop have been engineered to resist rust's proliferation. But *la roya*, as it's called in Central America,¹³ has continued to return with greater intensity and at higher altitudes, as climate irregularities encourage its propagation.¹⁴ As lands across the Americas succumb to rust and fall fallow, farmers and wage labourers are pressed to migrate toward northern borders that largely refuse them.

In the past, agricultural combat against rust remained a relatively local affair. In ancient Rome, when large spreads of wheat had reddened with rust, they used to say that foxes with torches tied to their tails — running — had set the fields on fire.¹⁵ Robigalia was a festival held by the Romans every spring, when they would ask the goddess of rust, Robigo, to please stay away from the crops — offering her red wine and the entrails of red puppies instead. In his account of the sacrificial festival, Ovid records a prayer to Robigo that solicits her to redirect her destructive powers towards weapons of destruction. 'Forbear, I pray you, and take your rough hands from the harvest [...]. Attack first not the tender crops, but harsh iron.' '[M]ay the weapons of war be stained with rust, and when anyone tries to draw a sword from its sheath, may he feel it stick through long disuse', bids the priest.¹⁶ Rust, if you must ruin things, at least ruin that which ruins; make yourself useful by introducing uselessness into the instruments of violence.

'Destroy first what can destroy others' — this springtime petition sees an ethics of anti-violence in rust's capacity to de-functionalize:

12 See Stuart McCook, *Coffee Is Not Forever: A Global History of the Coffee Leaf Rust* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019).

13 The word also carries the sense of 'blight'.

14 In Guatemala, The Federación de Cooperativas Agrícolas has formed 'Anti-Rust Brigades', which spray farms with fungicide. Jacques Avelino, Marco Cristancho, Selena Georgiou, and others, 'The Coffee Rust Crises in Colombia and Central America (2008–2013): Impacts, Plausible Causes and Proposed Solutions', *Food Security*, 7.2 (2015), pp. 303–21.

15 J.C. Zadoks, *On the Political Economy of Plant Disease Epidemics* (Wageningen: Wageningen Academic Publishers, 2008), p. 25.

16 Ovid, 'A Prayer to Robigo', *Fasti*, iv.905–32, quoted in Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), II: A Sourcebook, p. 32.

rust could accomplish disarmament even if the will to power remained unchecked. The naval and army commander Pliny the Elder likewise sensed the promise of rust's inhuman power, which, without directly partaking in military contest, could render it inoperative. Writing in his *Naturalis Historia* about the uses of iron in weaponry and war, he reflects with particular despair on the missile, which he considers 'the most criminal artifice that has been devised by the human mind, for, as if to bring death [...] with still greater rapidity, we have given wings to iron and taught it to fly.' He then considers rust, and concludes that the 'benevolence of nature' has limited the power of iron by inflicting rust on it as a penalty, 'making nothing in the world more mortal than that which is most hostile to mortality'.¹⁷

*

Rust can signal a once-functional object's disuse, while also ensuring its future uselessness. Think of a rusted bicycle or padlock; the less you have used it, the less you can use it. It is perhaps appropriate, then, that one of the only ways that the substance of rust is usefully put to work is in that pursuit most commonly opposed to utility: the ornamental. Through a reframing of *stain* as *dye*, rust lends itself to the production of pigments for paints, inks, and cosmetics. It is only when the metals are oxidized — when they have 'breath put into them', in John Ruskin's words — that they begin to function as colouring agents.¹⁸

When the artist Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, walking to New York's city hall to get married for the third time in 1913, picked up an abandoned rusty iron ring off the street and renamed it *Enduring Ornament*, she was compelled perhaps by the object's show of time in colour — its mottled persistence through its fall from utility. Met by her eye, rust is renewed as ready-made adornment.¹⁹

17 Pliny, *Natural History*, 10 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938–62), ix: *Books* 33–35, trans. by H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library, 394 (1952), p. 231.

18 John Ruskin, 'The Work of Iron in Nature, Art, and Policy', in *The Two Paths: Being Lectures on Art and its Application to Decoration and Manufacture Delivered in 1858–9* (West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2004), pp. 93.

19 Freytag-Loringhoven's friend Marcel Duchamp would exhibit the 'first' readymade the following year. Irene Gammel, *Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), p. 161.



Figure 3. Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, *Enduring Ornament* (1913), found rusted metal ring, approximately 3 1/2 inches in diameter. Mark Kelman Collection, New York.

The artist most readily associated with rust today is probably the American sculptor Richard Serra, whose uncompromising prowess of production had earned him the title, ‘man of steel’.²⁰ Serra’s work has long pressed against the limits of infrastructural support, requiring ship yards, big cranes, steel mills, outsourced labour, and lots of money.

20 The nickname also makes reference to Serra’s time working in a steel mill in California during his student years. Calvin Tomkins, ‘Man of Steel’, *The New Yorker*, 5 August 2002 <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/08/05/man-of-steel>> [accessed 2 July 2020].

His enormous rusted metal sculptures make major demands on the spaces they occupy. In her 1990 essay 'Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power', the feminist art historian Anna Chave recounts that Leo Castelli Gallery had recently shored up the floors of their industrial loft, so that the space could exhibit Serra's works without totally collapsing under their weight.²¹

The sheer heaviness of Serra's sculptures is a primary component of what is supposed to be impressive about them; their exact weights and dimensions are routinely advertised in their official descriptions. While making a clear bid to permanence, the extremity of their weight also invests the objects with a potential violence, as testified by the numerous injuries — and on one occasion, death — of workers who have collapsed under the gravity of Serra's abstractions while trying to install them.²²

*

In 1981, the artist David Hammons took a piss on *T.W.U.*, one of Serra's massive assemblies of pre-weathered steel, which had been installed the previous year in the gentrifying downtown neighbourhood of Tribeca. The sculpture was sponsored by a wealthy German gallerist, and New York's Public Art Fund website vaunts that it weighed more than 72 tons (65,000 kilograms). The title of Hammons's short-lived intervention is *Pissed Off*.

21 Anna C. Chave, 'Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power', *Arts Magazine*, 64.5 (January 1990), pp. 44–63 (p. 44).

22 In 1971, Raymond Johnson was killed by one of the 5212-pound steel plates comprising Serra's 'Sculpture No. 3', which Johnson was helping to install at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. His wife filed a lawsuit against Serra, whom the courts acquitted from guilt. The fatality and trial did not seem to alter Serra's practice of producing sculptures so grandiose in their dimensions that anyone handling them would be placed at risk of injury. In 1988, another of Serra's enormous free-standing works fell on top of installers Daniel Hafner and Joseph Gallo at Leo Castelli Gallery. Gallo's right leg was crushed, and later amputated. Of the incident, Serra has said the following: 'Some reporter asked me about my relationship to the accident. I don't think that my relationship is open to interpretation or speculation. I think it's *my* relationship to it. Rigging is a dangerous business. Danger is something that surrounds that activity. The sculpture when it's erected is not dangerous.' Richard Serra, 'Interview by Robert Morgan', in Richard Serra, *Writings/Interviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 191. See United States Court of Appeals, Eighth Circuit, Janet Johnson v. Richard Serra, et al., March 10, 1975. Don Terry, 'A 16-Ton Sculpture Falls, Injuring 2', *The New York Times*, 27 October 1988, Section B, p. 6.



Figures 4–5. David Hammons, *Shoe Tree* (1981) and *Pissed Off* (1981).
Photographs by Dawoud Bey. Copyright Dawoud Bey; courtesy of
Stephen Daiter Gallery.

As is often the case with Hammons, the facts about this piece are fuzzy.²³ The artist had his friend Dawoud Bey document the act — along with another work that is now known as *Shoe Tree* (1981), where twenty-five pairs of kicks were draped by their straps and laces over the top of Serra’s three-story tall sculpture, turning his monument of high art into just another prop for the transient idiom of the street. But Hammons didn’t show the black-and-white photographs publicly until nine years later, and they still leave us guessing about what happened outside their frames, and what happened before and after the moments they capture.

Do the pictures refer to a one-off event, or a sustained habit, or a re-enactment for the purpose of documentation? Were the shoes thrown up all at once, all by Hammons? Or did he gradually add to shoes already flung, maybe over several days, maybe taking a piss each

23 See Elena Filipovic, *David Hammons: Bliz-aard Ball Sale* (London: Afterall Books, 2017) and Abbe Schriber, “‘Those Who Know Don’t Tell’: David Hammons c. 1981,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 29.1 (2019), pp. 41–61.



Figures 6–7. David Hammons, *Pissed Off* (1981). Photographs by Dawoud Bey. Copyright Dawoud Bey; courtesy of Stephen Daiter Gallery.

time? Was there an audience, besides Bey? And what happened with the white cop who is shown talking to Hammons in a number of the photographs? Is Hammons being arrested, or receiving a warning? Is he talking his way out of a fine?

In 1981 in New York City, anti-loitering campaigns and the criminalization of ‘vagrancy’ were feeding into the city’s pro-development agenda, as unemployment and homelessness were skyrocketing following large-scale withdrawals of social services. The industrial neighbourhood of Tribeca had been recently re-zoned so that investors could convert it into a new housing market; this was the first time ever in New York’s history when loft housing was made legal for those who weren’t artists.²⁴ There was also a dearth of public lavatories in the city, which meant that the only way one could avoid pissing in public was to become a paying customer in a restaurant or bar, or else risk being charged with indecent exposure.²⁵ And, as the pictures of Hammons and the officer remind us, gentrification was secured by anti-black policing.

Hammons exhibited the images for the first time in 1990, as part of the group show *Illegal America* at Exit Art.²⁶ A short statement he wrote for the exhibition reads:

Pissed Off is about the fact that in New York City a man doesn’t have any public access to relieve himself in a decent manner. There is no way for a gentleman to relieve himself in a gentlemanly way without having to buy a drink. Keeps the rage going.²⁷

*

Serra has been infamously iron-willed about the site-specificity of his public pieces. In 1981 (the same year as *Pissed Off*), his *Tilted Arc* was installed in a plaza outside a government building a few blocks away from *T.W.U.* At 120 feet long and 12 feet high, the solid wall of steel formed a domineering and blank-faced block to the area’s daily commuters, who couldn’t see past it and had to take detours around

24 See chapter nine of Aaron Shkuda, *The Lofts of SoHo: Gentrification, Art, and Industry in New York, 1950–1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

25 See Abbe Schriber, “Those Who Know Don’t Tell”.

26 Ibid. In addition to the *Illegal America* exhibition at Exit Art in 1990, the images were also included in the exhibition catalogue *David Hammons: Rousing the Rubble* (New York: P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, 1990).

27 The statement is reproduced in Abbe Schriber, “Those Who Know Don’t Tell”, p. 48.

it.²⁸ When hundreds of government workers petitioned for it to be repositioned or relocated, the artist sued the public agency that had commissioned the project, insisting that ‘to remove the work is to destroy the work.’²⁹

While Serra’s sculptures are specifically situated in public places (and with public funding, in the case of *Tilted Arc*), they’re also meant to be impervious to the lived realities of their surroundings.³⁰ Despite this, and despite the artist’s defensive resistance to the time of contingency that comes after the execution of his authorial intention, many of Serra’s site-specific works around the world have become impromptu but well-established urinals. Something about their placement in busy thoroughfares, combined with the degree of shelter and privacy offered by their big rusty facades, makes them perfect spaces for responding to nature’s calls. It’s safe to say that as long as cities fail to provide adequate public facilities, Serra’s weatherproof monuments will continue to have a stench of piss about them.

Quite against themselves, Serra’s outdoor sculptures also tend to become broad canvases for public commentary — with messages inscribed in the rust, writing his facades out of their timelessness. As soon as it was installed, the *T.W.U.* piece was customized by its neighbourhood. The immensity of its scale and the starkness of its surfaces made it well suited as a blank slate for graffiti and posters — so the dubious claim to autonomous purity is actually what ensured that the Minimalist sculpture became contaminated by the reality onto which

28 Chave cites Danny Katz, who worked as a clerk in the building at the plaza where *Tilted Arc* was installed, who said: ‘It’s not a great plaza by international standards, but it is a small refuge and place of revival for people who ride to work in steel containers, work in sealed rooms, and breathe recirculated air all day. Is the purpose of art in public places to seal off a route of escape, to stress the absence of joy and hope? I can’t believe this was the artistic intention, yet to my sadness, this for me has been the dominant effect of the work, and it’s all the fault of the location and position. I can accept anything in art, but I can’t accept physical assault and physical destruction of pathetic human activity. No work of art created with a contempt for ordinary humanity and without respect for the common element of human experience can be great’ (Chave, ‘Minimalism’, p. 60).

29 Richard Serra, *Writings/Interviews*, p. 194. For more on the *Tilted Arc* debacle, see *The Destruction of Tilted Arc: Documents*, ed. by Clara Weyergraf-Serra and Martha Buskirk (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

30 Chave cites Serra’s own account of what it means for him to conceive of a work for a public place: ‘one has to consider the traffic flow, but not necessarily worry about the indigenous community, and get caught up in the politics of the site’ (Chave, ‘Minimalism’, p. 58).

it imposed itself. Paint was splattered on its surfaces, garbage tumbleweeded around it, and there was, almost certainly, piss. Then David Hammons comes along and participates in this existing repertoire of furtive and improvisational urban practices, where authorship is blurry or irrelevant, and where forms are necessarily transient.

*

Another work that has Serra's big weathered walls in the background is Andrea Fraser's 2001 video *Little Frank and His Carp*.³¹ With just over six minutes of shaky footage that was shot with hidden cameras,³² the video shows Fraser taking herself on a tour of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, which was designed by Frank Gehry, the titan of contemporary architecture, whom Fraser's title addresses in the diminutive. Walking through the museum's atrium with the official audio guide pressed to her ear, its strap around her wrist, Fraser performs a radical susceptibility to the disembodied voice, which instructs visitors exactly where to go, how to feel, and how to appreciate what they are looking at:

If you haven't already done so, walk away from the desk where you picked up this guide and out into the great high space of the atrium. Isn't this a wonderful place? It's uplifting. It's like a gothic cathedral, you can feel your soul rise up in the building around you.

Rather than resist the bathos of her automated tutor — by, say, turning the device off — Fraser abandons herself to its powers of suggestion. When the voice tells her to look up at the archways, her head follows.

31 This video can be viewed at *UbuWeb* <http://ubu.com/film/fraser_frank.html> [accessed 2 July 2020].

32 In an essay that accompanies this work, Fraser mentions how aggressively the Guggenheim Bilbao controls the circulation of images of the museum's architecture; while visitors are encouraged to touch the walls, they are strictly prohibited from taking any photographs. Fraser also relays an anecdote of a local artist who, after making macaroni shaped like Gehry's building, was threatened with a lawsuit. The museum's vigilance about its own image makes the artist's intervention in this site all the more provocative. Andrea Fraser, 'Isn't This a Wonderful Place? (A Tour of a Tour of the Guggenheim Bilbao)', in *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, ed. by Alexander Alberro (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 233–59 (p. 245).

When he directs her to turn around and admire the glass tower, she swivels on cue. When he speaks of the ‘heart of the museum’, she touches her breast. When he explains pedantically that modern art is ‘demanding, complicated, bewildering’, her brows contract in consternation.

The artist never speaks, and while the video begins with the ambient sounds of the museum, the audio track is soon replaced with the generic museal voiceover that arrives through the wand of information. The camerawork also participates in the play of acquiescence, as it cuts to show whatever she is told to look at. But this perfect compliance — if not obedience — to the dictation of experience by the voice of institutional authority gradually takes a turn, as a transgressive mode of sensuality starts to emerge from the practice of listening all too well.

Every surface of this space curves, only the floor is straight. These curves are gentle but in their huge scale powerfully sensual. You’ll see people going up to the walls and stroking them. You might feel a desire to do so yourself. These curving surfaces have a direct appeal that has nothing to do with age or class or education [...]. This pillar is clad in panels of limestone. Run your hand over them. Feel how smooth it is....

When the video is two and a half minutes in, Fraser bites her own fist. By the fourth minute, she is hiking up her bright green dress to reveal a white thong, and caressing her own ass as she presses herself against Gehry’s curved pillar. She consummates the enjoyment of the universal through its de-sublimation, and her impersonally prompted exhibitionism recodes the solemnity of aesthetic education into the comedy of the improperly erotic.³³

When the narrator prompts her to pause the audio guide, she does so, ambling to the next room to await further instruction. The

33 ‘These curving surfaces have a direct appeal that has nothing to do with age or class or education’, the Guggenheim Bilbao’s voiceover insists, before explaining how the building was made by computers and robots — as the product, in Fraser’s words, ‘of a world in which the human labour of production does not exist’. While museum-goers are instructed to touch the walls of the building and ‘feel how smooth it is’, Fraser’s essay reflects on the social realities that are being smoothed-over here — from local unemployment and poverty to the precarization of labour in and through art institutions and the franchised spectacularization of museums made into ‘corporate entertainment complexes’ (ibid.).



Figures 8–10. Andrea Fraser, *Little Frank and His Carp* (2001), standard definition video. Video stills. Courtesy the artist.

video cuts to a museum-goer touching his hand to the wall where Fraser has just had her encounter, before ending on a shot of Serra's 180-ton, 15.85-meter-long *Snake* (1994-97) — a 'big slab of rusty steel' (Fraser's description) that critics have variously described as 'undulating' and 'flirty' in its 'wanton curviness'.³⁴ By the time she arrives in the space, Fraser has libidinally charged the embodiment

34 Ibid., p. 243. Richard Cork, *Breaking Down the Barriers: Art in the 1990s* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 515. Deborah Solomon, 'Richard Serra Is Carrying the Weight of the World', *The New York Times*, 28 August 2019.

of the abstract ‘phenomenological subject’³⁵ that Minimalist artworks like Serra’s are credited with inviting into engagement — and she has roused platitudes about participatory art to the point of their discomposure.

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Fraser’s illicit encounter with the defiantly blank surfaces of the institution recalls an anecdote at the start of Anna Chave’s essay on the relations of power that play out through Minimalist artworks. At the Museum of Modern Art in New York, two teenage girls are interacting with a polished brass box on the floor, which is an untitled Donald Judd sculpture. Their first response is to kick it and laugh, then they use it as a mirror to fix their hair, and finally they bend down and kiss their reflections on its surface. Witnessing all this from a distance, Chave recounts that she was struck by the fact that the museum guard who stood nearby made no attempt to intervene. She goes on to argue that ‘the object’s look of absolute, or “plain power”’, as Judd described it, ‘helps explain the perception that it did not need or merit protecting.’³⁶

The tendencies that came to define American Minimalism as it emerged in the 1960s included the explicit use of industrial materials and procedures, and the absence of any frame or plinth for the art object. Positioned on the same ground as the viewer, the Minimalist sculpture might have appeared more ‘exposed’, more vulnerable to being touched or attacked — except that the self-consciously hardy and non-precious materiality, and the techniques of outsourced mass production, served at the same time to negate any dimension of fragility.

Serra’s contribution to Minimalism was to render its objects on an ever more monumental scale, and the installation at the Guggenheim Bilbao is one of his biggest-ever works. It occupies the museum’s largest gallery, which was specifically built to house the installation as a permanent centrepiece. ‘Contemporary art is *big*’, the official voiceover in Fraser’s video explains, as she reaches the Serra room. ‘In fact, some of it is enormous!’

35 See Hal Foster, ‘The Crux of Minimalism’, in Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 35–71.

36 Chave, p. 44.

The curvaceous surfaces that we see Fraser enjoy in her video seem to be left unaffected by her excessively compliant (and wonderfully inappropriate) masturbatory caress. Similarly, Hammons's piss and shoes have got nothing on the immense solidity and claims to posterity that are embodied in Serra's work. They might cause some olfactory disruption, and prove difficult to take down, but the stench would pass within a matter of days, the shoes in some weeks, while the towering steel walls would remain indefinitely and indifferently upright.³⁷

By messing with registers of macho monumentalism, though, these transitory interventions bring its humorlessness and impervious self-importance into sharp relief. The steely indifference of Serra's surfaces, along with the logic of final conquest that they embody, may seem to impress a sense of futility on such leaky and libidinal gestures as those enacted by Hammons and Fraser. But it is precisely by making minimal claim to staying power that such acts of fleeting disturbance underscore the ultimate futility of trying to close off the relationship between an object and its world.

For decades, Serra has steeled his works against the weather by using pre-treated COR-TEN, which is the generic trademark name for US Steel's weathering steel, whose alloy is designed to stave off the weathering effects of the weather, by accelerating and then harnessing the rusting process. Rust is welcomed onto the surface, but only as a technique of controlled passivation: once the coating of oxidation has formed over the exposed metal, it is supposed to stabilize and shut out the environment, thereby eliminating the need for ongoing re-painting or other costly anti-rust maintenance measures. This is the idea with weathering steel; the steel is weathered so as to refuse the weather, with a paradoxically protective layer of corrosion.³⁸

When US Steel opened the US Steel Tower as their headquarters in Pittsburgh in 1970, the building was supposed to be a showpiece for their COR-TEN product, with columns of the weathering steel running right up the sixty-four story skyscraper. Within months, though,

37 Serra, apparently, was not pleased. Filipovic, *David Hammons*, p. 70.

38 In this sense, COR-TEN's design is in keeping with the original architectural sense of 'weathering', which refers to the parts of the building that were meant to 'throw off the rain' or otherwise stave the weather off. Mohsen Mostafavi and David Leatherbarrow, *On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

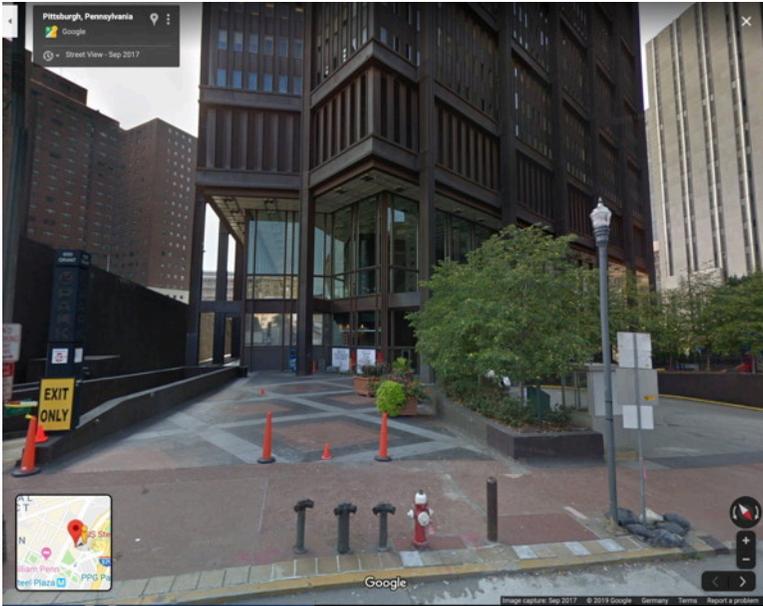


Figure 11. US Steel Tower in Pittsburgh, as it appears in Google Maps Street View.

as the COR-TEN underwent its initial phase of anti-corrosive corrosion, the building started to bleed, with iron oxides seeping out and staining the sidewalks and nearby buildings. Literally red-faced, the corporation orchestrated an extensive clean-up effort. But Google Maps Street View confirms that parts of the pavement around the tower still have a rusty tinge to them.

We recently went to have an irl look at Serra's big COR-TEN sculpture that stands outside the Berliner Philharmonie, at the southern edge of Tiergarten. Besides the presence of graffiti, garbage, weeds, and an abandoned long-stemmed rose — which were not altogether unexpected — we noticed that the solid metal panels are failing in their weather resistance, and literally leaking out into their surrounds. They're standing strong, very strong and very still, but the ground around them shows ornamental stripes of fluid red, where the rust is carrying the resistant sculpture away from itself. This is rust: a gathering of red that is followed by its own scattering; a material archive of exposure that does not keep itself but flakes apart and seeps away.

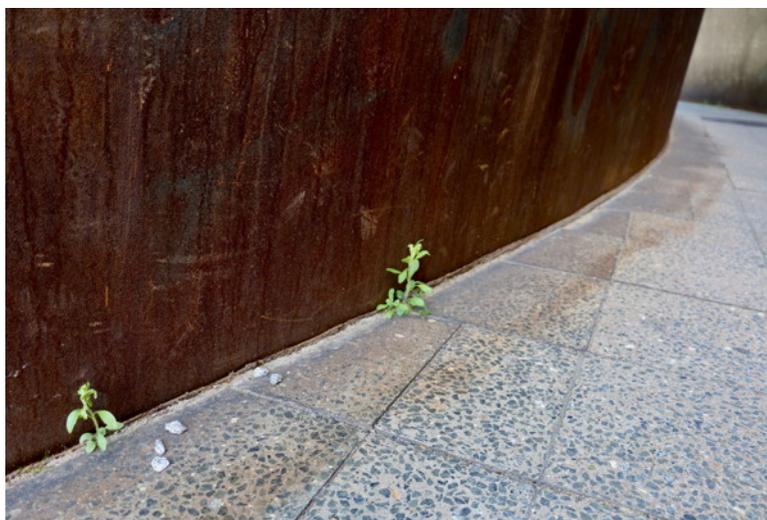


Figure 12. Richard Serra's *Berlin Junction* (1987), giving off its red.
Photograph taken by the authors on 21 May, the Ascension Day of 2020.

Amelia Groom and M. Ty, 'Enduring Ornament', in *Weathering: Ecologies of Exposure*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 17 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2020), pp. 121–41 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-17_06>

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