

# I Destroyed a LeWitt

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# Tablet



How the father of minimalism brought power to the people, and learned to let go

By [Jeremy Sigler](#)

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My first experience with Sol LeWitt was not so great, to be perfectly honest. I was in my twenties. It was back around the turn of the century, just before the doomsday predictions of Y2K.

I had been hired by the legendary conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner and his wife Alice to do various odd jobs around their modest home-studio in Greenwich Village—to be his house boy, or what I liked to call his Chauncey (aka Chance) the Gardner.

One day, I was asked to run to the nearby hardware store, purchase a few gallons of white wall paint, a brush, and roller, and begin painting the interior.

I was happily painting the main living room wall, a safe distance from the vintage Sol LeWitt wall drawing all by itself (to the best of my memory, a grid of four one-foot quadrants, each containing nearly touching rows of vertical, horizontal, or diagonal pencil lines drawn with a

ruler—a work that seemed to meditate the essence, if not deconstruct, a single Rembrandt crosshatch), when it dawned on me that my Benjamin Moore atrium white did not match the older, dirtier, faded wall.

I was now faced with a complex decision: How close dare I come to the precious LeWitt, knowing that I might impinge on the artwork with any unwanted arbitrary graphic element anywhere on the big white wall in the artwork's vicinity. If I were to come too close to the artwork, I would inadvertently be forced to paint a frame around it, and any such frame would be nothing less than aesthetic blasphemy.

The LeWitt—the epitome of no frills, no frame (see Adolf Loos' "Ornament and Crime" circa 1908)—was by design directly one with the wall. Its dimensions may have been a mere 32 inches, but its sense of place, architectonics, decorum, caused it to hold the entire wall and room and radiate outward with its quiet, commanding presence and authority. My patchwork of new paint a few feet away thus meant that I had already, to put it bluntly, destroyed Lawrence Weiner's Sol LeWitt.

I stopped, and stood with my spongy roller, scratching my head. I could feel the acid burning up my chest. It was time for a Tums. I called out to Lawrence, who came in, mellow as can be, rolling a cigarette, immediately joined by Alice.

Finally Lawrence spoke in his deep warm voice with his perfect diction from behind his frizzy gray beard. "Go ahead and paint right over it," I seem to remember him saying. "It's a LeWitt," he continued with an actual twinkle in his eye.

Weiner then explained that Sol approached his wall drawings the way a composer composes. Any pianist can come along, sit down before the keys, open a book of sheet music, and spontaneously begin playing the song. LeWitt was famous for saying: "Every time you hear the same Bach piano or harpsichord thing, it's different, even with the same person. Whoever does it will leave their mark on it."

And by the time of his death in 2007, LeWitt's opus had been orchestrated all over the world and played by many. Thousands of wall drawings had been executed on-site, and while some were permanent, most were only up for a show's duration, and destroyed immediately after. The ephemerality of his art was thus built into its DNA. As he once explained: "the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art."

By this such logic, I was part of the machine. Surely the gesture of destroying the art was also perfunctory, and conceptual. Which is why Lawrence would have no trouble deciding he'd contact Sol's assistant and have him come over to redraw the LeWitt as soon as possible after I was done with my work.



Sol LeWitt, 'Wall Drawing 350BCD,' Outlines of four isometric figures (trapezoid, parallelogram, triangle) drawn with black crayon. First Drawn by: Anthony Sansotta. First Installation: Max Protetch Gallery, New York, March 1981 (*Photo courtesy of Printed Matter Inc.*)

I was saved here, you might say, by Walter Benjamin, who may have been the first theorist to conclude, as he did in Paris in 1935, that in the Modern era, a work of art was destined to become a mere copy of a copy of a copy. As the great critic wrote in his seminal essay "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction": "We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art." Benjamin went on to lament that an artwork's authenticity, its aura (which in romanticism was everything!), was now verging on obsolescence. "The most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: Its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be... thus, the aura, the unique aesthetic authority of an artwork, is absent from the mechanically produced copy."

So why not make a clone? LeWitt seems to cleverly propose, taking Benjamin's aesthetic diagnosis at face value. And he went on, with deadpan pragmatism, over the course of his career to "bring about an amazing change in our very notion of art"— an aura-less art for an aura-less world.

When I read the other day that Printed Matter was doing a comprehensive retrospective of Sol LeWitt's artist books, titled "Book as System," curated by Emanuele De Donno, I knew it was time to brave Manhattan, and to contemplate LeWitt's achievement. Printed Matter would also be teaming up with Primary Information to co-publish a faithful facsimile of one of LeWitt's books from 1977, *Four Basic Kinds of Lines & Colour*.

But where was I going? Printed Matter had changed locations so many times since its founders Sol LeWitt and Lucy Lippard sat down in 1976 on Lispenard Street in Tribeca to write the mission statement for the world's first nonprofit dedicated to the dissemination, understanding, and appreciation of an unrecognized genre known as the "artists' books," while also providing a kind of clubhouse for the pioneering practitioners of conceptual art, performance, process, environment, sound, and other experimental forms of intermedia—most of whom were in need of a neutral space to execute experimental works and found it on the virtual walls of paper in the virtual real estate of printed matter. Many, being Marxists, aimed to create for the common good, not the common collector.

After 13 years in Tribeca, Printed Matter moved to Wooster Street, in SoHo, and eventually on to Chelsea, shuffling around from storefront to storefront in the early oughts until it settled in its current location on 11th Avenue. While it has generally always remained on the endangered list, it has seemingly defied the art market, expanding and popping up in new ways and new places—i.e., a compressed mini-bookstore in the lobby of the new Swiss Institute, and as the driving force and brand-name behind a growing L.A. art-book fair, and the extremely popular New York art-book fair that sets up annually at PS1.

A visit to Chelsea was certainly in order. Perhaps it was even a matter of duty—not the duty to be dazzled by hype, or to join any crowd in witnessing something spectacular, current, and relevant. On the contrary, it was the duty to miss the main artery, and to opt out of all the commentary. My duty was to get lost in LeWitt, in his incremental meditations. While he was alive (in his sustained prime), he never failed to stay within his own labyrinth and to remain focused (pre-Adderall) on his unique idea of boring.

I was being given an opportunity by Printed Matter—who has never flinched, thanks to folks like its current director, and lifer, Max Schumann—who also happens to be the son of the revolutionary founder of Bread & Puppet, Peter Schumann. In fact, I had just returned from Bernie-bury—from the land of pink skin, white hair, and Subaru hatchbacks with green license plates—where I'd seen Bread & Puppet perform for the first time. Although my current 30-day, no-carb-diet did not permit me to accept the free bread (which is shamefully bourgeois), I did, however, partake in the youthful crusades for social justice and take a seat in the grass offering my hairier warmer regions to the population of deer ticks, and really imbibe the New Orleans jazz band (particularly the trombonist) in their all-white coveralls, and the agile college kids on stilts, cloaked in homemade costumes, performing rituals in front of a hand-painted backdrop draped over the old school bus they rode in on. Without

an actual puppet or marionette in sight, the happening was as close as anything genuinely communist as I've ever experienced. Maybe I picked the right day to start microdosing. I nearly left my wife and kids behind, and boarded the school bus with the trombonist. Millennial Madness!

And while all of this may seem like a self-indulgent digression, if not confession, having little to do with Sol LeWitt, it's interesting how different artistic cultures and circles overlap and share common ground. Peter Schumann once stated in regard to his dream of creating a rebelliously free theater: "We want you to understand that theater is not yet an established form, not the place of commerce you think it is, where you pay to get something. ... Puppets and masks should be played in the street. They are louder than the traffic. They don't teach problems, but they scream and dance and display life in its clearest terms."

So I guess I went to Chelsea to study LeWitt's much more subdued puppetry, his "clearest terms"—what the Printed Matter press release refers to as his "radical framework for the publication-as-artwork," which was "instrumental in charting out the reaches of the medium" as he "explored notions of seriality and permutation, seeing the page as a rich site for experimental sequences of line, color, geometry forms." In other words: I would have the chance to reflect not on a LeWitt's artwork or bookwork, per se, but on his "rigorous, algorithmic process in which a set of rules is run through its permutations to generate corresponding images."

The key word being "algorithmic." Seeing that LeWitt's breakthrough to a kind of meta-art, the logic of systems, predates, and foreshadows the ominous infiltration we are presently experiencing, cryptically, and quite against our wills.

The first definition of "algorithm" to appear on my computer screen (which of course is algorithmically coordinated with the personal data they have stolen from my so-called identity) reads: "An algorithm is a step-by-step method of solving a problem. It is commonly used for data processing, calculation, and other related computer and mathematical operations. An algorithm is also used to manipulate data in various ways, such as inserting a new data item, searching for a particular item or sorting an item."

LeWitt used the book medium not merely to draw, but to draw things out. Before there was any such thing as a personal computer, he used the book system to manipulate the fundamental data of line, value, shape, color (formalism). His line processing like word processing gave him a kind of extender, an elaborator, and an exhaustor for each and every whim, as if a book's 20-some pages (with recto, verso, cover, spine) allowed him to expand the most innocent of thoughts into a walloping ballad of metrical verses and techno cadence. Each minimal nibble taken to an unprecedented harnessing of unforeseen potential.

And what better context is there to acknowledge this independent achievement than Printed Matter? No inflated tickets, no crowds of tourists. Just three or four curious nerds and a geek browsing as if they were in a really cool record store, surrounded by shelves of intellectual, politically subversive, mostly DIY miscellanea and ephemera generated mostly by left-leaning artists, learning to, as Lawrence Weiner once instructed, read art.

Scanning the carefully curated and arranged LeWitt vitrines, I saw nothing but gems. Each book was an entirely new can of worms. Skimming LeWitt's titles makes this abundantly, if not clinically, evident: *Wall Drawings. Seventeen Squares of Eight Feet with Sixteen Lines and One Arc; Red, Blue and Yellow Lines from Sides, Corners and the Center of the Page to Points on a Grid; Isometric Drawings; Lines in Two Directions and in Five Colors with all their Combinations*. And a few important inclusions in the show were projects that first appeared in other people's publications. Such as an early issue of *Aspen Magazine*, and Seth Siegelaub's notorious *Xerox Book*.



Albrecht Dürer, 'Melencolia I,' 1514 (*Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1943, The Metropolitan Museum of Art*)

And it also bears mentioning that the show included a single wall drawing executed on

Printed Matter's large back wall: "Wall Drawing #350." It displays three outlined isometric forms, side by side (a trapezoid, parallelogram and a triangle) drawn in black crayon. Works from this series generally remind me of Albrecht Dürer's "Melancholia I," an engraving from 1514 that—aside from its allegorical winged, androgynous figure, magic square, and emaciated sleeping greyhound—is most famous for its rendering of an enigmatic polyhedron—a truncated rhombohedron, to be exact—which due to the amount of attention it has garnered over the centuries from art historians, is now officially known as Dürer's Solid.

LeWitt's wall drawing, like the one I first destroyed at Lawrence Weiner's, clarified in my mind that one LeWitt per show is enough. Even two may be ostensibly too many. An exhibition of multiple wall drawings, temporary as they usually are, can't help but distract me with anxiety for wasted human labor—the army of students and/or aspiring plebs assembled to follow King Solomon's instructions.

This may be why LeWitt's massive 2007 retrospective ("Sol LeWitt: Drawing Series") at Dia:Beacon—the pantheon of minimalism—left me with a bad taste in my mouth, despite the very high quality of the work in the show. At the time, Roberta Smith praised Beacon's "hulking displays" of "mind-teasing, eye-filling wall drawings," with their "crisp geometries, accumulating marks and radiating patterns," persuading us to "mind the gap between artistic thought and artistic action ..."

Jock Reynolds, in an essay he wrote for the catalogue of a similarly ambitious, over-the-top LeWitt grand finale of sorts that he organized back in 1993 at the Addison Gallery: "Sol Le Witt Twenty Five Years of Drawing: 1968-1993," describes the three-month-long messy chaotic installation process, seeing it in contrast with the show's clean appearance once it was open to the public. He chronicles the scaffolding, ladders, drop cloths, paint, and drawing materials, etc., as well as the "group of draftspersons hurled over Lewitt's instructions and schematic drawings at a work table in the middle of the gallery ... transcribing countless point locations and dimensions onto notepads so they could be plotted in full scale on the walls." He describes how the galleries "resembled something akin to an air traffic control room where, in a large string-gridded environment, workers were plotting and cross-checking coordinates across a vast Cartesian abstraction." On another day, he went so far to compare it to "an auto body shop, a place frenetic with the activity of carefully applying masking tape and Kraft paper to establish and control color barriers ..."

Where was LeWitt while all this hard work was going on? Playing chess? Catching a matinee in a quiet dark theater? At a baseball game? Indeed we have been influenced by clichés about tortured artists oppressed by everything but miraculously catapulted, by will and inspiration, by an inner voice, if not supernatural feats of manual labor, to achieve monumental even holy manifestations of sublime genius. We've all seen the 1965 Hollywood portrayal of Michelangelo (Heston) up on the scaffolding of the Sistine Ceiling

with his nose nearly touching the wet plaster in *Agony and the Ecstasy*. And Andrei Rublev, in the 1969 masterpiece directed by Andrei Tarkovsky, as he skim coats a church wall for what feels like 10 hours of hypnotic black and white cinematography, before getting started on the damn altarpiece.

But LeWitt at Printed Matter led me to consider no such inflated angst-ridden artistic egos. The output remains, in a way, hypothetical, propositional, provisional, and we get to consider LeWitt's work with or without the wealthy patronage behind big-museum productions. The starring attraction, if anything, was the artist-book Printed Matter reproduced in facsimile with Primary Information of the catalogue for the 1977 Lisson Gallery show, which looks more like a manual for how to make a LeWitt—a catalogue from which to choose which colors and lines to use, rather than an actual work. In it, we get to observe LeWitt's approach to the blending of colors and layering of gray tones.

At first the manual/catalogue reminds me of the beginning of color printing by William Blake in the 18th century, when he was among the first artists to colorize his etchings in an attempt to take them onto serial, mechanical reproduction. I'm reminded of an on-line demonstration for the British Library, [showing](#) how Blake would use tiny portions of dry powdery pigment (bone black, gamboge, yellow ochre, Prussian blue, madder lake)—and a drop of honey-like reduced linseed oil, work it in a stone with his pallet knife and then use a leather-covered dabber to gently tap the raised surface of his copper plate, methodically building up layers of ink in a spectrum of pixilated color.



From 'Where the Wild Things Are,' 1963 (Harper & Row)

LeWitt's own colored cross-hatching technique (somewhat weaving colored lines with black) is right out of the watershed moment in '60s children's book illustration, namely: *Where the Wild Things Are*, by Maurice Sendak. Could it be that LeWitt and Sendak, who were both born in the same year (1928), had something in common? Were they both intuitive, dangerous, alluring, erotic, nostalgic, sentimental, emotional, risky: even surreal artists at heart, not merely brilliant technicians?" (The wall drawing that seems to demonstrate this most is the highly immersive lyrical "Wall Drawing #652," which was designed to cover three adjacent walls with polygons [no two are alike] using moody washes of semitranslucent Pelikan ink. This LeWitt strikes me as a total anomaly—the one that got away.)

In Sendak's famous children's book, a boy named Max, who is dressed in a wolf costume, is punished for misbehaving and sent to his room without dinner. While locked in the claustrophobic terror of the confined space, Max begins to hallucinate. The walls dissolve. He is taken, via the power of his own imagination, beyond the architecture—into a jungle, onto a ship, away to an island inhabited by beasts, where he is made into a king.

When I attended the LeWitt show at Printed Matter, I was able to study, not browse, LeWitt's multigenerational career that seems to bookend Eadweard Muybridge's Zoopraxography, Duchamp's "Three Standard Stoppages," and Mondrian's neoplasticism, securing his reputation as the father of Conceptual Art and Minimalism. But I also felt a little closer to LeWitt the family man and father of a daughter named Eva LeWitt, whom I had the pleasure of meeting a few years ago.

Eva and I were at a bar one evening talking when I noticed a baseball tattooed on her forearm. Why a baseball? I asked. And her response was that she and her dad used to love to go to ball games together. It related to my own childhood going to Orioles games with my father, cheering on the home team on August nights under the lights, in a kind of hypnotic daze, with the occasional wooden crack of a bat or thud of a fastball in the catcher's mitt.

I recently came across the following letter from 1965 written to another Eva, his close friend Eva Hesse (his daughter's namesake, apparently). The letter clarifies that LeWitt could give inspiring advice to any fellow artist in need, regardless of his or her gender, and that he also happened to have a very Jewish sense of humor. Read for yourself:

Dear Eva,

It will be almost a month since you wrote to me and you have possibly forgotten your state of mind (I doubt it though). You seem the same as always, and being you, hate every minute of it. Don't! Learn to say "Fuck You" to the world once in a while. You have every right to. Just stop thinking, worrying, looking over your shoulder wondering, doubting, fearing, hurting, hoping for some easy way out, struggling, grasping, confusing, itchin, scratching, mumbling, bumbling, grumbling, humbling, stumbling, numbling, rumbling, gambling, tumbling, scumbling, scrambling, hitching, hatching, bitching, moaning, groaning, honing, boning, horse-shitting, hair-splitting, nit-picking, piss-trickling, nose sticking, ass-gouging, eyeball-poking, finger-pointing, alleyway-sneaking, long waiting, small stepping, evil-eyeing, back-scratching, searching, perching, besmirching, grinding, grinding, grinding away at yourself. Stop it and just DO!

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*Read Jeremy Sigler's art criticism for Tablet magazine [here](#).*