

LAWRENCE WEINER

WORKS

WITH THE PASSAGE OF TIME

NOVEMBER 28, 1990-MARCH 3, 1991
THIRD-FLOOR ESCALATOR LOBBY

FOCUS: LAWRENCE WEINER

A FREE LECTURE BY THE ARTIST ON NOVEMBER 28, 1990, AT 6:30 P.M.
MARION AND GUSTAVE RING AUDITORIUM AN INFORMAL RECEPTION WILL FOLLOW

HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN 8TH AND INDEPENDENCE AVENUE, S.W. WASHINGTON, D.C. 20560

Focus talks are supported in part by a grant from the Washington Post Company

CHAINS WRAPPED AROUND ONE THING & ANOTHER

BROKEN ONE BY ONE WITH THE PASSAGE OF TIME

(RUSTED FREE)

(BUSTED OPEN)

(PULLED APART)

(MELTED LOOSE)

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PR: How did you come to be involved in art?

LW: Other people turn you onto it, but you discover it. If you're in New York you discover it quite early. I was verbal and big and I had other entrees that came from being a New York City kid. In the fifties all you had to do was go to the Cedar Bar. If you saw people you'd heard about, you'd talk to them because New York was a bar culture in those days and a rather open place. Anybody who had something to say could enter into any conversation. That lasted until the early seventies. You met people and began to realize that this is what it was all about. I had professors at Hunter who were interested in what I was doing and they seemed to think I wanted to be an artist more than a philosophy professor, which is what I was being trained for. They said, "just leave, and anyway, you want to go to California, don't you?" I packed a bag, put out my thumb, and went.

PR: How did you start working? You did outdoor projects?

LW: Outdoor projects and really bad paintings. I got disillusioned with the art world, which is quite normal for someone who is 18 years old. Everything in front of you seems corrupt, which later you begin to realize is true. So, I spent a couple of years just doing paintings for children and proselytizing and screaming that I wasn't part of this and I wasn't part of that. Then I went to Europe and started to participate in some shows, came back and continued to work, and that was it. Somehow or other some people found my screaming and yelling interesting.

PR: Do you still have any of those early paintings?

LW: No, I don't have any paintings. I have one or two small maquettes here or there. Becoming the curator of your own life gets a little heavy.

PR: Is it necessary to be a record keeper because so much of your work has been/is ephemeral?

LW: Something that interests the culture is not ephemeral. If something turns up in 15 or 20 essays or 15 or 20 magazine articles, it is being used as an object. We have to redefine what "ephemeral" means. Solid objects. It just isn't a solid object the way we used to think solid objects were.

PR: A lot of your work exists only as documentation.

LW: It's not ephemeral. The Library of Congress would argue with you on that. All these terms have to be readjusted.

PR: How do you explain that the use of text is a work of art, not "just writing"?

LW: Because everything you see you have to give a name to. If you use the language of the name, you're dealing with the generalities of the material rather than its specifics. For me, the word "stone" is stone. If I want it to be basalt, I'll say "basalt." If I'm dealing with generalities of materials, language is sufficient. If I ever want to deal with the specificity of one particular stone out of all the stones in the world, then I'll deal with it in a different way. But I'm not particularly interested in special stones.

PR: Using language allows you to be more flexible?

LW: It leaves it more open for the user. It lets consumers immediately transform it into something they can use in their lives. It also doesn't carry with it what a stone looked like in 1927. So that if a work has any kind of shelf life and it's picked up by

another generation, that generation does not have to accept any of the moral prerogatives or any of the value structures in order to be able to use it. The trouble with films is that they become dated. The material within them is not dated because it is the relationship of human beings to human beings. When you see a film, that pair of bell bottoms or that necklace place it in another context that you can't relate to your context.

PR: What are other considerations in your work? How do you determine size, color, typeface?

LW: Size, color, format, means of presentation, all have to do with the times and that's the only artistic practice that is not just aesthetic practice. You do not present something within a context that will be in your terms reactionary. You do not present things within a context that in your terms will be used in a way that you don't particularly approve of. I reject things like certain typefaces that stand for what was an old-fashioned idea of modernism.

PR: Why do you use parentheses and brackets?

LW: They stand for something physically. In materials the parentheses and brackets mean "either/or." Using them is a way of presenting the work without having to have a large discourse, without having to have attendant information hanging all over the place explaining that we're not talking really about this material but about any other material that happens. It is an editorial introduction meaning that I do know my choice is only an emotional one and viewers can replace it with anything else they want.

PR: What factors determined your selection of a site at the Hirshhorn?

LW: I chose the honeycombs in the ceiling because using them allows me to enter within the museum and present a full structure that provides a context for people. I'd like to present as complete a work as possible that affords me a nonimpositional way to give viewers enough time as they ride up on the escalator to become acquainted with the fact that they're going to deal with something that might have a meaning, which is language. There's enough of



Tension Enough to Hold a Stone above the Rhein, 1985. Facade, Museum Haus Esters, Krefeld, Germany. Photo: Volker Dohne.

a space to present the language within a very theatrical, very mise-en-scène situation.

PR: How do you decide what you are going to do, once you know where the work will be?

LW: I become—and I don't know why—I become interested in some material. It could be limestone, it could be the idea of blue light or something, and I start to accumulate "information" about whatever it is. In the studio, I move that material around, and when it comes to a configuration that makes some sense and I begin to understand why I was interested in it, I translate that. It's language, from what I see. That translation I then clean up and present. My prose is disjointed because I see in terms of nouns. And I see any activity as a noun because I see it as a material process that I understand is art. So, that makes me not a very good prose writer. Poetry is about those untranslatable, unnameable reactions and emotions between human beings to human beings and recollections. The work I do is designed for translation. It's the exact opposite of what poetry is.

PR: Would it be accurate to say that your work went from painting to instructions for pieces that could or could not be made to finally only the language itself?

LW: It never was instructional. It always was in the past participle, it always is. I never said "do this, do that, stand on your head," I said "head stood on." The word "statements" in my first book was not even about utterances but referred to what you get at the end of the month, after used services. When you get your American Express bill, it says "statement enclosed." It tells you that you drank fourteen tequilas, you did this, you did that. That's all *Statements* ever was. It told you how many pieces of stone were moved and where.

PR: How do you see the work of other, younger artists who use language in relation to yours?

LW: I would like to be thought of as an artist who took a direction that was not considered popular and was able to use what was not considered possible in art works—and that includes a long list of artists besides myself. Other than that, these are good artists who are not at all involved in the same questions that I'm involved in. They're my colleagues. They're the people I like to show with because I like what they do, but that doesn't mean that everyone who uses language is related. Art comes from changes within a society and a structure and the need for that society for art. If all you can do is relate it back to a precedent situation, it removes the dignity of the endeavor. You can't always justify anything that's done in 1990 with something that was done in 1960. Sometimes they don't relate. . . . I learned a lot from many artists in the generations before me because they set a very good moral tone, but I did not learn how to make art from them. Because art is of its times. It is of its own essential need. I hope, or else there is no more need for art.

**HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION**

This is the eleventh project in the Hirshhorn WORKS series—a special exhibition program in which artists are invited to choose a site in the building or on the grounds to create temporary works of art. The Hirshhorn believes that having artists work on site, using the museum as both studio and medium, enlivens and transforms this environment and enables an exploration of some of the motivations and issues underlying site-specific art—a significant aspect of contemporary artistic expression.

Lawrence Weiner was born in the Bronx, New York, February 10, 1942. He attended Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan and Hunter College. Weiner was among a number of American and European artists to participate in experiments in the late 1960s that defined art as an ongoing, open-ended conceptual process rather than as something located in the finite boundaries of specific, physical objects. Within this context, he developed his characteristic presentation of material forms and processes as writing. His first solo shows were with Seth Siegelau in New York. He has exhibited regularly at Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, since 1971 and Marian Goodman Gallery since 1986 as well as in many museums and galleries in the United States and Europe. His most recent retrospective exhibition was at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in 1988. He lives in New York City and Amsterdam.

Interested in the book, page, performance space, film, video, and sung and spoken language as well as the large-scale wall texts for which he is most well known, Lawrence Weiner designed the pamphlet and announcement for this project. A selection of his films and videos will be shown in the Marion and Gustave Ring Auditorium in January. The following text is edited from an interview with the artist that took place in New York City, May 25, 1990.

Phyllis Rosenzweig, Associate Curator

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