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ARTFORUM



Lawrence Weiner, late 1980s.

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LAWRENCE WEINER 1942–2021

BENJAMIN H. D. BUCHLOH

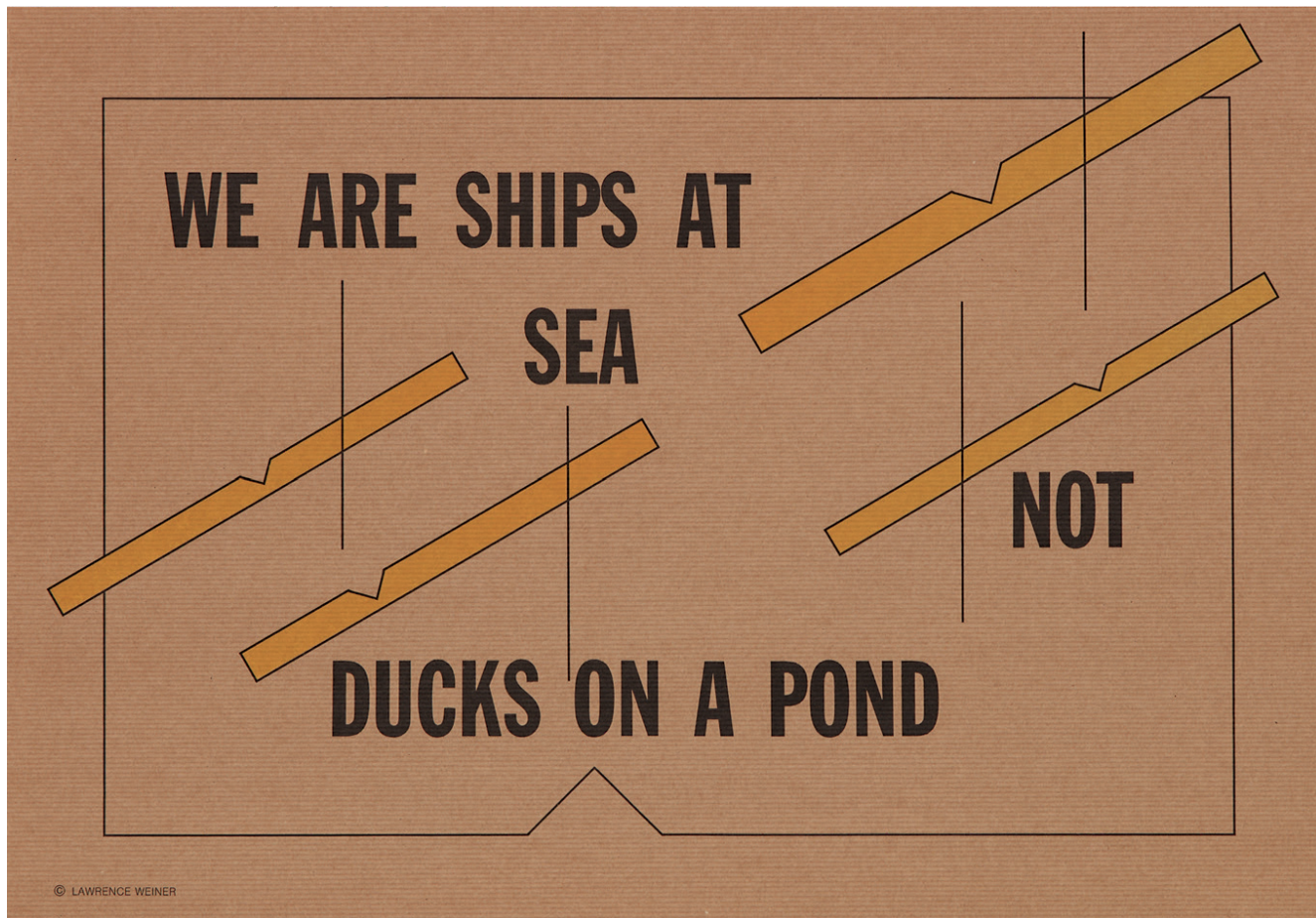
There is no tabula rasa. We are like sailors who must rebuild their ship on the open sea, never able to dismantle it in dry-dock and to reconstruct it there out of the best materials. Where a beam is taken away, a new one must at once be put there, and for this the rest of the ship is used as support.
—Otto Neurath

FEATURING HIS SELF-MADE SAILOR'S HAT until his last days, Lawrence Weiner never tired of reminding us that **WE ARE SHIPS AT SEA NOT DUCKS ON A POND**, apparently sharing Otto Neurath's moral imperative. The necessity of citing Weiner verbatim in the very first sentence (and in nearly every paragraph) of this homage already signals the extent to which his work contested—if not disqualified—the legitimacy of critical and historical ekphrasis. Every single one of his statements aimed at dismantling linguistic conventions (of plasticity, of poetry, of metaphor, of metaphysical thinking) and disputed the conciliatory potential of cultural practices. In a 1969 interview, Leo Castelli, an early admirer of Weiner who became his dealer after the artist parted ways with Seth Siegelau, presciently identified the work—both literally and figuratively—as “the writing on the wall,” rightfully sensing the terminal radicality of its innate anti-aesthetic.

In 1960, the artist detonated small amounts of dynamite, carving minor craters or cavities into a desert park in Mill Valley, California. Shortly thereafter, back in his hometown of New York, he removed a stone from the Brooklyn Bridge and displayed it on a simple wooden support structure he had constructed from found timber, naming the ca. 1962 work **WHAT**

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© LAWRENCE WEINER

Lawrence Weiner, *WE ARE SHIPS AT SEA NOT DUCKS ON A POND*, 1986, lithograph, 16 7/8 × 23 3/4".

IS SET UPON THE TABLE SITS UPON THE TABLE. When Siegelauub organized an exhibition at Windham College in 1968, Weiner installed his literally groundbreaking sculptural work *A SERIES OF STAKES SET IN THE GROUND AT REGULAR INTERVALS TO FORM A RECTANGLE TWINE STRUNG FROM STAKE TO STAKE TO DEMARK A GRID A RECTANGLE REMOVED FROM THIS RECTANGLE*. It not only mobilized Marcel Duchamp's strings one more time to subvert the myth that wood, stone, and metal are the essential and exclusive materials of sculpture. Furthering Weiner's subversive responses to his Minimalist peers, his choice of string and sticks also deflated the widely touted myths of Minimalism's new commitment to sculpture's mandatory industrial fabrication. The process of mapping and measuring space—and simultaneously subverting it via a partial removal from its totalizing grid—engendered a specific object,

in its own right, eliciting contemplation of the experience of collective public space in a totally administered society. When confronted with the work's instant vandalization by students, the artist decided that actual material execution would henceforth qualify as simply one of several options for a sculpture's existence, leading to the three foundational and by now epochal definitions of his epistemic principles:

STATEMENT OF INTENT

1. THE ARTIST MAY CONSTRUCT THE PIECE
2. THE PIECE MAY BE FABRICATED
3. THE PIECE MAY 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

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Above: Lawrence Weiner, *WHAT IS SET UPON THE TABLE SITS UPON THE TABLE*, ca. 1962, limestone, wood, nails; stone, 24 x 24 x 12", table: 42 x 30".

Below: Lawrence Weiner installing his 1968 *A SERIES OF STAKES SET IN THE GROUND AT REGULAR INTERVALS TO FORM A RECTANGLE TWINE STRUNG FROM STAKE TO STAKE TO DEMARK A GRID A RECTANGLE REMOVED FROM THIS RECTANGLE*, Windham College, Putney, VT, 1968.



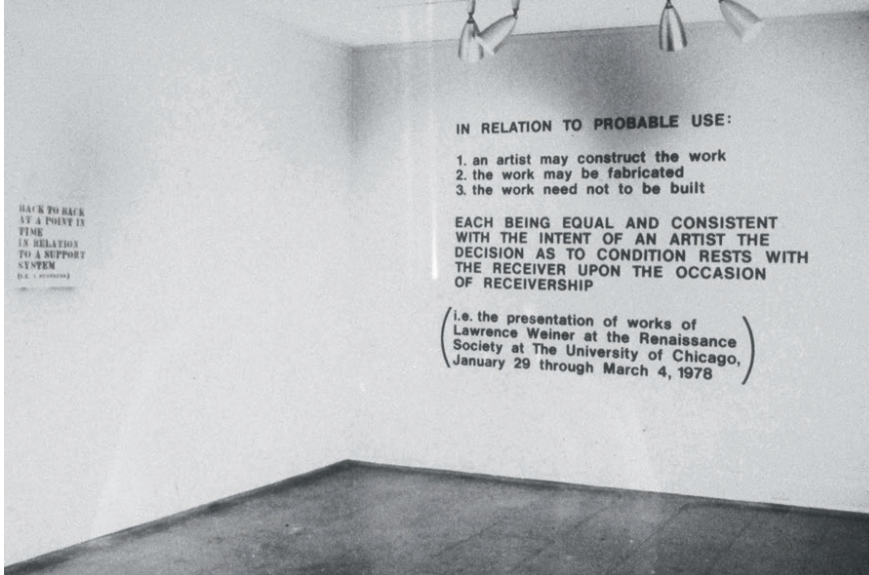
Even more than Warhol, Weiner insisted that only an aesthetics of ever-intensifying withdrawal could respond to the absence of ethics and aesthetics in late capitalist culture.

In 1968, when Siegelau published Weiner's first book, *STATEMENTS* (priced at \$1.95), the Windham work would be included. This insight—that sculpture after the foreclosure of public space had to shift locations, materials, and morphologies to publicly perform the loss of its formerly identitarian or monumental function—motivated Weiner's decision to claim this discipline as his primary practice. To posit his work within the discourses of sculpture caused quite the crisis among those most concerned with the medium's history and its fate in the present. In apotropaic disciplinary protection, Carl Andre and Richard Serra insisted that Weiner's work be corralled within the parameters of poetry, not celebrated in the perimeters of plasticity. Even Lucy Lippard, the most advanced critic, and eventually the first historian, of what was then called Conceptual art (a term from which Weiner distanced himself whenever possible), initially emphasized Weiner's formation as a poet and a painter.¹ And when Rosalind E. Krauss, the foremost scholar on the matter, published *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (1977), her account of the history of modernist sculpture, Minimalism and Land art qualified as sculpture in the expanded field, but Weiner's linguistic definition eluded her just as Mondrian had eluded Kahnweiler, who was unable to recognize the conclusion of Cubism in abstraction. Once again, Weiner was the best commentator on and historian of the crisis he had induced, stating that

the whole problem is that we accepted a long time ago that bricks can constitute a sculpture, we accepted a long time ago that fluorescent light could constitute a painting. We have accepted all of this; we accept a gesture as constituting a sculpture. The minute you suggest that language itself is a component in the making of a sculpture, the shit hits the fan.

Even more than Warhol, Weiner insisted that only an aesthetics of ever-intensifying withdrawal could respond to the absence of ethics and aesthetics in late capitalist culture. His first steps into planarity, the enigmatic "Propeller Paintings" of ca. 1963–65, simply copied television's no-signal sign, as if artisanal craft now originated, at best, in the precarious or accidental or nocturnal pauses in programming, which at that time still allowed for a nightly hiatus. Weiner's second series of paintings derived from a dialogue with Frank Stella, whose notched rectangular canvases from the early '60s had enhanced tactile plasticity to approach objecthood.² For his "Removal Paintings," ca. 1967, he consulted collectors about the size of the works, the colors, and the dimensions of the removed section, turning Minimalism's almost mythical phenomenology of participatory tactility into a concrete economy of exchange. Once Weiner departed from painterly planarity and sculptural plasticity altogether, his dialogical retorts to the reigning figures of New York School culture became ever more subversive, redeeming their past radicality and sublimating it into the banality of our

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Above: Lawrence Weiner, *Untitled* (detail), 1963, acrylic and gesso on canvas, 6 7/8 x 6". From the series "Propeller Paintings," ca. 1963-65.

Below: Lawrence Weiner constructing his 1968 A 2" WIDE 1" DEEP TRENCH CUT ACROSS A STANDARD ONE-CAR DRIVEWAY, Mamaroneck, NY, 1968.

Left: View of "Lawrence Weiner," 1978, Renaissance Society, Chicago. From left: BACK TO BACK AT A POINT IN TIME IN RELATION TO A SUPPORT SYSTEM (i.e. a buttress), 1977; *Statement of Intent*, 1969.

Opposite page: Lawrence Weiner, TWO MINUTES OF SPRAY PAINT DIRECTLY UPON THE FLOOR FROM A STANDARD AEROSOL SPRAY CAN, 1968, language + the materials referred to. Installation view, Sol LeWitt's Hester Street studio, New York, late 1960s.

present. Thus Pollock's heroic horizontality, his performative enactment of the gravity of painterly matter, and his departure from manual to proto-mechanical automatism were aggressively updated in Weiner's TWO MINUTES OF SPRAY PAINT DIRECTLY UPON THE FLOOR FROM A STANDARD AEROSOL SPRAY CAN, 1968.³

And if the withdrawal of scopic gratification had been one of the most stringent implications of Barnett Newman's vertical divisive lines and his vast expanses of monochrome color (e.g., the notoriety of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* in 1950-51), Weiner now challenged that very lineage to resuscitate, expand, and transfer the painter's sublime reduction. With the incisive gesture having been relocated to the spatial and social context of a private Mamaroneck, New York, driveway, the owner/beholder could now compare the asceticism of past metaphysical promises with current conditions of experiencing the sacred in the spaces of the everyday: A 2" WIDE AND 1" DEEP TRENCH CUT ACROSS A STANDARD ONE-CAR DRIVEWAY.

Even if a work from *Statements* was acquired and privately held, Weiner's collaborative contract insisted on its innate incommensurability with the laws of private property. Quite logically, some of Weiner's works in his first collection of statements were designated "public freehold," so as to remain outside of the circuits of commercial exchange and collectors' economies. Previously almost utterly absent from even the most radical practices (except for Duchamp's scheme for *Monte Carlo Bonds*, 1924), the paradox of the reification of the artwork in the economic exchange between artist and collector was foregrounded even more emphatically in another of Weiner's proposals, this one from 1969. It offered the amateur committed to Weiner's oeuvre A SQUARE REMOVAL FROM A RUG IN USE. Needless to say, if the artist's subliminal plot ideally might have



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Like all artists who instigate significant changes within systems of representation and their reception, Weiner operated simultaneously on all fronts and in all genres: painting, sculpture and drawing, film and video, music and sound, books and ephemera.



targeted a precious Oriental carpet to sabotage art's destiny to aspire to the condition of decoration, the initial (and undoubtedly still viable) execution of Weiner's work in the Cologne home of Wolfgang Hahn quite literally took its place in a mere industrial carpet.

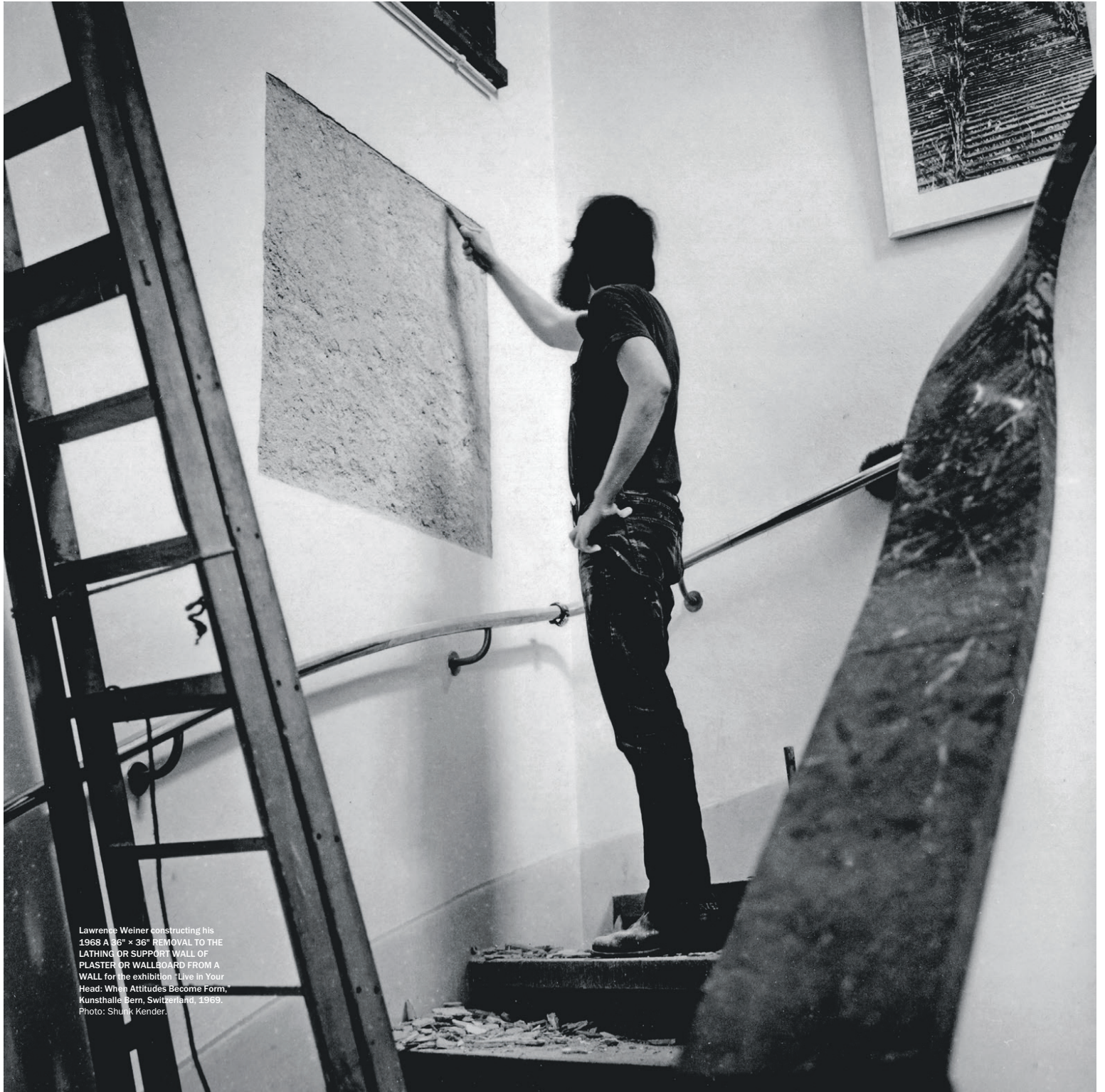
When it came to a perplexing and provocative selection of mundane materials, suspending spectators between the sublime banality of the urinal and the brash domesticity of the Brillo Box, both Duchamp and Warhol once again provided Weiner with ample antecedents.⁴ Uncannily deploying ordinary domestic materials (drywall, salt, bleach, aerosol spray cans) or literally far-fetched and eccentric procedures (a flare or an oceanic dye marker, shifting mercury across a nation-state's border), Weiner not only transfigured their vernacular functionality. His mutations of processes and substances could easily match, if not supersede, the plausibility of manufacturing sculpture from galvanized iron and Plexiglas, copper, lead, and Cor-Ten steel. And if such items and actions could suddenly appear as perfectly qualified tools for painterly processes and sculptural performativity, they also endowed inhabitants of the commonplace with an incessant demand to transgress and transcend the merely given.⁵

One removal in particular, however, would not only fundamentally change the parameters of Weiner's work but also entail critical consequences that have reverberated among younger generations of artists, from Michael Asher to Louise Lawler, Andrea Fraser to Fred Wilson and Cameron Rowland: A 36" X 36" REMOVAL TO THE LATHING OR SUPPORT WALL OF PLASTER OR WALLBOARD FROM A WALL, 1968. Mapping and collapsing some of modernism's key formal, material, and epistemological features, namely the square, the monochrome, and the presumed neutrality of the white cube, Weiner's removal initiated sculpture as performative and as process (both were practiced at that moment by Bruce Nauman and Richard Serra as well), while his literalism destabilized the still-ruling presumption that the semblance of white-cube neutrality under which institutional spaces presented themselves would actually deliver emancipatory illumination. The deceptively unassuming thirty-six-by-thirty-six-inch excision countered that only an invasive deconstruction of all these premises could give culture an elementary credibility in the present, for only such a thorough dismantling could offer the necessary critical contestation of institutional authority or persuasively de-privilege modernist conventions of painterly and sculptural genres, displays, and legibilities. Like all artists who instigate significant changes within systems of representation and their reception, Weiner operated simultaneously on all fronts and in all genres: painting, sculpture and drawing, film and video, music and sound, books and ephemera. From the monumental mural to the lapel pin, no wall was too large and no site too small to accommodate yet another admonition, such as LEARN TO READ ART. And the multiplicity of support surfaces was eventually matched only by the frequency of the iterations of the same urgent sentences.

Weiner's conception of aesthetic experience as a primarily linguistic operation drew on a complex spectrum of artistic and theoretical positions. While Weiner explicitly claimed the linguistic theories of Jean Piaget and Noam Chomsky as part of his philosophical foundations, the actual scope of his dialectical-materialist conception of language ranged much further: from Stéphane Mallarmé's diagnosis of language as the social site and practice through which the subject is constituted (anticipating a poststructuralist conception of the ideological suturing of subjectivity into language) to Soviet factographic programs that had aimed to expand the collective's competences of reading and speech.

To differentiate Weiner's writing decisively from poetry is still one of his

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Lawrence Weiner constructing his
1968 A 36" x 36" REMOVAL TO THE
LATHING OR SUPPORT WALL OF
PLASTER OR WALLBOARD FROM A
WALL for the exhibition "Live In Your
Head: When Attitudes Become Form,"
Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland, 1969.
Photo: Shunk Kender.

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work's most bewildering challenges. The phenomenology of Mondrian (whom Weiner often referred to as one of his most significant influences) had made viewers concretely aware that all spatial movement they experienced in studying his paintings and all optical dialectics they confronted were in fact not those of the artist's design but primarily those of their own perceptual and cognitive operations. In a parallel manner, Weiner's innate resistance to metaphor, indeed his programmatic rejection of it, insisted on sampling language as the enactment of spectators'/readers' own potential enunciations, as in his ca. 2019 sentence EACH TO THEIR NEEDS EACH TO THEIR ABILITIES. To comprehend Weiner's particular opposition to metaphorization could further clarify why he adamantly insisted on having his practices distinguished from conventions of poetry. After all,

hierarchical differentiations between poetic and vernacular linguistic structures are as fundamental to conceptions of poetry (or at least were until the arrival of Dada and Zaum poetry in 1916) as the even more hierarchical distinction between the poet and the reader. And the transfer occurring at all times within the metaphoric process not only affirms transcendental conceptions of language but in fact inscribes quasi-theological foundations within the linguistic act itself.

Again:

Language, when it's used for literature, when it's used for poetry, when it's used for journalism, constitutes an assumed communicative pattern. That implies a belief in God. Without that implication there's no way that words like love and hate and beauty would have any significance.

To differentiate Weiner's writing decisively from poetry is still one of his work's most bewildering challenges.



View of "LEARN TO READ ART: A History of Printed Matter," 2009. Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, Germany. Wall: Lawrence Weiner, LEARN TO READ ART, 1984. Photo: Stephan Baumann.

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The fact that Weiner's sentences often deploy the full combinatory potential of the syntactic, lexical, grammatical, and typographical orders of language (e.g., his games with typographic features such as ampersands, mathematical signs, parentheses, or brackets) has not been recognized as an additional source of subversive intent: It is 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 in the reader that Weiner invites spectators/readers to make their own constitutive choices, to perform as fully participatory subjects both inside and outside the rules of the given language structures (just as it is inevitable that they operate simultaneously inside and outside the regime of language itself). One peculiar exception to these principles was Weiner's occasional use of deeply ingrained linguistic readymades within the sheer infinity of his own universe of enunciations. Similar to a strategy already practiced by John Heartfield in his proverbial citations, which could be recalled by everybody at any time, Weiner's statements lapsed into the commonplaces of the proverb or the children's rhyme. An invocation of the collectively embedded wisdom of popular speech acts, they, too, activated readers in an exemplary manner, guaranteeing the correspondence between artistic text and collectively available elements within the system of language practices.

Two key works from Weiner's later production, which never slowed in the precision of its topical acuties nor softened in the depth of its incisions, elucidate the problem of metaphorization even further. In each case, the artist was given the opportunity to position a work on a site and in a context of a considerable density of historical charges. The first was a 1991 inscription on an air-defense tower (the *Flakturm*) built by the Nazis in occupied Vienna after the Anschluss, a massive edifice of cast concrete that had proven indestructible when the city attempted to remove the involuntary monument to its Fascist past: SMASHED TO PIECES (IN THE STILL OF THE NIGHT).

When queried about the seemingly inevitable association of the inscription with the destruction of Jewish life in Vienna at the hands of the Austrian and German Fascists, Weiner acknowledged that this interpretation was perfectly possible if it actually occurred in the readers'/spectators' minds. But the artist insisted that the same sentence could be equally productive when installed on a beach with falling coconuts. Sublime sarcasm, the basso continuo of all of Weiner's conversations, quite obviously was deployed here to underscore once more that all interpretations of the artist's statements, which were triggering projections and mnemonic resonances, remained in all instances within the registers of the spectators'/readers' own language games. Thus Weiner even more strongly emphasized to what extent the artist refrained from any imposition of preestablished meaning, as well as the readers'/spectators' proper responsibility as agents articulating themselves and their own experiential horizons within the prison house of language.

The second of these key late works was an inscription Weiner placed on the frieze of Munich's Haus der Kunst in 2007: ROWS OF CABBAGES MARKED WITH RED INK AND BURIED TOMORROW/REIHEN VON KOHL MARKIERT MIT ROTER TINTE UND MORGEN VERGRABEN. Nazi architect Paul Ludwig Troost had been commissioned by Adolf Hitler to construct a megalomaniacal travesty of Neoclassical architecture as the showcase for an imagined future art of Fascism. The Haus der Kunst had opened with grand celebrations at the same time as the infamous "Degenerate Art" exhibition in Munich in 1937, the first of several exhibitions in which the Weimar Republic's avant-garde artists were



Above: Lawrence Weiner, SMASHED TO PIECES (IN THE STILL OF THE NIGHT), 1990, language + the materials referred to. Installation view, Esterházypark flak tower, Vienna, 1991. Photo: Christian Wachtler.

Opposite page, top: Lawrence Weiner in his studio, New York, 2019. Photo: Philip-Daniel Ducasse.

Opposite page, bottom: Lawrence Weiner, ROWS OF CABBAGES MARKED WITH RED INK AND BURIED TOMORROW/REIHEN VON KOHL MARKIERT MIT ROTER TINTE UND MORGEN VERGRABEN, 1994, language + the materials referred to. Installation view, Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2007. Photo: Jens Weber.

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publicly ridiculed and annihilated. Being asked to install a work in this city and in this institution and in this architecture not only challenged Weiner to incise a clear demarcation of the building's political history and its association with the destruction of avant-garde culture. Equally if not more important was the task of publicly subverting the clandestine assignment within the commission: recruiting Weiner to perform the compensatory functions of German memory culture (and of culture in general) for its remedial and conciliatory agenda. Weiner's enigmatic and at first sight grotesque diagnostic and prognostic statement worked like an oracle. Its demonic banality enticed the readers/spectators to solve the riddle on their own terms. As in all of his work at different times and under different contextual demands, Weiner's language endowed readers/spectators with agency—in this case, the agency to recognize responsibility and to dismantle their initial, collective repressive incomprehension step-by-step.

Once more, I have to conclude with 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.'"⁶ □

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For notes, see page 187.



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