

REGEN PROJECTS

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BEST OF 2008

Lawrence Weiner

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

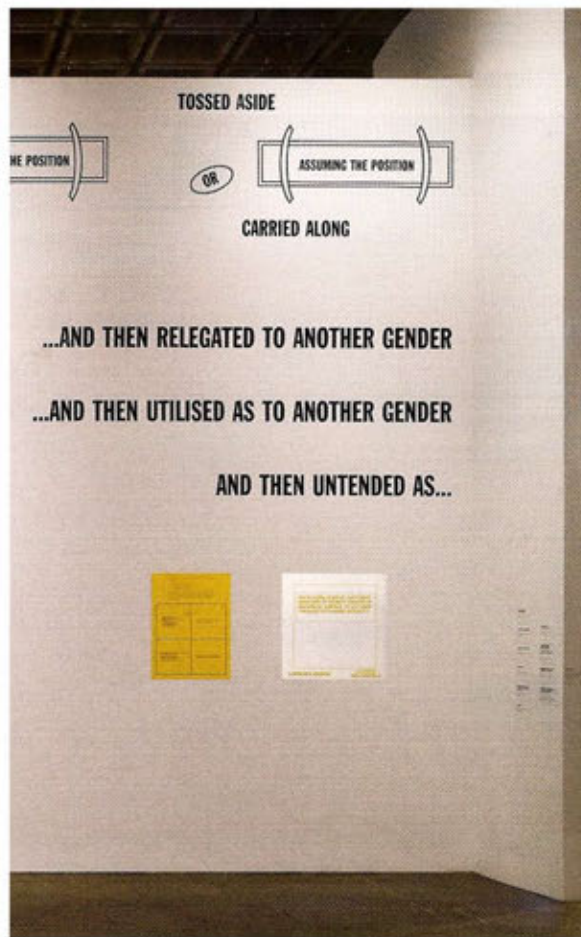
BENJAMIN H. D. BUCHLOH

ALMOST FORTY YEARS AFTER *Statements* (1968), Lawrence Weiner's first and foundational book, was published by Seth Siegelaub and sold for \$1.95, the Whitney's Donna De Salvo and Ann Goldstein at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles convinced their respective directors and trustees to offer the first major museum retrospective in the United States devoted to the paragon of Conceptual art. Both overdue and timely, the exhibition "As Far as the Eye Can See" gave us cause not only to reflect on the historically limited primacy of vision but also to look back at the moment of 1968 once more with passion (now bordering on disbelief). Simultaneously, almost as a side effect, it invited us to cast a comparative glance at what is called art in the present and to pass most of it over with an almost chiliastic diffidence. In a 1969 interview, Leo Castelli, an early admirer and Weiner's dealer after Siegelaub, presciently identified the work—both literally and figuratively—as "the writing on the wall," rightfully sensing the terminal radicality of its innate antiaesthetic.

Designed and installed by the artist himself, Weiner at the Whitney seduced even some of Conceptualism's age-old skeptics. They might have missed the fact that exquisite design could all the more efficiently induce yet another end of art

Views of "Lawrence Weiner: As Far as the Eye Can See," 2007–2008, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2008.

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(at least art as we had known it). After all, Weiner's arsenal of seduction—ranging from the almost decorative scheme of a 2005 mural in large Warholian silver-foil letters to the modest enamel lapel pin of 1984 with the imperative LEARN TO READ ART—has tirelessly served one of the artist's primary ambitions: to emancipate the production and the perception of art from its seemingly eternal entanglement with mythical forms of experience. Never before could one grasp the full range of this subversive ambition as clearly as during this retrospective (all the more so since one instantly realized the absence of any comparably radical nerve in most contemporary work).

What then were the fundamental claims made by Weiner in 1968, and which we see now through the guise of retrospective authority? First of all, that language at the end of the twentieth century could (and should) perform most, if not all, of the functions of traditional sculpture and painting. Weiner insisted from the start—and has ever since—that his practices be situated within the material and formal conventions and the discursive field of sculpture. And the polemical protests from his sculptural peers of the late 1960s (e.g., Carl Andre's derisive comment that Weiner might be a great poet but that his writings

had no purchase on plasticity) proved the urgency of the trespass all the more.

Second, Weiner's abolition of the hierarchy of sculptural (and painterly) genres and conventions went hand in hand with an ostentatious embrace of the materials of the everyday—as when he used TNT to blow craters in a state park near San Francisco in 1960 or, more site-specifically, when he executed works from *Statements* in 1968 and after, cutting a two-inch-wide, inch-deep trench into a collector's driveway, for example, or excising a square from a carpet in a collector's home in Cologne. (The work insisted from the start on its innate incommensurability with the laws of private property, even if acquired and privately held, and approximately half of Weiner's works are designated "public freehold" and thus remain outside of the collector circuit.) Weiner's work often suggests the deployment of materials that are either domestic (e.g., drywall, salt, bleach, aerosol-spray cans) or literally far-fetched and eccentric (a flare or an oceanic dye marker). Nevertheless, Weiner transforms their inconspicuousness and vernacular functionality, and suddenly these materials appear as perfectly plausible tools and matter for sculptural and painterly production in the present, easily matching, if not superseding, the plausibility of bronze, copper, lead, and Cor-Ten steel.

It has long been obvious yet improperly understood to what extent Weiner's practice contributed to an emerging dialogic and dialectical exchange between the process of sculptural production and the (eventually linguistic) performative. It is an exchange that resulted from Weiner's careful consideration that in 1968 both the legacy of Jackson Pollock and that of Jasper Johns had to be taken into account (a perspective shared by Weiner's sculpturally more disciplinary peers Richard Serra, Bruce Nauman, and Andre).

Third, Weiner's project, from the start, addressed a work's situatedness in public space and reflected on its rapidly altering meanings/readings according to its inevitable subjection to institutional and discursive frames. Thus, he was initiating one of the earliest maneuvers of institutional critique when he removed yet another square, this one from the white walls of the Kunsthalle Bern on the occasion of

Harald Szeemann's epochal exhibition "When Attitudes Become Form" in 1969.

And last (in our necessarily abbreviated list), Weiner's famous "Statement of Intent" from 1968 laid out a post-Warholian and post-Minimalist strategy to deconstruct the conven-

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tional divisions between authorial production and spectatorial participation.¹ While the statement succinctly separated artistic conception (and aesthetic experience) from the materials and procedures of execution, it also explicitly assigned a major part of the decision as to the work's final execution to the potential receiver (thus not only foregrounding the fact that economic and aesthetic structures are inextricably intertwined but simultaneously acknowledging the collector's dialogic participation in the work's material and morphology).

Weiner's fundamental claim is that aesthetic experience (and subjectivity) in the present is constituted in language. This positions him at the end of a long line of artists/writers who had engaged in the project of articulating the dialectics of the subject's simultaneous linguistic redemption and subjection—a lineage that stretches from Stéphane Mallarmé in the 1880s and Hugo Ball and Tristan Tzara around 1916 to Weiner's European friend and counterfigure in 1968, Marcel Broodthaers. What remains fluid, however, are Weiner's philosophical foundations, even though the artist has always insisted that his writings should be read as derived in equal measure from his understanding of Noam Chomsky and of Jean Piaget. Yet the multifaceted theoretical spectrum of his project is already



evidenced by the fact that theorizations of linguistic subjectivity as different and incompatible as those of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Louis Althusser are called up consistently in critical interpretations of Weiner's work. (In the exhibition's generous catalogue and its textual responses, these range from the pedantic and professorial to the brilliant and innovative, such as Kathryn Chiong's clarification of the tremendous impact Jean-Luc Godard had on Weiner's filmic oeuvre.)

As with that other great signifying system, abstraction, which—almost a century ago—transfigured pictorial and sculptural representation in view of a more radical materialist and egalitarian concept of visual culture, Weiner's monumental antimonument, considered in retrospect, also triggers the critical ponderings of hindsight: What will be the status of his language structures in the digital age? How does the work operate with regard to a phenomenology of bodily experience (e.g., color, space, and mass)? How can the work oppose the languages of control and administration with which the ever-expanding apparatus of advertising invades even the remotest spaces of syntax and grammar, and the most daring strategies of fragmentation (see, for example, the recent adoption of some of Weiner's strategies by the (Product)RED campaign, especially as disseminated by the Gap corporation)?

The fact that Weiner's sentences often deploy the full combinatory potential of the syntactic, lexical, and grammatical orders of language (e.g., his games with typographic features such as ampersands, plus signs, parentheses, and brackets) has not been recognized as an additional source of subversive intent: Precisely in the resulting slippages of seemingly prescribed meanings, in the equivalence or rapid alternation of two meanings, or in the indecisiveness that these constructions induce, does Weiner invite the subject's own constitutive choices, making it a fully participatory subject both inside and outside the rules of Weiner's language structures (just as it is inevitably inside and outside the regime of language itself).

To conclude, an etymological homage to the name of the artist to whom we owe so much: "Laurentius derives from *lauream tenens*, or 'he who holds the laurel wreath,' because victorious in his passion, Lawrence 'softens the hardened heart, restores the hearing of the spirit, and wards off the lightning of the sentence of the damned.'² □

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NOTES

1. "1. The artist may construct the piece / 2. The piece may be fabricated / 3. The piece need not be built. Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership." —Lawrence Weiner (1968)
2. Jeffrey T. Schnapp, "Introduction," in Schnapp, ed., *Ball and Hammer: Hugo Ball's Tenderenda the Fantast* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 8, quoting from Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 437.