



Lawrence Weiner

Essay by
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Since 1967 Lawrence Weiner's work has been formulated by recourse to language rather than the more conventional idioms of painting or sculpture. In language, Weiner found a medium and tool for representing material relationships in the external world in as objective a manner as possible, one that could eliminate all references to authorial subjectivity—all traces of the artist's hand, his skill, or his taste. "ART IS NOT A METAPHOR UPON THE RELATIONSHIP OF HUMAN BEINGS TO OBJECTS & OBJECTS TO OBJECTS IN RELATION TO HUMAN BEINGS BUT A REPRESENTATION OF AN EMPIRICAL EXISTING FACT," he argues. "IT DOES NOT TELL THE POTENTIAL & CAPABILITIES OF AN OBJECT (MATERIAL) BUT PRESENTS A REALITY CONCERNING THAT RELATIONSHIP."¹

This often-quoted contention is spelled out in characteristically succinct spare terms: it posits the allusive and hypothetical as the negative of that which is, an objectively observable or verifiable concrete reality.

By focusing on generalities rather than specifics, Weiner has been able to constitute these material relationships and conditions as abstractions. And by utilizing, wherever possible, semantic and grammatical symbols such as capitalization, brackets, parentheses, ampersands, and the plus and equal signs, or, more recently, arrows and related graphic devices, he has articulated his work in unequivocally direct terms. Clear, concise, lapidary, and affectless, such sculpture in the guise of statements is designed, in the artist's words, to offer "a universal common possibility of availability."² Eschewing the literary or poetic, this former philosophy student concentrates on empirically observable properties, materials, states, conditions, processes, behaviors, and functions of matter.

An individual work need never actually be realized, Weiner contends, since "each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the re-

¹ Lawrence Weiner, "Notes from Art (4 pages)," in Clive Phillpot, ed., "Words and Word Works," *Art Journal* 42, no. 2 (Summer 1982), p. 122.

² Weiner, quoted in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh in "Conversation with Lawrence Weiner," in *Lawrence Weiner* (London: Phaidon, 1998), p. 19. Only rarely does Weiner engage in double entendres, or figures of speech, by the choice of imbricated literal and metaphoric idioms, as in *around the bend* (1970) and *over the hill* (1970). A more telling exception to the tenor of his written statements occurs when the text is spoken or, especially, sung, as in several of his recent CDs, including *monsters from the deep* (1997), with Ned Sublette. In such works the neutral, objective monotone of the abstract statement in its written guise becomes imbued with affect: in short, since the voice is inherently expressive, it could be said to offer another location. See Batchelor, "many colored objects placed side by side to form a row of many colored objects," in *Lawrence Weiner*, pp. 74–83.

ceiver upon the occasion of receivership.”³ Shifting the onus onto the audience, delegating the responsibility of instantiation to the owner or custodian, this fundamental tenet of his practice was appended to a Declaration of Intent set forth in 1969:

1. THE ARTIST MAY CONSTRUCT THE WORK
2. THE WORK MAY BE FABRICATED
3. THE WORK NEED NOT BE BUILT

Because Weiner’s works are conceived as nonspecific, as endlessly adaptive representations of states or processes grounded in but not bounded by material reality, they can be viewed in countless possible situations and manifestations. Although material relations at the level of generalities and abstractions embody the content—the thematics—of his art, presentation and context impact upon and cannot be divorced from the content of any individual work whenever and wherever it is realized. Since presentation and context are always determined only when, and if, a particular work is installed, the choice of medium—whether, for example, the letters are stenciled, painted, or mounted in relief, and in what typeface, size, proportions, placement, and color—varies with the site; similarly, the context—whether a poster, artist’s book, gallery wall, mural, or other public arena—necessarily inflects not only the work’s form but its very meaning. In David Batchelor’s felicitous phrase, “The site doesn’t so much receive the work as the work receives a voice from the site.”⁴

Seldom site specific, Weiner’s works can be tellingly site related, that is, strategically conceived or adapted to the venue and circumstances. In *Displacement*, for example, an environmental-scale project at Dia in Chelsea in 1991, he painted an abbreviated version of the Statement of Intent in a hopscotch grid on the floor. Immediately to the left of the entrance he placed a small work, BITS & PIECES PUT TOGETHER TO PRESENT A SEMBLANCE OF A WHOLE (1991). On the opposite side of the gallery, on the longest available wall, he installed CADMIUM & MUD & TITANIUM & LEAD & FERROUS OXIDE & SO ON . . . (1991); an aggregation of an indeterminate, heterogeneous array of materials, this work exemplifies the postulates set forth in the piece on the threshold.

In *Displacement* Weiner stipulated the identity of a set of material components but not their quantity or proportion. Elsewhere he has focused on other sculptural aspects: spatial and structural relationships, composition, and mass. When *5 Figures of Structure* was first realized, at the Arts Club of Chicago in 1987, it took the form of words in Franklin Gothic Condensed typeface outlined in charcoal on the textured gallery walls.⁵ At the Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, in 1999, the dense sanserif script appeared as solid black letters compacted into weighty blocks stacked one above another on a single wall, the relevant diagrams adjacent. At Dia:Beacon, the weighty massiveness of this quintessentially sculptural work is embodied in an

³ This statement has been used in many presentations since its first publication in *ARTnews* in the fall of 1968 and its republication in the catalogue for the group show “January 5–31 1969,” at the Seth Siegelau Gallery, New York, in 1969. See Buchloh, ed., *Lawrence Weiner: Posters November 1965–April 1986* (Halifax: The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, in association with Art Metropole, Toronto, 1986), p. 173.

⁴ Batchelor, “many colored objects placed side by side,” p. 83. This is obviously more true when the work is positioned outside the white cube of the traditional museum or gallery, but even there the presence of works by other artists potentially impacts upon the viewer’s reading of the piece. Even when permanently sited in a specific context, Weiner’s works may always be reinstalled, not least because the artist retains the right to an exhibition copy.

⁵ See Anne Rorimer, “Sculpture: Figures of Structure. The Work of Lawrence Weiner,” in *5 Figures of Structure* (Chicago: The Arts Club of Chicago, 1987), n.p.

interplay between optical quiddity and physical proximity, between the semantic solidity and the silhouetted graphic paradigms. Visual and textual “figures” are cadenced to mime the conditions they embody, in what proves almost a tautological imbrication of text, inscription, context, and site.

“I really believe the subject matter of my art is—art,” Weiner asserted in 1969.⁶ In the thirty-odd years since he made that claim his work has ranged widely, from early pieces strongly connected to painting to others evoking the sculptural, which has ultimately become his primary focus. In its constituents, techniques, and formal concerns, ONE QUART EXTERIOR GREEN INDUSTRIAL ENAMEL THROWN ON A BRICK WALL (1968) alludes self-evidently to the art of painting and especially to that of Jackson Pollock, a revered icon when this work was conceived. Yet in boldly eschewing that art’s defining or established conventions, notably the rectangular pictorial field and intentional mark making, it eloquently invokes more contemporary, process-based genres.⁷

Exemplary of Weiner’s earliest works, ONE QUART EXTERIOR GREEN INDUSTRIAL ENAMEL . . . was initially conceived in the form of a statement; when not printed in books or catalogues, such works existed as typed sheets of paper that could simply be mounted on the walls of the gallery for exhibition. With some few others, it was also fabricated by the artist, who, in hurling paint against the facade of his home, effectively extended Pollock’s gesture into the real world. Only after 1972, when Weiner began to work directly in situ in art venues as well as less orthodox frameworks, did it assume multiple guises. Among its many memorable incarnations are a rapidly daubed graffito on a grimy residential streetscape and a modestly scaled bilingual Japanese-English presentation that, in conforming to each language’s respective conventions, appeared both vertically and horizontally on the same wall. Given their inherent variety and versatility, Weiner’s works may well commandeer physically dispersed sites—as found in Beacon, where they are set among the galleries devoted to sculpture, in a stairwell, and in the café-bookstore. Reflecting his desire that his works not be confined to “aesthetically contracted spaces,” that they exist in the culture at large, the Declaration of Intent is suspended high over the admissions desk. As it offers vivid testimony to his belief that irrespective of placement “art always institutionalizes itself,” it also reminds visitors that the work of art is completed in the act of “receivership,” or reception.⁸ Above all, in this context it becomes less a gentle admonition than a promise.

⁶ Weiner, quoted in “Art without Space: A Symposium Moderated by Seth Siegelaub with Lawrence Weiner, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, and Joseph Kosuth, 1969,” reprinted in *Lawrence Weiner*, p. 96.

⁷ One of Weiner’s formative artistic experiences was a visit he made as a child to the Museum of Modern Art, New York, where he saw a painting by Jackson Pollock. See Weiner, “The Possibility of Language Functioning as a Representation of Non Metaphorical Reality, e.g. Art,” 1997, reprinted in *Lawrence Weiner*, pp. 137, 140. Films and photographs of Pollock at work in his barn, pouring paint onto his canvas on the floor or onto a sheet of glass, were widely circulated, and much lampooned, in the popular press during Weiner’s adolescence. Buchloh contextualized one quart exterior green industrial enamel . . . in relation to more contemporary practices when he asked Weiner, “Do these strategies and materials not add up to an internal criticism of the false heroization of even the last layer of industrial materials that was still dominating the aesthetics of minimal and postminimal sculpture?” “Exactly,” was Weiner’s reply. “Benjamin Buchloh in Conversation with Lawrence Weiner,” pp. 16–17.

⁸ Weiner, quoted in Robert C. Morgan, “A Conversation with Lawrence Weiner,” *Reallife*, nos. 11–12 (Winter 1983), p. 36.