

The Controversy Over Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*

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The goal of this essay is to present three different perspectives on a controversy over Richard Serra's sculpture, *Tilted Arc*. During my research, I read several articles, but I will focus, here, on only three: *Public Art/Public Space: The Spectacle of the Tilted Arc Controversy* by Gregg Horowitz, *The Paradox of Public Art: Democratic Space, the Avant-garde, and Richard Serra's Tilted Arc* by Caroline Levine, and *Public Art Controversy: The Serra and Lin Cases* by Michael Kelly. While all the authors agree that this specific situation is important to analyze, all three form and defend different opinions about the details of the case. In general terms, two authors, Horowitz and Levine, support Richard Serra and his sculpture, while Kelly does not. However, even though Horowitz and Levine stand on the same side of the issue, the writings do offer slightly different arguments. Below I will outline the major arguments made in each of the three articles and compare and contrast them as I go along.

I will begin with summarizing the important points that Horowitz made in his article, *Public Art/Public Space: The Spectacle of the Tilted Arc Controversy*. Within the first paragraph, Horowitz takes a position on a specific issue that comes up in the other articles as well, which has two parts. First, there is the question of if the sculpture was actually site-specific or not, and second, if the removal of the sculpture should then be thought of as its simultaneous destruction. On this issue, Horowitz states that the sculpture was indeed a site-specific work, and therefore the work was destroyed when it was removed from the Federal Plaza (Horowitz, p. 8). The author then provides the main intention of his writing, which is to highlight the publicity surrounding the controversy, "specifically, the discourse of the protection of public space from public art" (Horowitz, p. 8). Horowitz is concerned with the way certain leaders involved in this case spoke about it. They set the art up as the enemy and set themselves up as heroes representing the public's rights, safety, and wishes. A phrase he uses throughout the article to

describe this strategy is “censorship-as-liberation” (Horowitz, p. 8). The leader Horowitz mainly focuses on is William Diamond, the New York Regional Administrator of the General Services Administration (GSA) at that time (Horowitz, p. 8).

Horowitz continues by describing the three different types of arguments made against Serra and his sculpture and then disputes them. The first argument claimed that *Tilted Arc* was seen as an inappropriate “symbol” (Horowitz, p. 9) for the area and the type of work conducted there. Second, claims were made that there was something pleasing about the Federal Plaza that was ruined by the installation of the sculpture. The third argument was that the sculpture limited the space’s possible functions (Horowitz, p. 9). The author goes into more detail, but in short, he uses the same point to dispute all three of these arguments against *Tilted Arc*. He argues that all of these claims can be refuted because for all of them the underlying problem was not with the artwork but with the plaza itself. The sculpture was intended to point out the flaws in the public space, and that is exactly what it did, which made it the scapegoat for all that the plaza was originally lacking. The author also points out several times that *Tilted Arc* disrupted what the plaza symbolized for many people, which was not reality but a hope for an improved public space (Horowitz, p. 9-12). One quote from the article sums up all of Horowitz’s ideas efficiently:

...when that space is both a sign of the powerlessness of those who pass through it and a focus for distorted fantasies of liberation from potentially unpleasant encounters, the demand for critical reflection is sure to elicit hostility. *Tilted Arc* did not destroy a plaza, but it did, in its aggressive site-specificity, destroy a dream (Horowitz, p. 13).

Now, I will continue by summarizing the perspective of Caroline Levine in her article, *The Paradox of Public Art: Democratic Space, the Avant-garde, and Richard Serra's Tilted Arc*. She provides thorough information about the history of avant-garde art and explains how the goals of public art are in complete opposition to the priorities of avant-garde art (Levine, p. 51-52 & 54-55). Despite this issue, the author is in favor of avant-garde art in public spaces and calls it a "democratic value" (Levine, p. 51). Levine, like both of the other authors, then offers the background story of *Tilted Arc*. She ends the story by making an important point:

The work was not obscene, violent, or offensive on grounds of race, religion, sex, or sexuality. It could not be said to cause injury, corrupt the innocent, endanger the community, or threaten the stability of government. It could not be said to be about harm. What was at stake was a matter of style, of aesthetic preference, of taste (Levine, p. 53).

Here she examines the reason for the sculpture's unpopularity, and it leads her to the question of who is "the public" (Levine, p. 54)? She explores this question in more depth later in the article, and it is a point brought up in the other two articles as well.

Next, Levine discusses the postmodern tendency to move away from the exclusiveness of avant-garde art because artists began to feel that completely autonomous art was unattainable. She notes Serra's insistence that *Tilted Arc* was a postmodern, site-specific work. However, Levine proposes the sculpture is postmodern, site-specific, and avant-garde. She also points out that even though the work is confronting the space in an avant-garde way, it was designed specifically for that space to do exactly that. So, she argues that a confrontational association between the work and its environment is still an association, and therefore the work is site-specific (Levine, p. 56). So, she agrees with Horowitz that the work is site-specific, but

Horowitz does not mention avant-garde art or postmodernism. I will explain later why Michael Kelly argues that the sculpture is not a site-specific work.

Levine then goes back to the idea of the public and considers whose voices were being heard in the controversy and even whose voices were considered more important: “vocal and silent, present and future, local and global, elitist and populist” (Levine, p. 58). This is important to her next ideas about public art and democracy. She says, “There is no difference between democratic and authoritarian government if, in the logic of the avant-garde, freedom from the preferences of the wider public is as important as freedom from a despotic regime” (Levine, p. 59). However, she then adds that this is the nature of the relationship between art and democracy; that the two will always be in conflict. She also feels like it is important for art to continue to push against the system and the majority in order to progress into the future, and so she finally takes her stance, the “public” that should be considered in these issues is the future public. Levine states her beliefs clearly about art’s role of educating people and that people should be open-minded in order to grow and learn (Levine, p. 59-60).

Levine continues with an idea that Horowitz talked about in his article, which is how *Tilted Arc*, through its site-specificity, forces attention to the surrounding architecture. She realizes this was the intention of the work and argues that instead of criticizing the sculpture, people should focus on the aesthetic issues of the architecture the artwork is critiquing (Levine, p. 62). Both Levine and Horowitz agree that the plaza and surrounding buildings were never beautiful from the start, and Horowitz even describes how the buildings were a product of an “urban renewal project” during a time of “student and labor unrest” (Horowitz, p. 11).

Overall, both Levine and Horowitz agree that this case is an important example of our democracy, how it operates, and its shortcomings. However, Levine strives more to highlight the

importance of the artwork and its significant cultural and societal role, while Horowitz is more focused on the flaws in the political and legal proceedings of the case.

Moving on, Michael Kelly's article, *Public art controversy: The Serra and Lin cases*, offers a completely opposing viewpoint than what has been described thus far. Like the other two authors, Kelly provides background information. One of the first important points he makes involves the idea of the public, which was brought up in both of the other articles. Kelly's stance is that the local public's voice was the most important (Kelly, p. 15), which does not align with Levine's claim that the future public should be the focus. Horowitz did mention this issue but did not take a stance.

Kelly then discusses the case and his criticism of Serra's defense, which Kelly says was completely dependent on the work being site-specific. If the work was site-specific, removing it from its location would destroy it, which is a violation of the artist's rights. Kelly explains that the judge ruled against Serra since the sculpture was private, not public, which contradicted the work being site-specific (Kelly, p. 16). The author continues to focus on the site-specificity of the sculpture for the majority of his article, making arguments as to how it does not qualify as a site-specific work, which is in opposition to the opinions of the two other authors.

However, all authors agree that the intention of the sculpture was to confront viewers. The first two authors believed this to be a positive and essential component of the work, while Kelly believes it is not only negative, but also one of the reasons the work cannot be considered site-specific (Kelly, p. 16). Kelly writes, "He defiantly did not recognize the public in any of these senses. So again, *Tilted Arc* was not public and not site-specific." (Kelly, p. 17) He believes that the public is part of the site, and if they are not pleased with the work, it can no longer be considered site-specific (Kelly, p. 16). By comparison, Levine and Horowitz both

made the opposite argument, in slightly different ways, that Serra did consider the public when he designed the sculpture. Horowitz says, "*Tilted Arc* did not interfere at all with paths of transit; rather, it appeared to do so" (Horowitz, p. 13). Levine argues that the sculpture is site specific because Serra did carefully consider the site, including the public, even though that consideration was used to confront them (Levine, p. 56). Kelly agrees with Levine and Horowitz that Serra's work did "redefine the space" (Kelly, p. 17), but he says that alone does not qualify it as site-specific because "the sculpture, in turn, has to be shaped by this same space in order to be considered specific to its site" (Kelly, p. 17).

Next, Kelly brings up the point that Serra could not declare his work as site-specific if he was also making claims that the work was avant-garde because avant-garde art is meant to be autonomous (Kelly, p. 17). This is different from how Levine perceived the sculpture and Serra's defense of it. While Kelly believes these two types of art to be contradictory, Levine believes that the work can simultaneously fall into both categories (Levine, p. 55).

Finally, Kelly states that Serra's thought-process of creating art for public spaces is not democratic, and therefore not site-specific. He says, "Serra's lack of respect for democracy with regard to matters of public art demonstrates once again that his public art was not site-specific" (Kelly, p. 18). On the other hand, Horowitz argues that Serra and other artists are the victims of "antidemocratic tendencies" (Horowitz, p. 8).

The process of comparing and contrasting these three articles not only emphasized the complexity of this specific controversy and other like it, but also the importance of researching several perspectives on an issue. The experience of reading these articles gave me some insight of the intensity on both sides, those for and against Serra's *Tilted Arc*.

## References

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