

Last year, in the first days of December, our friend LAWRENCE WEINER (1942–2021) passed away. Toward the end of the '60s, Weiner developed the distinctive practice and theoretical position that he would maintain for the rest of his life, to great consequence.

Nonetheless at the heart of Weiner's work lies a paradox, and it is precisely the tension created by this paradox that characterizes his work.

Weiner's now famous belief that art, in its essence, can only exist in the communication of one individual with another, implied that it must therefore be entirely transformed into the medium of thought, that is, into language. In that respect, Weiner's categorical step toward the transformation of the aesthetic field into this mental form—subsumed, to his chagrin, to the term *conceptual art* he refused to identify with—appears above all as a radical fulfillment of the philosopher G.W. Hegel's verdict on the end of art.

In the face of a society which, under the influence of natural sciences, mechanization, and the nascent industrialization, increasingly turned to forms and topics of art charged with intellectual content, Hegel anticipated the loss of art's inner nature, namely, sensuality. That is why Hegel decided that all art is, according to its highest form, something past. Weiner, it seems, takes this concept seriously. His oft cited *Declaration of Intent*, from 1968, which he frequently repeated, reads like an affirmation of Hegel's diagnosis: the artist's idea is all that matters; whether or not it is realized is no longer decisive. The third member of his syllogism therefore reads: "*The piece need not be built.*"

On the other hand, however, Weiner always insisted that the *Statement* form he developed— whether as typographical design; as typeface on a wall, on paper, on a banner pulled through the sky by an airplane; or in one of his subversive artist's books—did not lack a sensual quality, but, on the contrary, was essentially material. For language does not come into the world unless it is embodied in a sign. In order to come into its own, and to be comprehensible as meaningful signals in intersubjective communication, language must be either a phoneme (spoken language) or a grapheme (written language). Language must therefore reify itself.

From a young age, Lawrence Weiner drew heavily on the history of philosophy. From conversations with him, it is clear that no one influenced him more than Ludwig Wittgenstein, an author who left behind two diametrically opposed concepts of language.

The solution to the riddle of the physical existence of the mind in written language—which, as in Lawrence Weiner's characteristic practice, helps thought come into reality—can be found in Wittgenstein's first theoretical scheme in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* of 1921. There, Wittgenstein assumes, almost subconsciously, a *picture theory* of language: the truth of a statement would consist in the equivalence of the syntactic order of words with the physical order of the real things they name.

Only if there exists this correspondence between the structure of language and the structure of reality can one speak of a reasonable proposition whose truth can be determined.

Informed by this theory, Lawrence Weiner saw the elements of his language games as objects, as sculptures in space, which themselves have the same haptic palpability and material presence as the objects to which they refer.

The work by Weiner at the center of this installation is of particular linguistic artistry and conceptual subtlety. The leanness and laconicity of the English sentence is startling. A German translation would need two subordinate clauses and three commas to convey the same meaning. In the syntax of the sentence, the verb comes at the end, standing isolated on the lowest line of the typographical design. Physically, then, the verb as written represents the very object that fell off-side and remained lying there. In this way, Lawrence Weiner succeeds in grasping the world in a word and in bringing the word back into the world.

Weiner's oeuvre, and especially his relationship to the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, constitutes one of the central interests of the *Arsenale Institute*. We agreed that his singular role in the art of the second half of the last century was neither adequately recognized nor articulated in the media coverage of Lawrence Weiner's death, neither in the US or in Europe. That is why on the occasion of the 59th Venice Biennial of 2022 the project room of the Institute is dedicated to his memory.

Thanks to the support of Alice Weiner, it was possible to present this wall piece, whose linguistic beauty and connotative ambiguity remains particularly fascinating among all his works. So far, it has been displayed only three times and has not yet been published.

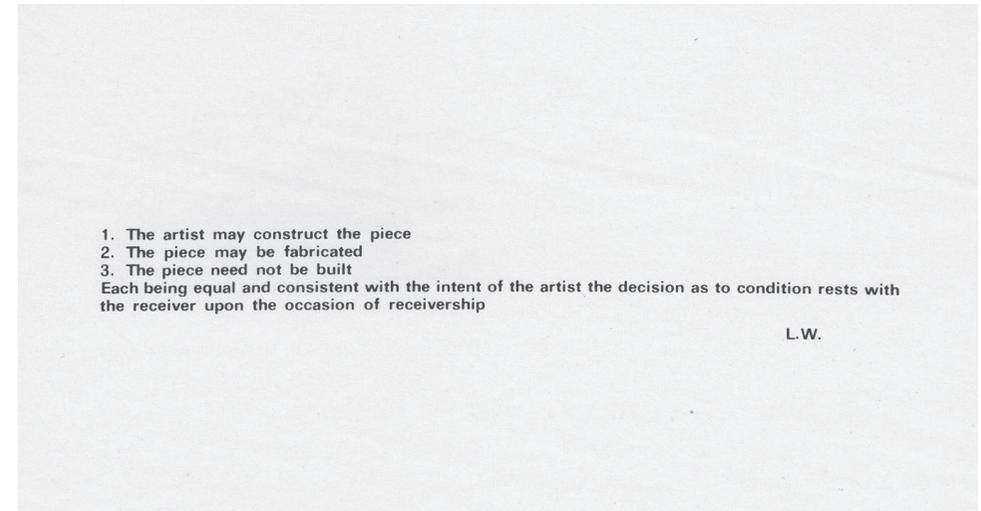


fig. 2

In addition to this work, which is at the center of the project, we are displaying all of Weiner's artist's books up to 1980, when the art market began to appropriate this underground mode of articulation. It is not easy to achieve completeness in the display of this important medium of Lawrence Weiner's mode of expression, since several books exist only in a handful of copies worldwide. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time they have all been put together in one place.

There was no other artist of his generation who showed such generosity and friendliness toward so many, whom he conversed with in so many languages. Language determined not only the form of Lawrence's work, but also the way he led his life. This project, in its intimacy, is therefore also a memory of the *conversation piece* we experienced with Lawrence Weiner one day some nine years ago in the garden of an island in the Venetian lagoon. That moment was dedicated to the very exchange, which gives his art its purpose.

WOLFGANG SCHEPPE, Venice, April 19, 2022

FIG. 2 January 5 - 31 1969, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner (New York City: Seth Siegel, 1968).