

# REGEN PROJECTS

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## ARTFORUM

### Lawrence Weiner

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Lawrence Weiner, "Out of the Blue," 1999.  
Installation view.

In black sans serif on silver Mylar the words "PURE AIR OF THE HIGH MOUNTAINS" and "BURNT RUBBER" appear across the packaging for the perfume Odeur 53, in French and English, along with an invitation to "CREATE AROUND YOU THE SMELL THAT YOU LIKE." With graphic design by Marc Atlan for Comme des Garçons, the antiseptic aesthetic of the product, from its austere gray box with prominent bar code to the empirical bluntness of the chunky rectangular bottle and talcum-powder-with-a-frisson-of-nail-polish-remover scent, succeeds by finding within the "undesigned," indexical, informational look of Conceptualism all the constituents for a new chic. I begin with Odeur 53 not only to suggest Lawrence Weiner's lasting effects on current graphic design, or to bring up my favorite *objet du jour*, but because to do so begins to get at the crux of the debate around his project. Years past the heyday of Conceptualism, decades into his career, there is still a residual emperor's-new-clothes-like doubt about Weiner for using language as a material like steel, paint, or fluorescent lighting; wrangling about language used as sculpture is not unlike the problematic (and tired) argument that fashion (perfume) cannot be art—that is, a debate about how and where meaning is allowed to take place.

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Weiner investigates our relationship to and experience of the materiality of words—enacting and undercutting the metaphorical. The effects of language are environmental; words enter the mind and expand in its atmosphere like—well, I was going to say, like a scent, but Weiner is concerned with how this process is *not* “like” anything else. His practice provides a way to consider how language works or doesn’t work, “means” or doesn’t “mean,” and in the process becomes a consideration and theatricalization of how art itself works and means or doesn’t. Demonstrating the potential material qualities of language, Weiner exposes the linguistic structure of materials—paring away everything to its nounlike base.

Sans serif typeface: Franklin Gothic Extra-Condensed. Point size: variable, but in Los Angeles, twenty-five inches tall. Within a thin rectangular border the phrase “OUT OF THE BLUE” appears, both in the same shade of sky blue, Pantone 2995 C. On another wall, another phrase: “THIS ROCK OR THAT ROCK IN A HOLLOW OF THE LAND,” parts of it on a slant, all in a deeper blue, a shade that would not make the navvies restless. Why or how do these juxtapositions work? Because of the beauty of the first expression, its sudden boxed-in message experienced as a bolt of sun and air, sky and water? Because of the proximity to Hollywood, those same words recalling the title of Dennis Hopper’s best film? And with the longer text, is it because there is an evocation of a “real” landscape—sea, sky, rocky mountains—as well as the tradition of landscape painting and architecture, of which these words are perhaps the purest distillation? The answer to such questions (as well as an answer to questions those questions don’t even begin to pose) could be found on the text on the courtyard wall outside the gallery: “MATTER CAUSED TO CEASE TO FUNCTION AS IT HAD.” Too infrequently language is not thought to function as matter, but perhaps Weiner’s project is to examine how imbricated words-functioning-as-words and things-functioning-as-things are, how any negotiation, any telling or recounting or memory of something in the world, depends on the mystery as well as the consistency of such an imbrication. In the ’80s Weiner designed a poster for a New Order concert—band name in sans serif within a colored block, pictures of the musicians forming a cross anchored by the year, “1987.” It presented his continuing concerns with no more and no less urgency than here. It’s all translation, a simple and endlessly complex matter, always refashioned anew. In the process of one thing translated into another, never being alleviated, Weiner tries to track what is not allowed to be lost in translation and what is.