by DR LUCY SOUTTER

PERHAPS WHEN REPRODUCED

Language and Site in Lawrence Weiner's Public Freehold Works

In 1968 Lawrence Weiner ended a series of paintings he had been making of TV test signals and started to produce statements: lines of text that he refers to as sculptures. Handwritten at first, the statements soon began to appear in print, in artists' books and exhibition catalogues organised by conceptual art impresario Seth Siegelaub. Like most Conceptual Art, these works challenged the "givens" of art as it was understood at that time. Weiner questioned the baseline characteristics of the work of art as an object in space and time, as a sight to be looked at, as an image to be reproduced, as a commodity to be bought and sold, as an artifact to be presented in institutions, as an expression of an artist's intention, and as a privileged locus of value, importance or beauty. Site was one of the key variables previously taken for granted and now brought under serious scrutiny in the conceptual interrogation of the how, why, when and where of art.

To function effectively as art, Weiner's statements rely on a framework of understanding, a declaration of intent formulated by the artist in 1968, and republished in some form alongside many of the manifestations of his work ever since:

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 intention of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.

In other words, if you buy a Weiner work, like **AN AMOUNT OF BLEACH POURED UPON A RUG AND ALLOWED TO BLEACH** (as an anonymous NY collector did in 1968), you get to choose one or more possible outcomes for the piece. It is up to you whether to ask the artist to come over to your house or exhibition space to pour bleach on your rug, or to hire some workman to come and do it, or to do it yourself. If you choose not to perform the action implied by the statement, you are welcome just to contemplate it in its printed form, or to throw the printed statement in the trash and mull over the idea in your mind, or you can carry out any combination of these activities. You have bought an idea and a framework of possibilities, and Weiner has given you permission to do whatever you want with it.

In designating these works as sculpture, Weiner invites us to think about them in relation to materials, and to site, and to our own bodies in space. It is a funny kind of sculpture. Rather than adding something to the owners' collection, the art work sometimes involves ruining or removing a bit of their private property. Several of the pieces in this early phase of Weiner's project have a destructive edge, in which purchasing the piece was volunteering to be vandalized. The statements propose trenches dug in collector's driveways, paint sprayed on their lawns, holes cut into patches bleached out of their carpets. Works that are not destructive are often disconcertingly vague. A piece like **PAINTED** evokes limitless possibilities.

In practice, a number of collectors, galleries and museums have chosen simply to exhibit the words of their Weiner piece—often painted on a wall—a particularly satisfactory solution when the statement is rather abstract, or involves explosives. In this manifestation the work oscillates between concrete poem and decorative

wall painting. It continues to hint at latent sculptural possibilities, but remains pinned and mounted. The declaration of intent, if we choose to accept it as an ongoing part of the work, ensures that each wall-painted statement bridges physical and mental space.

In most cases, Weiner leaves it up to the receiver where to place the work. Some pieces take place in a generic anywhere, that becomes someplace specific only if we bring them into material form (e.g. **PLACED**), while others point to a specific here (e.g. **A RECTANGLE REMOVED FROM THIS RECTANGLE**). Some imply a special type of location, particularly border and boundary spaces (as in **AN OBJECT TOSSED FROM ONE COUNTRY TO ANOTHER**). In the late 1960s conceptual artists took advantage of the fluidity and portability of their practice to travel all over the world, producing works wherever exhibitions or commissions or inspiration struck. Hence works such as **AN ABRIDGEMENT OF AN ABUTMENT TO ON NEAR OR ABOUT THE ARCTIC CIRCLE**, which Weiner produced on an exploratory mission to the Arctic Circle with a team of intrepid conceptual artists and critics from the United States and Canada.

Like many artists with related projects, Weiner has been received more enthusiastically in Europe than America. The need to translate work for audiences in other countries led to works that engage with the act of translation. Hence, **A TRANSLATION FROM ONE LANGUAGE TO ANOTHER**, known in German as **EINE BERSETZUNG VON EINER SPRACHE IN DIE ANDERE**. Such works not only operate in the vernacular of the country in which they are received, but also comment on the mutability of language as material. Translated into various languages the works gather new associations through the specific words and idioms used.

Weiner's negotiation with the idea of ownership further complicates the issue of site. Since he started using language, Weiner has designated certain works as belonging to Collection Public Freehold. They are up for grabs. Unless otherwise specified, the Weiner statements reproduced in Arc are Collection Public Freehold, and were conceived between 1968 and 1971. These works exist here and now, on the pages you hold in your hands, and can also move into the space of your own environment, if you take a leap of imagination and perform them in actual materials. Help yourself.

Of course there is nothing to stop us from carrying out Weiner works that belong to someone else. We can construct **TWO MINUTES OF SPRAY PAINT DIRECTLY UPON THE FLOOR FROM A STANDARD AEROSOL CAN** even though it officially belongs to the estate of Sol LeWitt. Sometimes we randomly encounter phenomena in the world that overlap with existing Weiners. I happen to have **A WALL STAINED BY WATER** in my own flat, even though Weiner sold or gave this work to Jost Herbig in Cologne in the early 1970s. Whether hanging up my laundry or going to work with a hangover, I occasionally have a flash of pleasure at the thought of **STRUNG OUT**, originally in the collection of Mr. & Mrs. Folker Skulima of Berlin.

Following Joseph Kosuth's famous essay "Art After Philosophy," many describe late '60s Conceptual Art as a linguistic art movement, a substitution of language for the traditional art object. The use of text as an art material allowed artists like Weiner to push their work into new areas of abstraction.

Their work could now include hypothetical actions, thought experiments and paradoxes that could not take place in the material world. But few artists were interested in operating in a field of pure mental abstraction; most conceptual projects, like Wiener's statements, have implications in real time and space. To say that this work is only conceptual is as preposterous as saying that other kinds of art do not have a concept at all. Some argue that the mental aspect of Conceptual Art made it more private than the self-evident structures and brute literalism of minimalist sculpture. Others assert that the use of text makes the work essentially public, since

Lawrence Weiner Public Freehold works
(listed with their published sources)

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

A RECTANGULAR FIELD CRATERING WITH A RECTANGLE IMPOSED 12 CHARGES EXPLODED SIMULTANEOUSLY

AN OBJECT TOSSED FROM ONE COUNTRY TO ANOTHER

A RECTANGULAR CANVAS AND STRETCHER SUPPORT WITH A RECTANGULAR REMOVAL FROM ONE OF THE CORNERS SPRAYED WITH PAINT FOR A TIME ELAPSURE

A TRANSLATION FROM ONE LANGUAGE TO ANOTHER

AN ABRIDGEMENT OF AN ABUTMENT TO ON NEAR OR ABOUT THE ARCTIC CIRCLE

PAINTED

TRANSLATED

PLACED

THROWN

A CONCISE EXPLOSION NEAR AACHEN GERMANY UPON THE COMMON BOUNDARY GERMANY BELGIUM AND THE NETHERLANDS

PERHAPS WHEN REPRODUCED

PERHAPS WHEN RETRANSLATED

RISEN AND FALLEN. FALLEN AND RISEN. AND RISEN AND FALLEN. AND FALLEN AND RISEN.

CURTAILED

DISENGAGED

RESTRAINED AS TO NOISE AND/OR SILENCE

WEAKENED

TINGED

NOT MORE NOR LESS
NOT LESS NOR MORE
NOT MORE GREEN NOR LESS GREEN
NOT MORE RED NOR LESS RED
NOT MORE BLUE NOR LESS BLUE

Lawrence Weiner, Klaus Honnef, ed. (Münster: Westfälischer Kunstverein, 1971)

OBSTRUCTED

MUCKED

MASHED

GREASED

"Lawrence Weiner at Amsterdam" (interview with Willoughby Sharp), Avalanche 4 (Spring 1972)

culture is based on communities of language. The whole public/private debate seems a bit forced to me, especially since there was such a range of conceptual practices, using language in different ways. Some works turn in on themselves, some point out at the world, and some manage to do both at once.

Although Weiner's unusual oeuvre can be radically DIY, and often ephemeral, it has operated successfully within the institutions of art for more than three decades. The work has been seen in an array of contexts all over the world, has been bought and resold, and has spawned just as many reviews, monographs and dissertations as if it had been cast in bronze or carved in marble. And, as with Piero Manzoni's artist's shit, which now sells for several times the value of its weight in gold, the works rely on the system to maintain their subversive edge. As Weiner described it from his houseboat in Amsterdam in 1972, "I am a successful culture fucker." Weiner describes his pleasure at the thought of uninitiated audiences encountering his work by chance, picking up one of his books at a thrift store, or passing one of his posters on the street. There is a freedom and a generosity to this idea. Weiner also has a proprietary streak. The Collection Public Freehold works, by their very reference to ownership, continue to participate in the market system. Today, he says that the Public Freehold Works were conceived specifically to address the problem of commodification. But here is the catch—he now says that if you take one of these works and do something with it, it is no longer by him, it is yours. Why should he withdraw his authorship from a piece that he initiated? He could consider such works collaborations, or even as gifts, but he does not.

Over time, Weiner's sculpture has changed. One might argue that even by the early 1970s, his work had become more sensual, with Collection Public Freehold pieces such as **MUCKED** and **MASHED** and **GREASED**. In the past 20 years, the artist has worked in all different materials, at all different scales. A works which first appeared many years ago in austere black text on a white page may now appear as brightly colored epoxy on polished granite. New works appear as stickers, badges, manhole covers and on grand museum facades. Some works transform functional or obsolete urban structures into art statements: **AS LONG AS IT LASTS** on the Euromast communication tower in Rotterdam (1993), and **SMASHED TO PIECES (IN THE STILL OF THE NIGHT)** on a WWII Anti-Aircraft defense tower in Vienna (1991). The texts often refer to materials, but they no longer seem to be springboards to incite homemade manifestations. Some critics might see the introduction of permanent or culturally privileged materials as a kind of backing down from a position of aesthetic purity. Weiner has dismissed such claims with a characteristically suave turn of phrase: "As the work develops, so does our concept of style. I am not the same person as 15 or 20 years ago: my taste and my style change. We are ships at sea, not ducks on a pond."

My favorite of Weiner's Public Freehold works is **PERHAPS WHEN REPRODUCED**. Written on the back of a library book request form, in my own spidery handwriting, this work hangs on the wall over my desk. I have interpreted it as a hopeful statement of the possibilities inherent in being an artist or writer. Perhaps when reproduced this essay may give a few more people access to works that have brought me great joy. Perhaps some of you will claim some of these Public Freehold works as your own. Perhaps you will reproduce them onto other pieces of paper, or into three dimensional form in a site of your own choosing. Perhaps when reproduced these works by Lawrence Weiner will have some curious consequences for your life or someone else's.

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