

# Richard Serra 1994 Commencement Speech

Like most of you here, I am from California. I went to graduate school back East, to Yale. The curriculum of the school of art and architecture offered an open, night seminar, which was optional, not required but everybody attended anyway. Notables - poets, composers, painters, writers, musicians, playwrights - were dragged up from New York and would talk on any number of subjects. It wasn't exactly a formal lecture series, in fact, it wasn't even announced. The second day I was there I went to the first of these ad hoc meetings in a drawing studio. The protocol was somewhat different from your usual lecture, in that beer and wine were served before the talk and the students stood shoulder to shoulder in the smoke filled, packed room. A playwright, Jack Gelber, was introduced who that week had opened a play, titled "The Connection" at the Apollo Theater at 125th Street in Harlem. In the introduction we were told that the play had caused considerable controversy. Gelber, who was white had asked black junkies from Harlem with acting aspirations to tie off and shoot smack on stage. The verbal exchange between the junkies and the black audience became the language of the play. People would shout at the actors to either stop, or go on, or whatever. As Gelber was explaining this to us, a student in the darkness of the back of the room interrupted:

"Mmmmmis-ter-ter Gggge-Gel-Gel-Gel-ba"

Gelber interrupted, saying "GELBER"

"Whawhawhat I-I-I-I wawawant to-to-to knokno to knokno" -  
and Gelber says "to know" -

At this point everybody started to feel uneasy. I was thinking this guy got in on slides. The atmosphere was quite tense, people felt embarrassed by the helplessness of the stutterer, but he persisted and went on:

"Iis-iis-iis whawhawhat you are da-da-da-doing iiii you-your-your ppplay"

Gelber interrupted and said "play"

and the student finished his question in clearly pronounced English:

"Is what you are doing in your play the same as what I have been doing?"

The audience recoiled. Gelber looked stunned, he couldn't come up with an answer. With one question the student had debunked the improvisational aspect of audience participation and revealed the triteness of Gelber's concern. I thought this is the place where you better figure out how to ask questions.

The need to ask questions and how to ask questions is a big part of being a student and it is essential for an artist. About 30 years ago Charles Olson gave a lecture at Berkeley where he stated:

There are no hierarchies, no infinite, no such  
many as mass, there are only  
eyes in all heads  
to be looked out of.

Individual questioning and individual experience is ultimately the only source for work. There are academic, historical models, methods and procedures anyone can follow and think that, thereby, they will become painters, sculptors, architects, designers, whatever. The



educational credo would have you believe that if you study prevailing models, disciplines and activities and imitate them as diligently as you can, you will slowly acquire an ability to succeed and invent. Being well trained academically makes you feel secure in a tradition of knowledge, and for sure, knowledge of history is a must and brings you to the forefront of what's current, but it may not trigger invention or relevant expression. The only reason to study conventions is to be able to question them. However, the questioning of conventions is also a convention, a form of problem solving. Art is not problem solving. Artists offer up problems, but not necessarily solutions to the problems.

It takes time for ideas to evolve and it is difficult to dismiss authority and arrive at a new viewpoint. To interpret your experience and react to it, you must extricate yourself from your own deceptions. It is difficult to initiate something that you could not have foreseen for we all are encumbered by a cultural ideology that is invisible to us because we are part of its dictate, part of its language. Some ideas do not translate verbally. The saying goes that when you do not ask me, I know. When you ask me, I do not know. It is obvious there are perceptions which cannot be formulated with words. One way of coming to terms with the prevailing language of a cultural orthodoxy is to reject it and to face your own contradictions. Rather than being told which tools are available for which ends, it is more useful to let your assertions dictate your tools. Keep in mind that: "You cannot utilize the master's tools to dismantle the master's house." Means and ends are totally reversible at any point.

It may be necessary to invent tools and methods about which you know nothing, to act in ways that allow you to utilize the content of your personal experience, to form an obsession and to cut through the weight of your education. Obsession is what it comes down to. It is difficult to think without obsession, and it is impossible to create something without a foundation that is rigorous, incontrovertible, and, in fact, to some degree repetitive. Repetition is the ritual of obsession. Repetition is a way to jumpstart the indecision of beginning. To persevere and to begin over and over again is to continue the obsession with work. Work comes out of work. In order to work you must already be working.

What is it that enables the entry into the process of self-inquiry? What is it that better enables one to reach a point of self-assertion? It is basically the confrontation with self; but how do you tap into your own private reservoir? How do you discern the conditions of complexity that allow for new things to happen, to occur or to be made? Don't worry, you don't have to go out and look for new experiences, there is enough to go around for all of us. However, there are some obvious processes available to everyone. You either see it and then say it; or say it and then see it. There is a multiplicity of possibilities to enter into a dialogue with yourself. It's without rules; it's experimental. There are countless positions from which objects, things, relationships, events, activities and ideas can come into being. There are countless forms of desire: acting out, identifying, associating, anthropomorphising, fantasizing, dreaming, playing. The more common processes of negation - working through fear, doubt and self-loathing - are but a few of the means that prompt new beginnings. Moments of instability are often intimately connected to an instability in one's personal value



system. Self-analysis often disrupts one's sense of identity and exposes the conditions from which work derives; whether they be formal, aesthetic, ideological, economic, political or whatever. This exposure clears the way for change.

There are infinite forms of invention. To cannibalize history is not one of them. There is value in eradicating the past. Start with your own origins, deal with your own pleasure, your own passion, chew your own cud, whittle your own stick, draw your own line, build your own house within your house, have a place to go where you can get it together, in your head or elsewhere. Rely on your own forms of hunger. Deal with your own perceptions, intuitions, instincts, for nothing is possible without doing it yourself. There is always the possibility for original movement that will allow you to approach and connect things from various forms of critical thought and self-analysis.

You may be thinking "What does he do? What is his source? What is his point of departure?" It's drawing. I have always made drawings as a means to carry on a personal dialogue. I draw constantly. I draw for the pure gratification and pleasure derived from the activity. Drawing enables me to see. Drawing for me is a concentration that does not allow time for skepticism nor the delusion of self-confidence. At best it is a form of conceptual play, not a game with rules, means and an end. Drawing makes the possibility of thought visible. It is the most direct tool I have.

Some of you may find the concern with self-assertion exaggerated and beside the point. However, this is my advice to you based on my experience. There may very well be other ways to extend the language of art. Some of you may have a larger agenda and want to accomplish things based on an interaction with others. You may find the collective more important than the individual. You will have to take positions to agree or disagree on what is important, rational, responsible, meaningful, useful and what is not. There are no hard rules, these things tend to change constantly as one's responsibilities change. There are other methods available to transform your context. None of us start with a clean slate. To allow one set of criteria to interface with the other, by crossing interdisciplinary boundaries can be a catalyst for new perceptions, new ways of thinking. For those of you who believe that originality is finished, you may choose to subvert historical styles, and take a supermarket approach to the appropriation of ideas. Purposeful misinterpretation may very well point toward relevant mutations. It's all possible. We all have a subject and it is up to each of us to find the method to pursue it. We are all more than we think we are and today as you graduate, this is the most optimistic send off I can think of.

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