Artists Documentation Program

Video Interview Transcript

RICHARD SERRA

FEBRUARY 27, 2012

Interviewed by:

Brad Epley, Co-Director, Artists Documentation Program, and

Chief Conservator, The Menil Collection

Video: Laurie McDonald | Total Run Time: 00:39:47

Location: The Menil Collection

This interview is part of the Artists Documentation Program, a collaboration of the Menil Collection, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, Harvard Art Museums.

The Artists Documentation Program has been generously supported by
The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

About the Artists Documentation Program

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, artists have experimented with an unprecedented range of new materials and technologies. The conceptual concerns underlying much of contemporary art render its conservation more complex than simply arresting physical change. As such, the artist's voice is essential to future conservation and presentation of his or her work.

In 1990, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded a grant to the Menil Collection for Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, then Chief Conservator, to establish the Artists Documentation Program (ADP). Since that time, the ADP has recorded artists speaking candidly with conservators in front of their works. These engaging and informative interviews capture artists' attitudes toward the aging of their art and those aspects of its preservation that are of paramount importance to them.

The ADP has recorded interviews with such important artists as Frank Stella, Jasper Johns, and Cy Twombly. Originally designed for use by conservators and scholars at the Menil, the ADP has begun to appeal to a broader audience outside the Menil, and the collection has grown to include interviews from two partner institutions: the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, Harvard Art Museums. In 2009, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded a grant to the Menil Collection to establish the ADP Archive, formalizing the multi-institutional partnership and making ADP interviews more widely available to researchers.

Acceptable Use

All uses of this transcript are covered by a legal agreement between the Menil Collection and Richard Serra.

This interview is made available for non-commercial research purposes only and may not be duplicated or distributed without express written permission from:

ADP Archive
Menil Archives, The Menil Collection
1511 Branard Street
Houston, TX 77006
adparchive@menil.org

[BEGIN INTERVIEW]

[00:00:49]

Laurie McDonald: We are rolling. So (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

Brad Epley: Today is February 27th. I'm here with Richard Serra on the event of the installation of his exhibition, "Richard Serra Drawing" [Retrospective," March 2-June 10, 2012] at the Menil Collection. My name is Brad Epley, I'm the Chief Conservator. And this interview is part of the Artists Documentation Program, which is funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Thank you very much for agreeing to talk.

Richard Serra: Good, thank you for having me.

[00:01:10]

Brad Epley: I wanted to take the opportunity to talk with you today about paint stick. Because this exhibition has been such a remarkable survey of the way that you have modified this tool to really push—pushed the tool, too—which has enabled you to push drawing. And I just wondered if you could talk a little bit about your early experiences with it, and if you began to see the potential then, or if it was developed over time?

Richard Serra: I think it comes out of the relationship that I have particularly with matter. And one of the interesting things at Yale was a design course that was given by a man named Neil Welliver. And he had a dictate, almost a mandate that matter will inform itself. That the logic of matter will inform whatever you do. And the variability of matter will transform whatever you do. So when I first started using the paint stick, I used it like every other kid who would go into a store and buy it as a crayon. And it comes with a cardboard wrapper, so it looks like a large crayon. In fact, it is a large crayon. And it also has the skin on it because when they make it, it oxidizes, and skin forms. But if you want to use it, I guess you can just draw with it. And as you draw, the skin will peel back itself. But what I initially started doing was just taking a razor blade, cutting it down, and then peeling off the skin as if you were peeling a banana or some fruit, whatever. But that was very, very tedious.

[00:02:56]

Richard Serra: So then I thought, "Why not?" And I was using it just with a hand motor operation. And I thought, "Why not extend the possibility of the material by using it on a larger scale—making the tool a larger scale?" And I think most invention comes from change of procedure. I mean if you look—if you go to Pollock's drip or Johns' stencil. One doesn't think necessarily that invention comes from changes in procedure, but more so than not, it does. So I had to

figure a way of how I was going to take this—and I got it because it was the cheapest material I could buy—how I was going to take this cheap, low material and be able to use it to extend its potential in relation to what I wanted to do on paper, and then later on linen. And what I found is if I melted it down into a bread pin, I could make a block of it about maybe three and a half inches by five or six inches.

Richard Serra: Then I could use it with two hands. And then, rather than spending days with this small motor movement going like this (makes small motions with hands), I could actually lean into it, and what the purpose was, was to cover the surface in a way that didn't allow for a lot of incident. So that you went to the shape of the earlier drawings in relation to the context. And a cut was usually made either in relationship to the corner, or the wall, or the floor. So they went from being drawings on paper to being installations in relation to the context of the room. Whereby when you walked into the room, you were walking into the space of the drawing. But if you really want to take it further and talk about what happens in a room like this in relation to these drawings that are on paper. Not on (pause) canvas, or on large pieces of paper, but on small pieces of paper, and handled very, very differently.

[00:05:10]

Richard Serra: I think what you'd have to do is, if you could, pan the camera to that drawing. (pause) Most of the drawings in this room were made on the front surface while I was watching what I was doing. But if you take a drawing like the one that you just showed, the way that that was conceived was I took a large table—maybe about four feet high, [maybe] a little less—and I flooded it with paint stick; the same material that I'm using to make the brick. Only now, the paint stick is still wet, and there's a lot of it. And then I took a screen—like a window screening, a very large window screening—stapled it down on top of this viscous material, laid the piece of paper on top of the material, and then took an instrument like a piece of metal or I had various tools. And kind of inscribed what I wanted to make on the back of the paper, which means I'm just looking at a white piece of paper, and I'm not making a line. I'm just watching my arm movement, and then I pull it off.

Richard Serra: So that drawing, in particular, I never saw, nor did I ever touch, the front of it until I pulled it to look at it. And after that, I never touched the front of it. So I've never actually drawn on the surface of that drawing, I drew on the back. That drawing, and the drawings in the next room—which I think there are five of them in the row—are done that way.

[00:06:47]

Richard Serra: And I've continued to do that. I've continued to use that process both with paint stick, but—and this is going to be an aside, and probably doesn't matter—but with litho [lithographic] crayon.

Richard Serra: Now, with litho [lithographic] crayon, you have to follow this one, because it might seem a little complicated. I've been using litho [lithographic] crayon on Mylar. Now if you take Mylar, Mylar is a transparent piece of paper. Now, if you cover a piece of Mylar like this (rubs hands together), and you have—with litho [lithographic] crayon, you have a black piece of Mylar, you have it like this. And so the other side's not covered at all. And what I was doing was putting a piece of Mylar down and drawing on it, a la the same as we'd done here. And I thought after a while, well, only part of it's coming up, maybe 60% or 70%.

Richard Serra: Then I thought, what if I take another piece of Mylar, put that paint stick on it, and put it on the bottom. Now we had this black, paint stick sandwich, right? And I put the clear piece of Mylar in between. Now when you draw on the Mylar, and you pull off the bottom and the top, you have the exact same drawing implanted and printed on itself on the top and the bottom of the Mylar. Which gives you a depth of field within the transparency of the paper. There, rather than just dealing with the paper and the paint stick, now we're dealing with a litho [lithographic] crayon and the transparency of the paper, and using the transparency of the paper to reflect the fact that you can see through it, and you can draw on both sides. I've only done those quite small, not very, very large yet. But I've been doing it for four or five years.

[00:08:24]

Richard Serra: But right now, just that kind of investigation into having the matter inform what you're doing—and allowing you to see further into what you need to do—is, I think, something that isn't primarily the concern right now of younger generations. Because once you go digital, then you're pretty much left with your spot and dot, your plus and minus. So, to some degree, the people have entered in there, but not with what you would call handmade work that deals with the invention of the physicality of the material. Maybe they'll use—they'll invent a new way of dealing with the matter as it's transported through the camera digitally to change what we're actually looking at. But that doesn't seem to be the way it's working, and younger artists don't seem to have that kind of concern for the physicality of dealing with matter as a possibility of invention.

Richard Serra: But I can name a few. There's a younger painter named Mark Grotjahn in Los Angeles, who's very much involved with it. There are some. I guess Christopher Wool, for sure. There are some painters who are involved with that.

[00:09:42]

Brad Epley: And just also to be clear. Painterly concerns, or issues we would normally talk about, paint surfaces, are really not obviously a concern for you in these works?

Richard Serra: No, I distinguish between painting and drawing mainly because it's on paper, and you know if you're painting, it takes in the tradition of painting. These take in—these—if they'd bespeak of anything, they'd bespeak of the tradition of drawing. Now, it may sound like a stretch, but if you look at the drawing behind us, I—I in my mind's eye, but it may be completely self-serving could think of Redon or Seurat. Now, I think people are going to look at this and go to pizza pies, not Seurat or Redon.

Richard Serra: But to me, these easily—and that's what makes them conventional, because they *are* on paper—dovetail into the tradition of drawing. These (points at drawing on wall behind him) were done not on the back, these were done on the front. And these I would just lie the paper on the table, and then I would mix up gallons of paint stick, start in the middle, screen on top, and then actually just physically pound it until they started moving—the paint stick would splash out, right? Totally hysterical. And I understood that if anything, they were going to fall into overblown, physical statements that related to either Abstract Expressionism, or the old materiality of European art.

Richard Serra: And to tell you the truth, once I started making them, I didn't give a shit. I thought I like doing this so much, I don't care if people are going to read them in the lineage of art history and tag them this way or that way. And in their kind, they're different than anything else in the show. Everything else in the show is much more specifically delineated in terms of its abstraction and in terms of how it functions. In that sense, these are more traditional drawings, but I like doing them. So if I'm—if that part of my need to make something where I'm physically involved with it, and I get a continuous return on the moment, gives me fulfillment, so be it.

[00:11:54]

Brad Epley: So these then are worked from the front, whereas the one (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

Richard Serra: That's right. This one is worked from the back (points toward wall behind Epley). The ones in the other room, which are curved, linear drawings just lines.

Brad Epley: That's the drawing in five parts [*A Drawing in Five Parts*, 2005]?

Richard Serra: Yeah, that's worked from the back. And these are all worked from the front. And these—this one and that one (points first at the wall behind him, then at the wall in front of him)—no, this one and that one (points at two walls in front of him), and eight of—ten of them were done in one summer.

Brad Epley: And because I did notice that there are actually some footprints. So that's again, you pushing the material outwards.

Richard Serra: Well, you know, once you get involved with making these things, you know, it's your hands, it's your feet, everything kind of—you just try to keep it together. You try to work toward—from the center out, and you try to find an edge. And it all, invariably, starts to curve itself just the way it splatters.

Brad Epley: So is there a template then or anything, or this is a round shape or a form that you've created just in...

Richard Serra: Sometimes I take a piece of cardboard and right on the spot, will cut it with a mat knife, and stick it up. But I don't carry a template around with me.

Brad Epley: You have used templates for some of these other works. For example, *Pittsburgh* [1985]...

Richard Serra: The wall drawing [*Institutionalized Abstract Art*, 1976/2011], I had my nephew [Shelter Serra] do it with a template right now, and that was a drawing I made originally in Chicago, and did it with a template, and whenever somebody would do with a template. But those are just—you know, that's provisionally going to go up, and come down, and painted over. I did it because it was probably the only wall drawing that I had done, that I wanted to include in this show.

Brad Epley: Mm-hm.

[00:13:14]

Brad Epley: A work like *Pittsburgh*, it looks like you may have used not tape, but some other kind of (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)?

Richard Serra: No, probably tape.

Brad Epley: Oh, probably tape? Okay.

Richard Serra: Yeah. Yeah.

Brad Epley: I wasn't sure. Cause it looked like--.

Richard Serra: For the edge.

Brad Epley: For the edge, right, because--.

Richard Serra: Sometimes I use tape, sometimes I use aluminum foil. And sometimes I actually use a galvanized template. I'll cut a galvanized template, and then I'll staple the template outside the paper itself.

Brad Epley: I also wanted to ask you about the—your use of the window screen that you've mentioned. Is that—and I've read where you describe it as a way of kind of diffusing the edges of a line or a mark. Is that what you—is that kind of its primary appeal to you, or does it also allow you to just amass enormous—material on the surface?

Richard Serra: (pause) I think it allows me to (pause) make a dot in relation to a line that I couldn't preconceive. So it allows something to happen while you're not making it and looking at it. Because when you're making and looking, there's something that transpires, usually in terms of the thought about what you're perceiving, so you either alter or whatever. I didn't want to be involved with that. I wanted these to happen in the activity of making, and then leave them. So they were more almost a verb extension of making. I think (pause) you know, you can't have an end without a process, right? And most people put the focus on the object. I put the focus on the process. I always have. Because you know, you can't have—you couldn't have the latter without the former.

Brad Epley: And this screen, are you able to see through it when you're working, or is it—?

Richard Serra: No. No. The paper's on top of it.

Brad Epley: Oh, that's—oh, that's right.

Richard Serra: Except in these.

Brad Epley: But these, where it's embedded with them.

Richard Serra: And here, sometimes I would take—I would use the screen, sometimes I would use it in part, sometimes I would use it not at all. So I would start with the screen, take the screen off, put it back on, don't use the screen at all, cut a piece of the screen off, use it on one part. So that—the screen became very much involved with the inner activity of—and sometimes you'll actually see a screen that has dots on it on the surface of the paper. And you think how did that get there in this activity? Because there doesn't appear to be a scrim or a screen between what you're looking at, and the paint itself. Because that's because the screen has probably been moved around.

[00:15:54]

Brad Epley: And when the screen comes out, that's where you get those kind of peaks of material pulled forward?

Richard Serra: Yes. Sometimes you have to spend—or at least I do. Well, nobody else works this way, but you spend more time getting the viscous matter to the point where you think it's not going to either not pull up at all, or adhere to the point where you've just got globs. And so until you really find the right temperature, and the right process of activity and time, you can go through a lot of paper on the floor; that happens often. So you can go all day and not get anything, then you can go the next day because you know what you're doing. And you can get a drawing or maybe two, and that's possible, but if you're working well. But you have to get to the point where it's like anything else where you're so involved in the actuality of the making, that it kind of takes care of itself as you're doing it. You can't preconceive these.

[00:16:58]

Brad Epley: I wanted to talk also about the installation drawings, and their surface contrasted against these where obviously, you want—their function is really to absorb light and to be an anonymous surface in a way?

Richard Serra: Yeah, and basically what I want to do with those is to use the context of the room to draw you in to the delineation of the space of the room in a way that either reinforces the architecture, or is actually different in kind than the intentionality of the architecture. You could say, "Well, what does that mean?" Well, if you look at *Pacific Judson Murphy* [1978], which is a rectangle and a square into the corner. When you walk physically into what would be the delineated space on the floor, if it were a volume. Because there's less light reflecting off of the black of the linen, the opticality of the space, even though it's a miniscule nuance, is darker than the space on the outside. So you're standing in a big, white room, and there's a black piece of—and you walk in there, and you can sense that—your body senses it. That—and I'm not trying to be you know, over-the-top about this. But your body can actually sense the differentiation in the substance of the volume of space in the room.

Richard Serra: Then you say, "Oh, what does that mean?" Okay, we'll take it to a very simple case. If you go to the last room, you have two, large rectilinear canvases that go from floor to ceiling. And they go on the left-hand side, right to the floor. And then they've been cut in the corner, and the rectangle, much like *Abstract Slavery* was tilted, and then it was cut in relation to one surface. So you have a right angle, and then you have—so you end up with a trapezoid. These now are using the corner to complete the trapezoid. So this one's going down into the corner, corner's cut, the white is left over probably about 13 or 14 inches on the top. So you have a white triangle going up.

And on the other side, you have a canvas going down. But here, the—it's—the right angle is here, and this corner, the high corner has been cut.

Richard Serra: So if you take that drawing, and you think about those two planes being on opposite sides of the wall, the very first thing that happens when you walk into the room—and this is to follow up on the right angle drawing we were talking about, *Pacific Judson Murphy* changing the volume of the nuance—is the walls of the space contract. So you go in there, and you think, "Oh, this room is closer together. Like it's even physically, a different dimension than the room I was just in." Now, you may not say that—you may not register it that thoroughly, but you feel that the room has protracted; that it's moved in. And you feel that the physicality of the space is not only different in kind, in terms of its light—I'm not saying quality kind—and that because of the cuts and the fact that one is up and one is down, even though they're running downhill you might actually think there's some dis—equilibrium going on in the room. That either the floor is coming up, or the floor is going down, or there's an illusion when you first come in the room—this is going to sound far-fetched—but that the wall that you're looking at is the floor.

Richard Serra: So, you know I think anybody can play that trick any time they wanted during the day, any room you're in. If you look at a wall, and you just sit and look at the wall, you say the wall is the floor. You could actually find yourself sitting at the ceiling, looking at the floor. So there is a way to displace your gravitational sense of how you see the world in relationship to where you position yourself, and how you want to focus on the possibility of what a kind of dis-equilibrium would be, and that interests me.

Richard Serra: It's always interesting to me what was on the right, and what was on the left. I've always been very interested in that. Now if you said—when I was talking about the relationship of walking into *Abstract Slavery*. If I said, "Look, you know the difference of walking into a telephone booth and a football stadium, obviously." But if we really get down to it, where is that difference registered? And how can you register that in just a simple installation of a drawing using the room? That's pretty much where that's at.

[00:21:46]

Brad Epley: And for those works, once they're created, are there specifics about another—in terms of the rooms that they can be subsequently reinstalled in?

Richard Serra: Yeah, we give certain dimensions that we don't want them to exceed. Like if you put this one in—*Pacific Judson Murphy*—in a very, very large room, and it's way down there in the corner, it's not going to have the same resonance that it does in a room where it's actually redrawing the physical space of the room. So we give certain parameters—what's possible and what's not; "not larger than so and so."

Brad Epley: I see. Okay.

Richard Serra: Not with a door next to so and so, or whatever.

Brad Epley: So there are parameters for the wall that it's on, but also for the three-dimensional space as well?

Richard Serra: For the room. For the room. I can tell you, one of the things that's interesting about this venue, you started at the Met, and you had just a terrible floor; awful, cracked, terrible. And you had a rotten ceiling, just glass, broken, it was just a mess. But very, very high ceilings; higher than here. Because the floor here is almost dark brown or black, it grounds the drawings more. So all of the canvas drawings have more weight going down, and that's to their advantage. So in a sense, the drawings look better here. The Met, they look more stark, and they may have looked more aggressive. Here, they resonate more, because they're grounded.

Brad Epley: Right. With the lighter floor at the Met, they kind of...

Richard Serra: Because the context of the Met was a mess, the pieces had to hold their own in what was a continuous, very fast-moving, almost labyrinthine space. Here, this is a smaller footage I think per square that we have to deal with—maybe similar, but we've made smaller rooms. So you're in—maybe too many; I'm not sure. But they're very, very tight rooms, and each one is very different than the other. So you really do go through a way of seeing differentiations and distinctions, in the kinds of drawings and what they're doing room-by-room.

Brad Epley: Yeah, I wanted to mention when you were talking about this installation that you did specific to the Menil. The other morning I was in, and you were really aware of what seemed like a narrowing. At first, I thought it was just an effect of the light channel running down the middle. But I came in later in the day when the lights were different, and you still have that same sense of a real compression of that space into a narrow band down almost through the middle of the room.

Richard Serra: Well, if you just do one wall black it's going, to a degree, close the room. And if you do two, it really channels it for you. And the space does become—you can almost palpably more compressed.

[00:24:22]

Brad Epley: Those works again, the installation drawings, the surfaces of them. Have you seen instances where there was a damage, or you felt like there needed to be a resurfacing of those works?

Richard Serra: That's happened.

Brad Epley: That's happened. Okay. So again, the quality of the surface is not necess—its uniformity or anonymity is important, but it's the specific quality of it?

Richard Serra: Some are done a little differently than others. But, for the most part, the canvas drawings are pulled vertically. There's one that we did in San Francisco where I had pulled it vertically, and then I had turned the drawing horizontally, and then we pulled it vertically while the drawing was horizontal.

Richard Serra: And what that did—and it interests me because what it does is it shows the weave of the canvas. And if you see the weave of the canvas—even though you've got two layers of paint stick on it—it brings the materiality of the canvas into the play of the optical perception of the matter. And I was just looking at the Rothko Chapel, actually. The same happens in some of those paintings where the actual surface that of the duck that has been first laid down with rabbitskin glue and a wash. The white of the surface in some of those paintings is still visible, and that's interesting.

Brad Epley: Where there's a kind of a unity between the...

Richard Serra: Well, you can see the layering. You can see into the layering.

Brad Epley: Because I feel like with these works on paper, you have a sense of the material sitting on something. Whereas the installation drawings, there's a real—that distinction is really not there. They are kind of in the same.

Richard Serra: Yeah, more autonomous surfaces. And that's what they need to be. I don't want people to get hung up on what they look like interior to themselves other than what they're delineating in the room.

Brad Epley: Because for this exhibition, you did do some different iterations of works like *Pacific Judson Murphy*, *Blank*, *Abstract Slavery*, or I guess a new iteration of them for specifically for this installation.

Richard Serra: They're all the same size, exactly the same size as they were. Emmy [Emily Rauh] Pulitzer has hers in her museum there, and she's lent it out a few times. And every time you put them up and down, you'd have to staple the edges so they get frayed, and she asked me if I could do one, if it was going to travel this exact same size, and I said, "Sure. I'll do that."

Brad Epley: Okay. Because again, it's really not about the surface, it's about its effect on the space.

Richard Serra: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think if people get hung up on the aura of the original object, they're missing the point with the canvas drawings. They're not about that.

Brad Epley: That's what—that was the point I was getting to.

[00:26:50]

Brad Epley: Back in here, in relation to these drawings, I wanted to ask a little bit about the paper that you've chosen. In some cases, it looks to be kind of a buffed color, and some it's a brighter white. Is it always—is the tonal balance between the black and the white…

Richard Serra: I think (pointing at works around the room) Hiromi, Hiromi, Hiromi. I think they're all Hiromi Japanese paper, which is acid treated. I think the three large rounds—these two were done ten years ago—this one was probably more recent. What's happened is that the oil, which is the medium that the paint stick is made with, bleeds out after a point. So the entire piece of paper has changed color. And I'll take it, I think it's fine. In ten years, this'll happen also.

Brad Epley: Okay. That's what I was curious—if it was something you had seen develop over time, or if it was...

Richard Serra: Actually, this morning they—when I had come in, they had brushed off—because this one had been in storage, and this one I own. It had a lot of dust on it, and they had brushed off the dust. And I didn't say anything, but I thought it probably it would have been better if they'd left it on. It gave it another layer to look into. I didn't mind it at all.

Brad Epley: So what kind of…

Richard Serra: I mean if someone said, "Well, why don't you just clean up your drawing?" But I didn't mind the dust, it didn't bother me. But you know, if they want to clean it up, clean it up.

Brad Epley: The issue of the dust also reminds me of an issue I've seen on a few of these in storage when we were looking at works before this exhibition. And that's some of them develop an efflorescence, this kind of white haze on the surface.

Richard Serra: That's the paraffin coming through.

Brad Epley: And is that something you feel distracts and you'd like removed?

Richard Serra: It could be problematic if enough of it comes through, you're going to have a black drawing turning white, but that only happened once.

Brad Epley: Okay. And it's…

Richard Serra: And to tell you the truth, I don't know why it happened. It may have been that I—when I was making the paint stick, I boiled it, and I boiled all of the—you know, the filler of black out. I don't know why it happened, but it happened in Japan, and you know I ended up with some white drawings after painting them black; drawing in black. The black paint stick turned white. They were small drawings.

Brad Epley: In a lot of cases, that efflorescence can be brushed off with a soft brush, and you get back to the...

Richard Serra: Yeah, that's right.

Brad Epley: Okay. I was just curious if—what your experience had been. We—Allen has given us a few samples of bricks and some other material, and we had it analyzed. And what we're wondering is if some of the components...

Richard Serra: What did you find out when they analyzed it?

Brad Epley: Well, we're still in the preliminary stages of it. But I think some of the components, it depends on the boiling point of them. They'll—whether they will come out of solution or stay in solution. And we're wondering if it's in the heating of it maybe up to different temperatures, perhaps where it kind of settles out.

Richard Serra: Well, that would be good for me to know.

Brad Epley: Well, we're still working. So we'll let you know once we've sussed that out, but—it's interesting, because I think I saw one at MoMA that had that on it as well. Just localized, it wasn't across the whole surface, and it's very, very faint. It's interesting you mentioned the Rothko Chapel paintings, because in the '80s, they had developed that work it was really essentially obscuring the whole surface. And they all had to be treated because the same thing, this migration of the fatty acids out to the surface.

Richard Serra: Oh, it came through?

Brad Epley: Yeah. Yeah. And they were black paintings.

Richard Serra: So how did they retreat them?

Brad Epley: They had a solvent mixture that they used to just—that just dissolved it enough to take it away. And so they had to kind of—they had to brush that across the whole surface.

Richard Serra: You know, I've been here often, but I've never liked the Rothko Chapel more than this time. And I think because there's been a lot of gray days. I think it's better with less light.

Brad Epley: I think I agree, yeah. (pause)

[00:30:32]

Brad Epley: Let's see what else I was going to ask you about. Dana Cranmer? I wanted to ask you--how long have you worked with her? And your relationship with her in terms of coming with the…

Richard Serra: A long time.

Brad Epley: Was there a studio sharing, or did you all used to have the same studio or something?

Richard Serra: I had a studio on Crosby Street, and I moved out of it. Now I'm not sure anybody moved into it before she did. I think maybe it was—she may have just taken it after I took it. I didn't sell it to her. Somebody may have had it in between. I think someone else had it in between.

Brad Epley: So but she helped to develop the system of edge lining a lot of these works?

Richard Serra: Yeah.

Brad Epley: That reminds me I wanted to ask you about the dimensionality of some of these. Especially in this one room where there's the kind of swelling in the middle. If that was an artifact of process, or if that's just the weight of the material sagging the…

Richard Serra: No it's just that I start in the center and work my way out. And invariably, if you keep doing that, it builds up more in the center. I wasn't trying to make, you know volcanoes, but if that happens, it happens.

Brad Epley: You're not bothered by the dimensionality of the paper, the fact that it swells or...

Richard Serra: I think—and there's a drawing in the other room that's from San Francisco, and the paper has bubbled. And that needs to be re-striplined and redone. And maybe the one from Pittsburgh does also, but the one in San Francisco definitely has to be redone. We just talked about it this afternoon.

Brad Epley: Yeah, it does—there seems to be a kind of difference.

Richard Serra: That has to be redone.

Brad Epley: Yeah, where it's really a sagging effect…

Richard Serra: Well, that slipped on the backing, and it needs to be taken out, and it needs to be restretched; the paper does. That has to happen.

Brad Epley: Okay.

Richard Serra: And I'll tell San Francisco that. Whether they do it or not, I don't know, but that ought to happen.

Brad Epley: Let me just see.

Brad Epley: Oh, I did want to just clarify the materials that are in the installation drawings. Those get prepared in the studio, and then transported on site for the actual customization of them there.

Richard Serra: Yes.

Brad Epley: Those are—it's Belgian linen that's treated with rabbitskin glue?

Richard Serra: Yes. And then with gesso.

Brad Epley: Acrylic gesso?

Richard Serra: Yes.

Brad Epley: And then does it get a kind of…

Richard Serra: Probably two coats of gesso, that's often.

Brad Epley: Okay. And does it get a pigment…

Richard Serra: Not always, but often.

Brad Epley: …a pigmented layer before it comes?

Richard Serra: No.

Brad Epley: Just that all gets—that all comes onsite [sounds like]?

Richard Serra: No, there's usually two coats of paint stick laid on, usually. Sometimes three, but mostly two.

Brad Epley: Okay.

[00:32:49]

Brad Epley: Are there any aspects of the preservation of these pieces that you—I guess where you've seen things that you felt went wrong or that you wanted treated? Or are there instances of...

Richard Serra: No, actually people have been pretty good in not going after them. Like you know, people will invariably graffiti sculpture, but they don't seem to stick keys in them or anything; so far.

Brad Epley: And if localized damages happen to things like—probably less so on these because it's less distracting—but on the installation drawings. Is that a situation where you'd rather see a resurfacing to treat that?

Richard Serra: You probably would have to resurface the whole canvas. I mean it's hard to do it in part without having it dry in a way that the differentiation of what's been reapplied is always going to be (pause) different than the initial coating. So you're going to have a spot there, no matter what you do. So in fact, by trying to repair it, you just complicate the matter. So what you have to do is resurface the whole thing. Unless it's just miniscule, then you can take some wet paint stick. And if it's just small, then you can take a Q-tip or something. But if it's big, it's hard to do.

Brad Epley: Have you worked consistently with the same brand of paint stick or from the same source?

Richard Serra: Yeah. Yes.

Brad Epley: Since the beginning?

Richard Serra: Yes.

Brad Epley: (pause) There's one other question in relation to the *Deadweights* [e.g., *Deadweight (The Hedgehog and the Fox)*, 1991, Collection of the Artist], and that is this issue of where the paper joins or when the two pieces abuts, and one actually overlaps slightly. The planarity of that, is there an issue with any of that? Have—or—because one, I guess when the two frames are separate, and then when they are joined together to form the piece, one overlaps. Is there a point where that needs to be—where you could ever see that kind of join where the plane comes apart and it becomes a distraction?

Richard Serra: That hasn't happened. And actually, the drawing called *Rift* [*Double Rift #3*, 2011, Private collection] in the triptych, that's done with an overlapping pieces of paper, and you can actually see them overlapping. You know, you

try to construct a procedure so that that edge won't be damaged in transportation or when the works are put together. But people have to be careful.

Brad Epley: And in those works too, the tonality of the paper again, that's something that you've seen develop over time. Again as the mediums…

Richard Serra: It bothers a lot of people, but it doesn't bother me.

Brad Epley: Okay. And with the *Forged Drawings* [*Forged Drawing in Four Parts (Octagon, Circle, Rectangle, Square)*, 1977/2008, Private collection], is that the only case where you've applied paint stick to the steel surface?

Richard Serra: I've done a corner piece; a corner forge. But I've probably done about six or seven of them. But I've—I did an early set like this, and actually a film producer named Claude Berri, he bought it. And then all of his works, because he was very old, went into storage, so I could never show it. And so he had the original four, and they're all caught up in litigation or whatever. And I had a show coming up in Bregenz [Austria], and I wanted to show it. And I kept writing him, and writing him, and they kept saying no, no, no. So I thought I'll just make the group myself, so I made another group, and that's this.

Brad Epley: Okay. All right. Okay.

[00:36:05]

Brad Epley: Any other—anything you'd like to—anything else you'd like to add to this discussion or...

Richard Serra: Yeah, I'd like to say something. I think this is, for me, a very curious venue, in that when you're here, you have the Rothko Chapel, you have Twombly [Cy Twombly Gallery, The Menil Collection], you have Flavin [Dan Flavin Installation at Richmond Hall], and you have the Surrealists, and you have four Rothkos on the interior here—which have a lot of emotional weight I think—and you have great Newmans. But what you have is a very refined situation for seeing objects, or works of art. Which isn't true, say, of the hurly-burly of the museum with escalators and bookstores and people running around.

Richard Serra: And this is set up—I understand the theology behind it and whatever his name was, [Father Marie-Alain] Couturier, and Ronchamp [Le Corbusier, Notre Dame du Haut], for me, is one of the most beautiful places in the world, without a doubt. But I think what they've done here is try to, without being heavy handed, extend that notion to make the act of looking (pause) a space of contemplation also, without getting overly aesthetic about the

interweaving of the subtext of religion. And I think for the most part, they're successful. Because this is one of the best places to look at art that I know. So you know, it's interesting being here for that reason.

Richard Serra: The other reason is I've never seen my work juxtaposed next to [Rene] Magritte, and [Max] Ernst, and [Giorgio] de Chirico. And I found that very curious; completely curious. I mean, I don't know what to make of that. On the other hand, I like the installation of the African sculpture very much. I think that's a terrific installation. And I think all in all, (pause) this is kind of like a little island of complexes that you can visit. And I think it's unlike anything else in kind in terms of a museum. Okay?

[00:38:32]

Brad Epley: Can I ask you one more question, sorry, before you go? You just reminded me of your comment about the light. Because I noticed when we came in, you had the lights turned off. That was to experience this installation or just the…

Richard Serra: No, during the day I want them off. I just want to turn them on when the sun goes down. I like it better off. I find them distracting; they're yellow.

Brad Epley: Right. And so just to rely solely then on the natural light coming in from above.

Richard Serra: Yeah, this, the show's basically black and white, and who needs yellow lights?

Brad Epley: Okay, great.

Richard Serra: Okay.

[END RECORDING]