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Lawrence Weiner: man of his word

The veteran Conceptualist, showing in London this month, uses text as just another material. And he doesn't like being called a Conceptualist, either

By Louisa Buck. Features, Issue 240, November 2012

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Lawrence Weiner at the Reykjavik Arts Festival to launch part of his work *A PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS ASAP*, 2005

For nearly half a century, the texts of Lawrence Weiner have been painted on the walls of cities and public buildings from Halifax to Hong Kong and galleries from Beijing to Mexico City. They have been spelled out in cobblestones, printed on beer mats, cast into iron manhole covers, floated inside souvenir Biros and sung as lyrics by a country and western band. Rendered in a utilitarian yet elegant typeface that is instantly recognisable, his cryptic but suggestive phrases operate simultaneously on several levels, whether spatial, poetic or political. They often conjure up processes and physical

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situations while at the same time leaving much to the imagination: “MANY COLOURED OBJECTS PLACED SIDE BY SIDE TO FORM A ROW OF MANY COLOURED OBJECTS” gives no indication of the actual colour, size, number or nature of these objects, just as “A TURBULENCE INDUCED WITHIN A BODY OF WATER” could be the swilling of water in a glass or the waves caused by an ocean liner.

These constructions of what Weiner calls “Language + materials referred to” have led to the 70-year-old New York artist being lauded as a pioneer of Conceptual art. His twice-reprinted Phaidon monograph hails him as “one of the canonical Conceptual artists of the 1960s”, and this view is echoed by London’s Lisson Gallery, where Weiner has a show of past and new work opening this month (21 November-12 January 2013). The gallery describes him as “a seminal American Conceptual artist”—but the man himself takes a different view. Speaking with characteristic forthrightness on the telephone from Vienna, Weiner dismisses such labels. “The Conceptual artist moniker makes absolutely no sense to me. I don’t like the term,” he says. “I think it was created by some people who wanted to make sure their work was differentiated from other artists. Why not just say sculptor?”

Or, more specifically, a sculptor who works with words. “I never quite understand why the shit hits the fan when sculpture is presented within the form of language,” he says. “The use of language is the same as the change to being able to use acrylic or light to make things—it’s not exotic.” Weiner may not make objects per se, but he is adamant that the stuff of the world is always at the centre of everything he does. He defines his art as “the relationship of human beings to objects and objects to objects in relation to human beings”, and insists that “art is essentially a sensual relationship between materials and objects”.

It is this relationship with the physical qualities of materials that continues to lie at the core of Weiner’s texts. He describes the genesis of his written words as “very mundane”, saying: “I become interested in a material and I bring the stuff into the studio. If the studio isn’t large enough for the material I’m interested in, then I go out into the landscape for it. I’ll go to a quarry or I’ll go to a steel mill, but most of the time I bring material in and I work with it—I don’t like the word ‘play’ because I’m not playing, I’m working. When I come to a configuration that I see, I translate it in terms of language. Then, after I’ve worked it through, I clean it up and I present it.”

Although Weiner’s texts are often poetic and open-ended, their creator is adamant that they carry no metaphorical meanings. “The work has no metaphor: it is what it is,” he insists. “Art that has no metaphor is what attracted me as a young person. I was attracted to Mondrian because you didn’t have to know anything; I was attracted to Caspar David Friedrich because again there was no metaphor. Each person coming to a Pollock or coming—hopefully—to a work of mine has a need and they have a desire and they have to place themselves in the material world and they make their own metaphor.” Weiner’s texts have been translated into many languages, and he believes their lack of specific metaphor enables them to have a wider application. “The work can go from culture to

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culture without having to take account of what your grandfather or your father says it is about. It is about what you get from what you are doing.”

Despite the fact that in certain locations Weiner’s texts can seem to chime almost uncannily with their direct surroundings, he is equally insistent that they are never tied in to a specific location. Even though he concedes that *Zerschmettert in Stücke (im Frieden der Nacht) / Smashed to pieces (in the still of the night)*, 1991, which was installed on a Nazi-era Flakturm Tower in Vienna, has an “unfortunate reference” to Kristallnacht, Weiner says this was unintentional and makes the point that, installed in the South Pacific, the piece could just as easily refer to coconuts falling off trees. “My work is never site-specific. Art work has to find its place in very much the same way that you and I do. People move from place to place until they find somewhere they can function. Brancusi became a French artist, Picasso became a French artist: how many artists do we think of as American but they come from somewhere else where they weren’t appreciated as they were?”

Weiner was born in the South Bronx in 1942, the son of a candy-store owner, into what he has described as “a lower-working-class background”. Although he was working on the docks at the age of 12, he graduated from Stuyvesant High School at 16, and then studied literature and philosophy at Hunter College for less than a year before hitchhiking across the country, doing odd jobs and “making the strangest kind of paintings”. These included his multimedia “Propeller Paintings”, made in the mid-1960s, which are represented in the Lisson show. In 1960, Weiner got into trouble when, with a group of friends, he made his now legendary *Cratering Piece*, for which he blew up parts of a state park north of San Francisco and dubbed the resulting voids sculptures. “There were artists performing all over the place, doing happenings, performances, other things,” he remembers. “In the light of my history, it was a big deal; in the light of what the hell was going on, it was just another artist out there, doing another sculpture-park thing using performances, explosives, tons of steel. This was all normal.”

Working and showing alongside fellow artists Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre and Robert Barry, Weiner’s investigations into the forms and processes of art led him to view art as a simple physical interaction, which could be expressed as effectively in words. Why, he asked, was it necessary to make a piece when it could be described? “I didn’t have the advantage of a middle-class perspective. Art was something else; art was the notations on the wall, or the messages left by other people. I grew up in a city where I had read the walls; I still read the walls. I love to put work of mine out on the walls and let people read it.”

In 1968, this realisation led Weiner to issue his *Statement of Intent*, now recognised as a cornerstone of Conceptual art, which sets out the three conditions in which his works could—and can—exist. “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 intent of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.” So in the case of works such as *AN AMOUNT OF PAINT Poured DIRECTLY UPON THE FLOOR AND ALLOWED TO DRY*, 1968, or *A*

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SQUARE REMOVAL FROM A RUG IN USE, 1969, the work can remain as words written on walls (or any other surface), or be executed as described by the artist or others. Or not. Weiner insists that his intention is not to provoke but to simplify and democratise. “I don’t mean to be snotty,” he insists. “Anybody can build it. It isn’t instructions, and therefore there is no way to do it right or wrong. The work is a specific object—it is even saleable as an object—but it has no specific form. And if that’s a problem for people, then there’s not much I can do.”

Such continuingly rigorous yet open-ended *modi operandi* have ensured Weiner’s enduring status, especially in the eyes of subsequent generations of artists. Given the extent of his influence on so many younger artists, it is surprising to learn that Weiner does not, and has never, taught. “A teacher is a very dedicated thing,” he says. “There are other human beings you are responsible for, and you have to assume authority or you are not a good teacher, and the one thing that an artist shouldn’t assume is authority. I prefer to stay asking questions... I’m 70 years old and it allows me not to have any problems with anybody when I’m showing... I don’t have to know what age anybody is; I don’t have a teacher-student relationship with anyone. The stuff that’s on the table is all that counts.”

“The implications of Lawrence’s work are political and connected to breaking down ideas such as rating and hierarchy and importance,” says the British artist Liam Gillick, who has frequently collaborated with Weiner, most recently in “A Syntax of Dependency” at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp in 2011, in which Weiner’s texts were laid into floors covered in blocks of coloured linoleum. According to Gillick, the experience of working with this senior figure is always one of being with an equal, not a mentor. “Working with Lawrence is never passive and does not involve the melding of personas or muddling up of authorship. It involves sitting side by side and not face to face, asking why the work should be made rather than what should be made.”

Despite his enduring art-world status, it was not until 2007, when Weiner was 65, that he was given a full museum retrospective in his own country, at the Whitney Museum in New York. It then toured to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and K21 in Düsseldorf. Although he is represented by the Lisson Gallery in London, Galerie Hubert Winter in Vienna, Marian Goodman Gallery in New York and Yvon Lambert in Paris, with further galleries in Tel Aviv, Los Angeles and Reykjavik, the nature of his work has not made him as easily marketable as some of his peers. Does this bother him? His reply is jocular but steely. “I don’t have any problem with this, and so I ended up with genteel poverty as a choice,” he says.

Weiner is ambivalent about the power of the art market. He accepts that “everyone has to make a living” and acknowledges the role of the commercial gallery as a place where “if you really can’t connect to what is there, you can either giggle to yourself or walk out and not feel guilty, whereas a museum has an authority stamp on it, which means you feel you might be missing something, when perhaps you are not”. But he also expresses concern that the tail now seems to be wagging the dog. “We should not confuse the conversation of the art world with the art market... when that becomes

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the playing field, then the conversation turns into who's better than who, or who has more value, when the conversation should be about who has more use.”

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