



Research Article

A STUDY ON THE PROBLEM OF MEANING IN THE ART OF SCULPTURE

Ömer Emre YAVUZ 

Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Faculty of Fine Arts, Department of Sculpture, Istanbul, Türkiye
Correspondence: omer.emre.yavuz@msgsu.edu.tr

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ORCID^a: 0000-0002-1404-4739

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Abstract

This study explores the complex relationship between the meaning of sculpture and its making process in the context of the philosophy of language. Sculpture is a unique art form that involves the creation of three-dimensional objects that occupy physical space. However, the meaning of a sculpture is not limited to its spatial characteristics alone. This study identifies two distinct levels of meaning in sculpture: its relation to space and its making process. While the former has received considerable attention in the literature, the latter has been largely overlooked. Therefore, this study focuses on the semantic relationship between Richard Serra's sculptures and his sculpture-making processes, particularly in his early works. Richard Serra is widely regarded as one of the most important artists of the Process Art movement, which emerged in the 1960s and emphasizes the importance of the making process in art. The study questions the reduction of the meaning of sculpture to a mere action and seeks to establish a deeper relationship between the philosophy of language and the process of sculpture. To achieve this, the study draws on the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin, and John R. Searle, who are some of the most important philosophers of language of the 20th century. Wittgenstein's concept of language games and his emphasis on the social context of language use is particularly relevant to this study. The study explores how Serra's sculpture-making processes can be seen as a form of language game, with its own rules and conventions. Similarly, Austin's concept of performative language provides a framework for understanding how the making process of a sculpture can be seen as a form of performative action. The study also draws on Searle's theory of speech acts, which suggests that language use is not just a matter of describing the world, but also of performing actions and creating new realities. Overall, this study represents an important contribution to the field of art and philosophy. By exploring the relationship between the meaning of sculpture and its making process, the study challenges traditional notions of art and raises important questions about the nature of meaning and representation in art. The study also demonstrates the relevance of the philosophy of language to the study of art and provides a framework for future research in this area.

Keywords: Sculpture, Meaning, Language, Speech-acts, Process Art

*Araştırma Makalesi***HEYKEL SANATINDA ANLAM SORUNU ÜZERİNE BİR DENEME****Özet**

Bu çalışma, heykelin anlamı ile yapım süreci arasındaki karmaşık ilişkiyi dil felsefesi bağlamında incelemektedir. Heykel, fiziksel mekânı işgal eden üç boyutlu nesnelerin yaratılmasını içeren benzersiz bir sanat biçimidir. Bununla birlikte, bir heykelin anlamı yalnızca mekânsal özellikleriyle sınırlı değildir. Bu çalışma heykelde iki farklı anlam düzeyi tanımlamaktadır: mekânla ilişkisi ve yapım süreci. Bunlardan ilki literatürde kayda değer bir ilgi görürken, ikincisi büyük ölçüde göz ardı edilmiştir. Bu nedenle, bu çalışma Richard Serra'nın heykelleri ile heykel yapım süreçleri arasındaki anlamsal ilişkiye, özellikle de erken dönem çalışmalarına odaklanmaktadır. Richard Serra, 1960'larda ortaya çıkan ve sanatta yapım sürecinin önemini vurgulayan Süreç Sanatı akımının en önemli sanatçılarından biri olarak kabul edilmektedir. Bu çalışma, heykelin anlamının salt bir eyleme indirgenmesini sorgulamakta ve dil felsefesi ile heykel süreci arasında daha derin bir ilişki kurmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bunu başarmak için çalışma, 20. yüzyılın en önemli dil felsefecilerinden Ludwig Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin ve John R. Searle'ün çalışmalarından yararlanıyor. Wittgenstein'in dil oyunları kavramı ve dil kullanımının sosyal bağlamına yaptığı vurgu bu çalışmayla özellikle ilgilidir. Çalışma, Serra'nın heykel yapım süreçlerinin nasıl kendi kuralları ve konvansiyonları olan bir dil oyunu biçimi olarak görülebileceğini araştırmaktadır. Benzer şekilde, Austin'in edimsel dil kavramı, bir heykelin yapım sürecinin nasıl bir edimsel eylem biçimi olarak görülebileceğini anlamak için bir çerçeve sağlar. Çalışma aynı zamanda Searle'ün dil kullanımının sadece dünyayı betimleme meselesi olmadığını, aynı zamanda eylemleri gerçekleştirme ve yeni gerçeklikler yaratma meselesi olduğunu öne süren söz edimleri teorisinden de yararlanmaktadır. Genel olarak, bu çalışma sanat ve felsefe alanına önemli bir katkı sunmaktadır. Heykelin anlamı ile yapım süreci arasındaki ilişkiyi araştıran çalışma, geleneksel sanat kavramlarına meydan okumakta ve sanatta anlam ve temsilin doğası hakkında önemli soruları gündeme getirmektedir. Çalışma aynı zamanda dil felsefesinin sanat çalışmalarıyla ilgisini ortaya koymakta ve bu alanda gelecekte yapılacak araştırmalar için bir çerçeve sunmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Heykel, Anlam, Dil, Söz-edimleri, Süreç-sanatı

1. INTRODUCTION

There is an epigraph at the beginning of Rainer Maria Rilke's book, *Auguste Rodin*. In the epigraph Rilke quotes Pomponius Gauricus from the book *De Sculptura*¹; "Writers work through words — Sculptors through matter" (Rilke, 1919:13). As can be seen from these words, Gauricus asserts that there is a clear distinction between sculpting and writing. Similarly, Heidegger compares the words in a literary work with stone in architecture and wood in the art of carving, and emphasises the importance of material in art as follows: "What is thingly in the work is obviously the matter of which it consists. The matter is the substructure and the field for artistic formation" (Heidegger, 2002, 8-9). Undoubtedly, everything in sculpture begins with the artist's 'dialogue' with materials and "if we want to

¹ In his treatise *De sculptura* published in 1504, Pomponius Gauricus gave a brief description of sculpting in clay.

understand a work of art, it certainly helps to know a little about the material from which it is made" (Penny, 1993:1). However, starting from Austin and Searle, it is possible to say that utterances also have an act. "[F]or instance, the utterance 'I do' (take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife), as uttered in the course of a marriage ceremony. Here we should say that in saying these words we are doing something—namely, marrying, rather than reporting something, namely that we are marrying" (Austin, 1962:12-13).

We can find the foundations of this idea in Wittgenstein's words: The meaning of a word is its use in the language. John M. Heaton, in his book *Wittgenstein and Psychoanalysis*, emphasizes that how something is said determines what is said while making an analogy between 'free association' and the uses of language. Heaton says: "It is essential to find not merely what is to be said before a difficulty but how one must speak about it - hence Wittgenstein's use of philosophical remarks which are so like free associations. How something is said determines what is said - it shows the thought. Free association encourages one to focus on the activity of speaking, the way we use words, and our feeling for them. The tone and gestures of our words reveal more than they can say" (Heaton, 2000:17). Therefore, the intonation and gestures of the words we use reveal more than what they say. Based on this idea, an analogy can be made between the words or utterances of the author and the actions of the sculptors. In line with such an analogy to be established between words or utterances and actions, when Richard Serra's sculpting methods are examined, we encounter a similar approach to the performative use of language. In this context, Serra's words "It's how we do what we do that confers a meaning on what we've done" indicates exactly this situation (Serra, 1994: 54). Serra argues that the problem in his work *Cutting; Device: Base-Plate-Measure* (1969) (fig. 1) is to use different elements side by side, and states that cutting a line means dividing and separating these elements from each other. "The activity of cutting restructured the field, informing the relationship between parts in a way other than the literal juxtaposition of elements" (Serra, 1994: 54).



Figure 1. Richard Serra *Cutting; Device: Base-Plate-Measure*, 1969

This understanding gives us a clue in the context of the philosophy of language that we relate [to] Wittgenstein's second period in terms of emphasizing the importance of studying language as a human behavior. In this regard Austin and Searle are on the same line that sees the rules governing linguistic behavior as the solution to the problem of meaning. According to Searle: "Speaking a language is engaging in a (highly complex) rule-governed form of behavior." (Searle; 1969: 12). In his book *Speech Acts*, Searle addresses the illocutionary force of utterances. That is, the utterance expressed when you are asked to do something can carry the force of request, as well as a plea or an order. He also likens "the illocutionary force of the text of a play to the illocutionary force of a recipe for baking a cake. It is a set of instructions for how to do something, namely, how to perform the play" (Searle, 1979:70) This view can be associated with Serra's idea especially in his early sculptures that how it was made rather than what was made gives an idea about the meaning of the work. However, it would be useful to look at the origins of this approach in art making before moving on to how this idea is revealed in Serra's sculptures.

2. WHEN ATTITUDES BECOME FORM (WORKS – CONCEPTS – PROCESSES – SITUATIONS – INFORMATION)

The importance of Process Art, which emerged in the 1960s and 70s and expresses a general philosophical approach to art production since then, could be described as the replacement of the artistic creation process and action to the finished product resulting from this process or action. This movement, including the artists such as Richard Serra, Lynda Benglis, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, and Keith Sonnier, developed in the art scene of the 1960s and challenged the idea that the artwork should be valuable, by building bridges between the conceptual and the physical reality of the work realized in the studio which reveals the process itself. Two exhibitions held in this context paved the way for the name of the movement to be announced. The first one is the exhibition called *When Attitudes Become Form* (works – concepts – processes – situations – information), curated by Harald Szeemann, opened in 1969 at Kunsthalle in Bern, Switzerland, and perhaps the most important event of the Post-Minimalist era (fig. 2). In the text of the catalog [of the exhibition], Szeemann describes the common points of these attitudes as "defiance of form, a high level of personal and emotional commitment, the assertion as art of certain objects not previously recognised as art, a shift of attention from the result to the artistic process, the use of everyday materials, the interaction of work and material, Mother Earth as an artistic environment and workshop, the desert as a concept (Szeemann, 1969).



Figure. 2 Exhibition view *When Attitudes Become Form* (works – concepts – processes – situations – information)

He also mentions three artists (Richard Serra, Keith Sonnier and Robert Ryman) whom he describes as making art about method or 'process'. In the exhibition, Szeemann states that by grouping the artists according to their orientation and choice of materials, he endeavours to create communities that would not otherwise be related (Szeemann, 1969). In his article titled "Notes on the New" in the catalog, he includes the following words: "Richard Serra, an artist of a very different sensibility, also creates works to exist only in one specific place. An amount of molten lead poured directly on the floor cannot be transferred from place to place, obviously, but unlike LeWitt, Serra focuses our attention on the manipulation of the properties of matter. The location decided upon for the distribution of a fluid material unavoidably affects the manner or means of distribution; for example, the height from which Serra pours his lead will affect the very size of the result. Serra's splash pieces are as situationally specific as any architectural or relief sculpture was ever meant to be but by a very novel and simple means" (Szeemann, 1969). As it is understood, Szeemann focuses on the use of the material in Serra's works before and beyond the site-specific values. In addition, Marina Biryukova states in her article "Reconsidering the exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* Curated by Harald Szeemann: Form Versus "anti-form" in Contemporary Art" that Szeemann took Serra's *Belt-piece* as the signboard of the exhibition (Biryukova, 2017:5). This exhibition, which covers a wide range of contemporary art productions, has undoubtedly been one of the most important art events of the twentieth century, as it includes many different production forms from Conceptual Art to Op Art and Minimalist Art.



Figure 3. Installation view of *When Attitudes Become Form*. From left to right: *Shovel Plate Prop*, *Close Pin Prop*, *Sign Board Prop* (1969) by Richard Serra. Kunsthalle Bern, 1969. Photo: Balthasar Burkhard © J. Paul Getty Trust. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (2011.M.30).f

The other exhibition is *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*, curated by Marcia Tucker, at the Whitney Museum in the same year. James Monte writes, in the catalog article that bears the same name as the exhibition that: “Richard Serra's lead sculpture is a displayed act as much as it is an exhibited sculpture. [...] The transformation of site and material are visual coefficients in Serra's work” (Monte, 1969: 5-6). In his works *Shovel Plate Prop*, *Close Pin Prop*, and *Sign Board Prop* (fig. 3) at the exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form*, this consisted of simply propping the lead elements against the wall. However, while Serra's works of this kind have generally been interpreted as being presented as objects representing a process, in fact the artist's relationship with "Process Art" has been misunderstood.

Serra clears this misunderstanding in his interview with Peter Eisenman by saying: “As I said earlier, I was concerned with the definition of 'what' by 'how'. I do not believe in the mystification of the creative process” (Serra, 1994: 144). These props functioned as one element of the sculpture lifting the other from the ground. In his 1967 work *To lift* (fig 4), this process was also emphasised by the name of the work. *To Lift* which embodies one of the verbs in the “Verb List” which will be analysed in more detail below, was generated by simply enacting the verb “to lift” with a ten feet long vulcanized rubber.

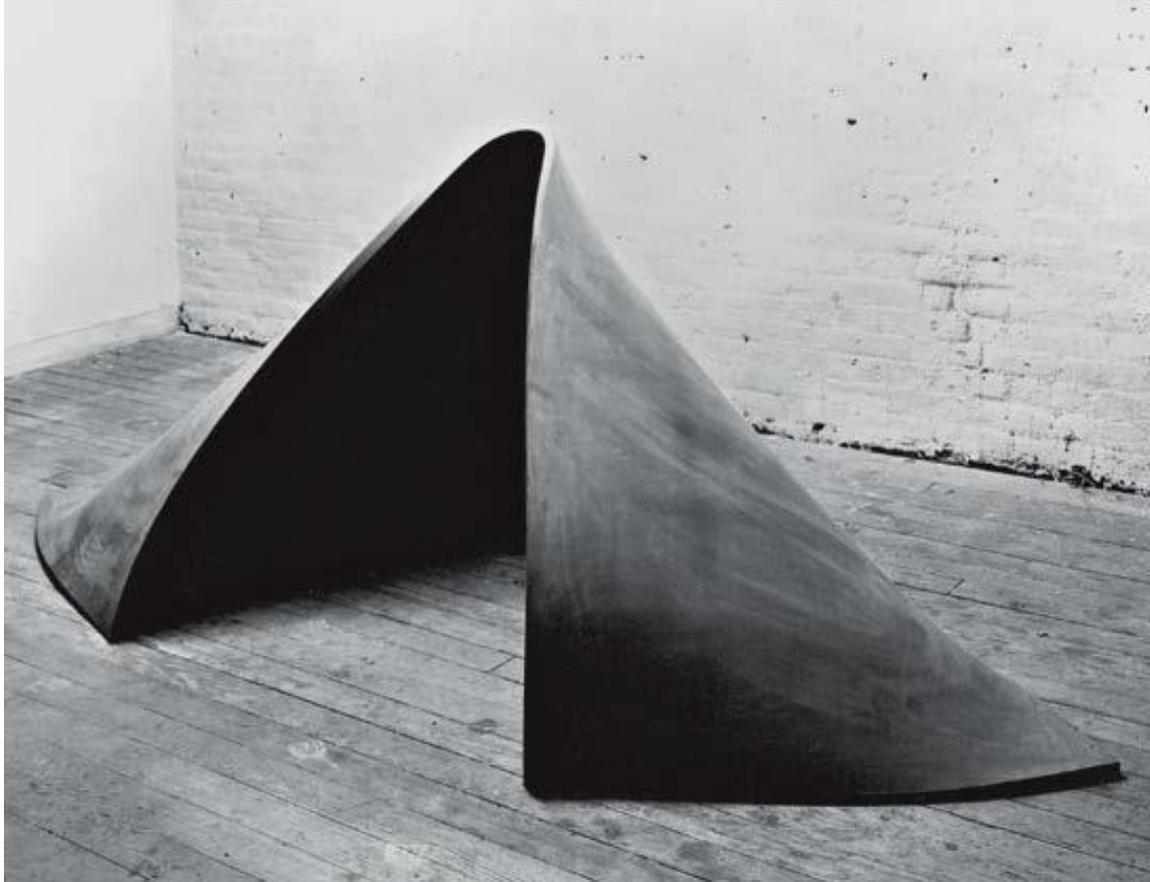


Figure 4. To Lift, 1967. Vulcanized rubber, 36 × 80 × 60 in. (91.4 × 203.2 × 152.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist. Photo Peter Moore.

This action, when applied to the material, allowed him to create a continuous topological surface that became a free-standing sculpture. In other words, it was not the lifting process but how this process was done that constituted the meaning of the sculpture. This situation resembles Wittgenstein's statement in *Philosophical Remarks*, "Tell me how you search, and I will tell you what you are searching for" (Wittgenstein, 1975: 67). It is necessary to open a parenthesis here, because the relationship between function or use and meaning can be evaluated on two different levels in terms of sculpture. The first of these refers to the context of the sculpture, the other [as emphasised here] refers to "how" the sculpture is made. At this point, it is necessary to make an explanation in terms of the philosophy of language. Searle addresses the misconceptions about meaning and use in *Speech Acts*. According to that; "The slogan 'Meaning is use' is "embodied the belief that the meaning of a word is not to be found by looking for some associated mental entity in an introspective realm, nor by looking for some entity for which it stands, whether abstract or concrete, mental or physical, particular or general, but rather by carefully examining how the word is used in the language" (Searle, 1969: 146). This fallacy did not allow linguist philosophers to distinguish "between the use of the word and the use of the sentence containing it. The slogan thus further engendered the mistaken conviction that because under certain conditions we don't say such and such, in those conditions it cannot be the case that such and such" (Searle, 1969: 147). This distinction is similar to what Wittgenstein reports in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 3.3: "Only propositions have sense; only in the nexus of a proposition does a name have meaning." (Wittgenstein, 2002: 16). In this context, just as there is a semantic distinction between the use of a word and how it is used in a sentence, there is also a distinction between

how the sculpture is made and how it is used in space, that is, its context. How the sculpture is used requires a phenomenological analysis of the place where it is located, i.e. its context, and how it is made requires a phenomenological analysis of the process. The former relates to the behavioral domain of the viewer and the latter to the behavioral domain of the artist. Because the process is part of the work rather than prioritizing it, a more direct relationship can be established with the world in art making, says Robert Morris. Because shaping is increasingly introduced into representation, he explicitly assumes that the desired purpose of art is to engage directly with the world. Kim Grant, in her book *All About Process: The Theory of Modern Artistic Labor*, says that Robert Morris argues “art’s predominantly social function explains why there has been little examination of the nature of art making itself” (Grant, 2017: 197). Grant also emphasizes that these behavioral forms have been overlooked hitherto because those who discuss art know “almost nothing” about how it is made (Grant, 2017: 197). However, it should not be ignored that both are elements that make up the meaning of the sculpture. Since this study focuses on the importance of how the sculpture is made in terms of its meaning, it is not necessary to mention the phenomenological analysis of the space. In that case, it would be useful to open the issue of the meaning of how the sculpture is made through Serra's list of verbs.

3. VERB LIST

Verb List (fig. 5) is a list of Richard Serra's working notes, written for himself in 1967 or 1968 and published in 1972, which corresponds to possible manipulations of the sculptural material. In the context of his early work, which includes all the sculptures before the "prop" pieces, this list is the main source of any criticism of his approach to process. Focussing on another aspect of the sculpture-making process, this list is a clear observation of the procedures involved in the production of sculpture. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh in his article “Process Sculpture and Film in the Work of Richard Serra” states that “The manifestation of process in sculpture around 1966 was thus based both on the discovery and representation of the forces that constitute sculpture and on a more precise understanding of the properties of matter itself, an understanding that may have come about in part through Andre’s prior reflection on the specificity of materials.” (Buchloh, 2000: 7).



Figure 5. Richard Serra. Verb List. 1967–68. Graphite on paper, 2 sheets, each 10 x 8" (25.4 x 20.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist in honor of Wynn Kramarsky. © 2011 Richard Serra/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The list includes eighty-four transitive verbs that represent actions and are applicable to a resistant material, as well as phrases such as of tension, of waves, of inertia, of symmetry, of friction, etc., which are inherent to natural forces and have propositional content concerning states that affect matter. Many of these verbs refer to recognisable processes in Serra's production. Rosalind Krauss in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* has this to say about this list: "Contemplating that chain of transitive verbs, each one specifying a particular action to be performed on an unspecified material, one senses the conceptual distance that separates this from what one would normally expect to find in a sculptor's notebook. In place of an inventory of forms, Serra has substituted a list of behavioral attitudes. Yet one realizes that those verbs are themselves the generators of art forms: they are like machines which, set into motion, are capable of constructing a work." (Krauss, 1981: 276). These transitive verbs in Serra's list, which consist of eighty-four verbs such as to fold, to roll, to split, can answer the question "what" directed to them since they can take a definite object or an unspecified object. In the context of Serra's sculptures, the answer to the question "what" refers to the material and also shows "how" that material will be handled. His work *Thirty-five Feet of Lead Rolled Up* (1968) (fig. 6) was realized by rolling a 10.67 meter-long lead sheet in itself.



Figure 6. Richard Serra. *Thirty-five Feet of Lead Rolled Up*, 1968

According to Krauss; “To think about the organization of material by means of a physical process applied to that material is obviously to desire to strip the work of art of all possible illusionism, to imbed its existence in the world in which tearing, rolling, or casting physically take place” (Krauss; 1986: 106). From this point of view, it is understood that Serra considered illusion as a pictorial matter and tried to purify his sculpture from it. Because he was only interested in what could be expressed through the language of sculpture. In one of his interviews with Hal Foster in the book *Conversations about Sculpture*; Serra says: “so that; The idea or expression of the sculpture being reduced to an image or idea for a static viewer and the translation of the experience into another language should be avoided under all circumstances” (Serra, Foster, 2018: 198). Therefore, in order to achieve this, Serra, as a way of avoiding the pictorial, is not interested in what is done but how it is done and underlines the importance of this situation for the art of sculpture. Because in sculpture, or in visual arts in general, the question of what you do is related to the subject-matter. However, Serra was interested in "how" he overcame issues such as gravity, weight, space, line, tectonics and the physicality of materials, as he evaluated the problem entirely through basic sculptural and structural principles. According to Kim Grant: these studies of process are the last bastion of "modernist self-referentiality" (Grant, 2017: 201).

4. CONCLUSION

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein wrote, “Let the use of words teach you their meaning” (Wittgenstein, 1967: 220). This view, which suggests that there is a connection

between the meaning of words and their use in language, marks an important transformation in the context of philosophy of language. Austin in *How to do Things with Words*, emphasizes how the meaning of words in language changes with their use, by saying “ ‘Take it’, the giving it or lending it or leasing it or entrusting it. To say ‘I shall’ may be to promise, or to express an intention, or to forecast my future. And so on” (Austin, 1962: 77). Similarly, Richard Serra’s sculptures show a similar transformation in the art of sculpture. The transformation in question is the development of the element that determines the meaning in sculpture from *what* is done to *how* it is done. In this context, it can be said that *how* a sculpture is made determines what is *made*. Serra, perhaps, had the last word about the self-referentiality of the sculpture, that is, if we say it like Krauss, it is only considered as a self-referring entity, which first came to the fore with modernism when the process became visible in Rodin’s sculptures. Because Serra, by making the idea of a purely sculptural action the subject of the sculpture through the manipulation of the material, has at least ensured that the process of making the sculpture becomes a sculpture.

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ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL

This study does not require any ethics committee approval.

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