

Richard Serra

The idea of a “torqued ellipse”—a rotation applied to the vertical axis of an oval cylinder—had never been explored by Richard Serra when, in the early 1990s, the artist was approached by Dia Art Foundation with a proposal for a new commission. Although he had considered the possibility of making works “that could envelop the whole space, and both lean in and out simultaneously,” this project represented a technical challenge for many reasons. On the one hand, the torqued ellipse is a form that does not occur in nature and no material examples could be provided, even among such areas of human production as architecture or pottery. On the other hand, Serra’s specific desire to produce this form in great scale and with steel (instead of other malleable metals or concrete) seemed unrealistic to most manufacturers at the time.

Even the formulation of maquettes and sketches for the new series of ellipses that “rotated in elevation” was unusually complicated. As Serra consulted with an engineer in order to generate a three-dimensional simulation, he simultaneously attempted to build a maquette using a purely intuitive, manual procedure. The artist cut twin oval pieces of wood, rotated them in opposite directions, and nailed a dowel between them. He then laid a sheet of lead on the floor and wrapped the lead around the twisted wheels. The procedure proved successful and was subsequently used in the production of an entire set of maquettes, totaling more than forty units, some of them containing double ellipses.

The selection of maquettes presented here accompanies the galleries of Serra’s signature works that have been on view at Dia:Beacon since the museum opened in 2003: *Torqued Ellipse I* (1996), *Torqued Ellipse II* (1996), *Double Torqued Ellipse* (1997), and *2000* (2000), in addition to *Scatter Piece* (1967), *Elevational Wedge* (2001), *Union of the Torus and the Sphere* (2001), and *Consequence* (2003). Serra’s *Torqued Ellipse I*, *Torqued Ellipse II*, and *Double Torqued Ellipse* were first exhibited at Dia Center for the Arts in New York City

in 1997. The maquettes rest on a platform designed by Serra that is elevated eighteen inches from the ground, thus allowing the viewer visual access to the interior of each unit. Although very few of the projected sculptures were constructed, their importance is unquestionable today. “There’s a big range left,” said the artist in the interview published in Dia’s 1997 *Torqued Ellipses* catalogue. “You can see where the potential is, what’s excessive, what needs to be enlarged upon, and what to avoid.”

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Richard Serra was born in San Francisco in 1938. After graduating with a degree in English from the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 1961, he studied art at Yale University until 1964, taking classes with Josef Albers and others. Serra spent two years traveling in Europe before settling in 1966 in New York City, where he continues to live and work. He began to show his work in museums and galleries in New York in 1967, and since then he has exhibited extensively throughout the world, including representation in Documentas 5 (1972), 6 (1977), 7 (1982), and 8 (1987), in Kassel, Germany; the Venice Biennales of 1980, 1984, 2001, and 2013; and multiple editions of the Whitney Biennial, New York. Retrospectives of Serra's work have been organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1998), and the Museum of Modern Art, New York (1986 and 2007). He has also created numerous site-specific sculptures in public and private venues in both North America and Europe. In 1997, Serra's first Torqued Ellipses were presented at Dia Center for the Arts, New York.

45 maquettes for Torqued Ellipses,
1994–98

Lead
Dia Art Foundation

