



## **DRAWINGS ON WALLS, ART AS IDEA**

In the fall of 1968, Sol LeWitt installed his first wall drawing at the Paula Cooper Gallery, in New York, as his contribution to a group exhibition curated by his friend Lucy Lippard, an art critic and theorist who was very close to the Conceptual Art movement. He thus launched a series of works that became core to his artistic practice, and which he continued to unfold until the end of his life. In the course of almost four decades, the artist conceived about 1,200 drawings, most of which were installed at least once before his passing.

At the end of the exhibition, when asked what to do with the drawing, Sol LeWitt just advised that the wall should be repainted, therefore erasing the tediously drawn series of squares with lines in different directions the artist had carried out some weeks prior. He however stipulated that the work could be re-installed in the future, on another wall, and executed by other hands, simply following his instructions. A set of documents would serve to establish a continuum: a diagram with instructions, and a certificate signed by the artist, which proved both title of ownership and the authorship of the work.

With the wall drawing, Sol LeWitt established an art form that was both ephemeral and permanent, in that it could be endlessly erased and then re-installed on any wall, as long as its size enabled the carrying out of the instructions. In early stages in the development of this body of work, Sol LeWitt showed less concerns about the conditions of presentation. However, as time elapsed, he started engineering a system, so as to ensure that the drawings would be properly installed on well-prepared walls, by good draftsmen: these in turn became key in helping the artist improve the system, exploring manners to better the wall preparation, and researching better materials. To date, this effort continues, and the technique of execution of the works keeps evolving. This crew of draftsmen became a set of key collaborators, often assisted by lesser skilled artists, some of whom would eventually join the core team. Today, many of those women and men install the work of the artist without having ever worked with him; they also keep teaching others. As time passes, and the assistants of the early times retire, the link to Sol LeWitt becomes ever more tenuous, but the one to his work has not. Should the system prove to withstand the passing of time, Sol LeWitt will have managed to establish an entirely new practice in the field of contemporary art. It is indeed through the skills of those draftsmen that the work will keep alive, as it is re-installed and erased, again and again, defying any form of fetishization. This process of knowledge transfer evokes the Japanese tradition of rebuilding some of the most holy Shinto shrines regularly, so as to pass on the knowhow of building the shrine from one generation to the next, while celebrating the impermanence of all things<sup>1</sup>.

In that sense, the wall drawing is perhaps the most accomplished and adequate form Sol LeWitt could imagine, in order to proceed with an artistic research very much predicated by the notion that art, before being an object, is an idea, and that an idea

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<sup>1</sup> : The most famous of these shrines is the Ise Shrine, located in the southwestern region of Kansai, whose two main temples and the bridge that connects them are rebuilt every twenty years on sites adjacent to the earlier buildings, which are then destroyed.



well conceived can be executed by a third party without altering in any fashion the artistic quality of the artwork. While this notion of separating the concept from its execution is something that has prevailed in the field of music, theater, or architecture, the idea of removing the hand of the artist as a core element of the validation of the artwork seemed quite revolutionary at the time the first wall drawing was installed. Furthermore, the very notion of an art form, which claimed ephemerality as a key element of its materialization also proved quite difficult to grasp at the time, and to a certain extent continues to be a challenging issue nowadays. Somehow, the way the artist chose to date his work exemplifies his approach. Indeed, while the concept of the drawing may exist in the form of a diagram, sketches or notes, the piece is not considered complete until it is installed for the first time. Hence, the fact that each wall drawing is dated on the year and month of its first execution. When the large-scale exhibition of wall drawings opened at MassMoCA in the fall of 2008<sup>2</sup>, some of the featured works were dated after the passing of the artist, in 2007. In the course of researching the work to establish a catalogue raisonné, a couple of other works were discovered, which had never been installed. Such is the case with *Wall Drawing 7A*, which is therefore executed for the first time at Fundación Botín. Hence, it is dated June 2015.

Another important element in the nomenclature used to catalogue a Wall Drawing is the naming of all people involved in its first execution. It seems natural that a work conceived to be carried out by others should somehow be signed by them. It is nonetheless interesting to note that Sol LeWitt deemed this an essential part of the description of the work, as if to demonstrate that the installation of the work perhaps enabled a fruitful dialogue between the artist and the draftspersons: by enacting his idea they would reveal aspects the artist may not have pondered, which could in turn inspire future work.

Over the course of the years, materials used to carry out drawings have changed, as the “original” ones have been discontinued. Both the artist and his team of draftsmen kept looking for alternatives, always with the goal to stay true to the essence of each drawing. These changes have led some professionals to question the relevance of re-installing works, when the very concept of the wall drawing precisely defies those conclusions. Interestingly enough, it is widely accepted that a musical score written for an instrument may be performed with another, and the resulting interpretation is still considered true to the original. Similarly, it is commonly admitted that a play written a few centuries ago may be staged in a different historical context. However, the idea of a work of art whose form would evolve over the course of time continues to be a challenging idea. This would somehow tend to strengthen the relevance of the research carried out by Sol LeWitt, and its importance in the history of visual arts.

The artist chose to draw directly on the wall, so as to eliminate any formal or conceptual distance between the work of art and the space it was presented in. His work would therefore bear no mediation of any kind with the architectural structure, hence enabling an uninterrupted dialogue between the two elements, one enriching the other and vice versa. In doing so, he chose to relate his artistic practice to the one of

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<sup>2</sup> The principle of the show was initiated in 2006. Sol LeWitt presented a fully-fledged model of the exhibition, although he did not live to see it open. This presentation will last until 2033.



fresco painting, and of course, to even more faraway references, in prehistoric times. It is noteworthy that cave painters in Paleolithic times most probably used color to accentuate the reliefs of a rock wall, hence revealing shapes that already existed, rather than attempting to conceal the ruggedness of the surface. One could say that the act of drawing on the wall as carried out by Sol LeWitt combines the two references. Frescoes tend to usually reformulate the architectural space they occupy, by adding a new dimension, whether purely fictitious – in the case of trompe l’oeil – or with a more fictional quality, when painting a specific subject matter. Whereas some of his work simply occupies the wall it is drawn upon, others literally engage in a dialogue with the architectural structure, such as *Wall Drawing 51*, which is also drawn with a chalk line reel, a tool typically used in construction.

When he worked with three-dimensional structures, Sol LeWitt deliberately avoided referring to them as sculptures. That is because he believed words such as “sculpture” carry a significant amount of historical baggage that would prevent anyone from experiencing his work as objectively as possible. “Wall drawing” shares with “structure” a certain degree of neutrality, a use of vocabulary that aims at describing in the simplest fashion the physical presence of the idea, leaving a wide space for the viewer’s interpretation.

Many wall drawings were produced once or twice, while others have been included in numerous exhibitions. Each time these works are drawn, they occupy the wall space they were assigned to so as to maintain the dynamics originally thought by Sol LeWitt when the work was first staged. For instance, when *Wall Drawing 620 (Fig. E)* was installed in 2007 in the residence of its current owner, Sol LeWitt decided to alter the design so as to achieve an adequate relationship between the work and the wall it was to be installed on. In Santander, the “missing parts” – an orange band up to and at the bottom of the drawing - are re-instated, but the proportion of the work has changed, as the wall is narrower. In a similar fashion, most if not all the works in the exhibition are somehow made “site specific”, as their scale is adjusted to the walls they are installed on – and the exhibition space. In discussing this issue, Sol LeWitt once stated:

“Determining what size a piece should be is difficult. If an idea requires three dimensions, then it seems any size would do. The question would be what size is best. If the thing were made gigantic then the size alone would be impressive and the idea may be lost entirely. Again, if it is too small, it may become inconsequential. The height of the viewer may have some bearing on the work, and also the size of the space into which it will be placed”.<sup>3</sup> The relation of the work to the architecture it occupies is also important in terms of the dynamics that may exist between the two. In the team of draftsmen who work with the Estate of Sol LeWitt and the Yale University Art Gallery is in fact a person in charge of rescaling the works according to the space they will be presented in.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art”, *Artforum* Volume 5, No 10 (Summer 1967) pp. 79-83.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Sansotta, who was a collaborator of Sol LeWitt for many years, has been re-scaling works for the exhibition at Fundación Botín as well as in other occurrences. He is also a lender to the exhibition.



Wall Drawing 1 was directly inspired from the *Drawing Series* Sol LeWitt had been working on, which was to be published later that year in the Xerox Book<sup>5</sup>, a project by Seth Siegelaub and John W. Wendler<sup>6</sup>, two gallerists and curators closely associated with Conceptual Art. Starting with a square divided in four squares, each with lines going in a different direction - horizontal, vertical, diagonal upwards, diagonal downwards, LeWitt juxtaposed twenty-four combinations of four permutations of this “original drawing”, so as to obtain a composition, which visually looks very much like a sentence, or a musical score. In doing so, he established the base for a visual language that he would later modify and alter, first by assigning a color to each line direction<sup>7</sup> and then using this color code to create more complex colors as he did with more complex figures, by way of superimposition. Subsequent use of new materials, such as Indian ink – as of the early 1980s – or acrylic paint – as of the late 1990s also gave him opportunities to stretch his field of investigation, while staying true to the founding principles. The line, whether straight or not, has continued to be central to all compositions, as has color combination.

Wall drawings and their conceptual base, are core to the understanding of the creative mind of Sol LeWitt. Perhaps these works lay the ground for a type of artistic practice that borrows from such art forms as performance and music, but also from the rigor of scientific research. There seems to be a constant back and forth between research and theorization in the mind of Sol LeWitt, which is best illustrated by the way this body of work has been evolving during the course of four decades. What may however be most compelling is that, with the system he has set forth, the artist perhaps addresses a core issue in contemporary Western culture: as we live in times of information overflow and the resulting ephemerality of culture, the idea of an art form that perpetuates itself in the hands of many practitioners, who in turn disseminate the knowledge of a specific thought process may in fact prove to be an efficient manner to perpetuate art and its relevance.

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<sup>5</sup> The Xerox Book was published in December 1968. Siegelaub and Wendler invited Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, and Lawrence Weiner to create a project on twenty five letter-sized paper which would then be photocopied – hence, the name. It was offset printed instead, in an edition of 1,000.

<sup>6</sup> Seth Siegelaub was a seminal figure in the Conceptual Art movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Active between early 1968 and mid-1971 in North America and Europe, he largely withdrew from the art world in 1972. His curatorial work took place both in physical spaces and in the form of books. Like Conceptual artists, Siegelaub explored subversive communication methods and mediums in his work and raised important questions about the making, display, ownership, distribution, and sale of art. Jack Wendler is a former gallery owner who co-founded the fine arts journal *Art Monthly* in 1976.

<sup>7</sup> See Wall Drawing 7A