

Martin Hartung

Under Control: Sol LeWitt and the Market for Conceptual Art

ABSTRACT

One year before his accidental death in April 1972, Robert Smithson cautioned: “The artist isn’t in control of his value.” He did not seem to speak for Sol LeWitt, who emphasized the transformation of the traditional production conditions of an artwork by promoting the idea in favour of its execution in his *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* (1967). Moreover, the artist chal-

lenged the sale conditions of artworks through offering certificates and instructions in an art market largely dominated by unique objects. The essay tackles the critical market success of LeWitt’s series of *Wall Drawings* within a time span of nearly twenty years, between 1968 and 1987, by tracking the myth of Conceptual art’s opposition to the commodification of artworks within a system adjusting to capitalist modes of production.

In October 1968, Sol LeWitt executed his first *Wall Drawing* in the context of a benefit exhibition for the *Student Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam* at the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York, organized by the critic Lucy Lippard and painter Robert Huot with a distinctive emphasis on “non-objective art”. [Fig. 1] Conceived as part of a protest show and drawn by the artist directly on the gallery walls, the delicate and precise, two-part drawing was not intended to be for sale as an “object”. This is also suggested by the price list of the exhibition, which announced the compensation for the artist’s contribution as “per hour”, thus “rendering the art commodity inseparable from

the artist's time [...] within a culture of object making and speculative collecting."¹ [Fig. 2] Asked in the early 1980s whether the *Wall Drawings* seemed like a "marketable commodity", LeWitt responded: "I didn't think about selling them but it wasn't a 'gesture' as an anti-market ploy either."² The apparent and not uncommon ambivalence of an artist towards a market that enabled him to disseminate his work and pursue a creative career, is reflected in the recollections of the gallerist Max Protetch, who repeatedly presented the successful artist's work since 1970, later making a name for himself through the promotion of architectural drawings in New York. According to the gallerist, LeWitt operated within a structure of maximal availability, "and he did it in the most generous and gracious, and Marxian way [...], so that everyone was taken care of."³

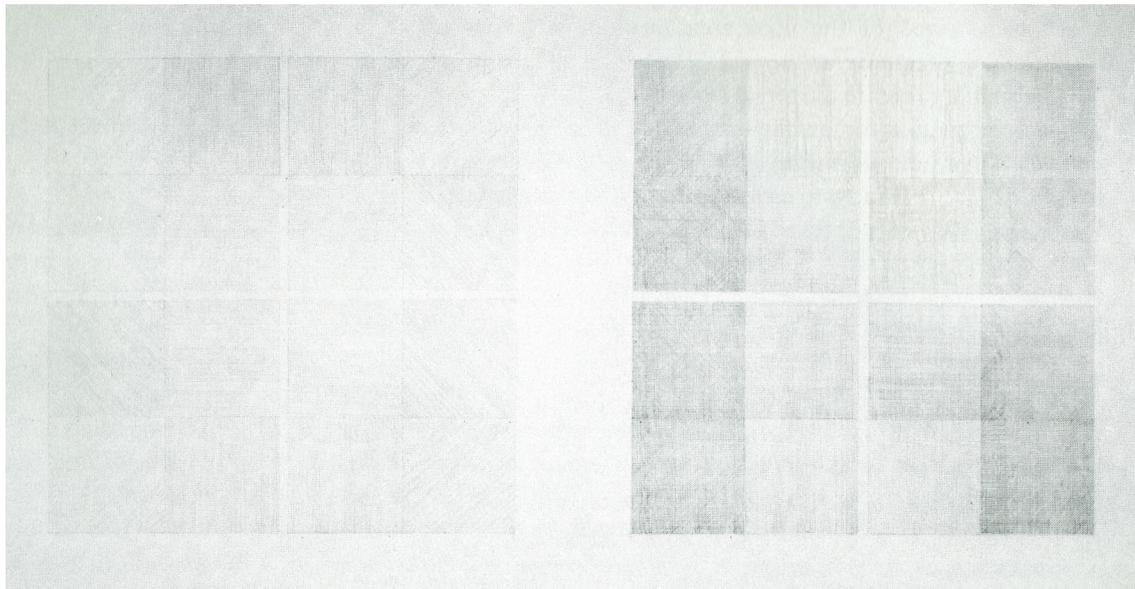


Fig. 1: Sol LeWitt, *Wall Drawing 1: Drawing Series II 14 (A&B)*, October 1968, black graphite. Installation view, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

© The LeWitt Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

In this article, I would like to show how Sol LeWitt, as a pioneer of Conceptual art maturing in this context, successfully set up a unique structure in an expanding art market through his series of *Wall Drawings*, "that was both generous to others, while being helpful to himself," by creating inclusive production and distribution conditions.⁴ As

-
- 1 Kirsten Swenson, *Irrational Judgments. Eva Hesse, Sol LeWitt, and 1960s New York* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2015), 144-145. The appearance of LeWitt's rationalized, geometric *Wall Drawings* has been associated with pictures of graffiti slogans on walls in Paris during the events of May 1968.
 - 2 Andrea Miller-Keller, Excerpts from a Correspondence, 1981-1983, in Susanna Singer et al., *Sol LeWitt Wall Drawings 1968-1984* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1984), 18-25, 18.
 - 3 Interview by the author with Max Protetch in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on 15 October 2015. As Protetch has stated, LeWitt depended on a number of "outlets to accomplish all of his ideas – all these permutations and combinations of one idea. [...] He would have a little structure for himself." (Interview with the author on 22 April 2017.)
 - 4 In the early years, LeWitt i.e. offered more affordable editions of his works on paper for \$100 per piece. See Béatrice Gross, "The arbitrary, the capricious, and the subjective": A Brief History of the LeWitt Col-

Kirsten Swenson has demonstrated, LeWitt's "wall drawings would become adapted for collecting with certificates of ownership, but the artist continued to control the compo-

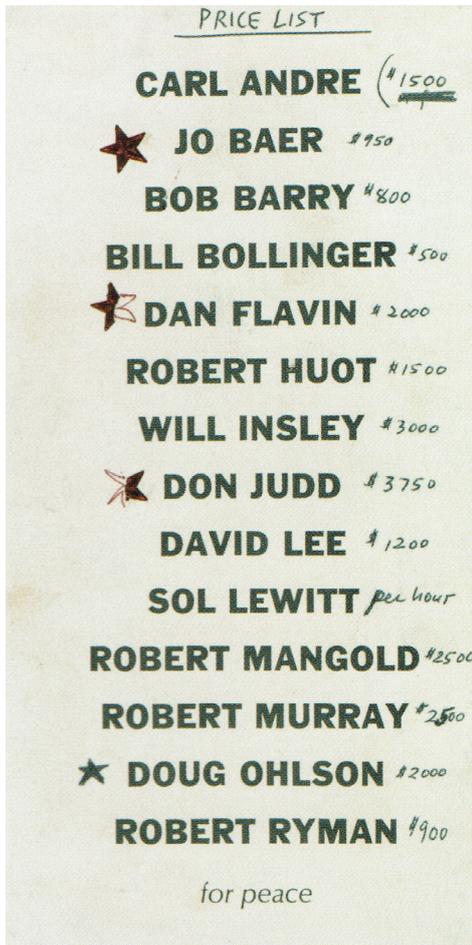


Fig. 2: Price List, Benefit exhibition for the Student Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam, October 1968, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. © Lucy R. Lippard Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

ment of compensated labor necessary to install the work through the hire of trained draftsmen.”⁵

Commercial success and the “Avant-garde”

Twenty years after LeWitt had outlined the idea as a driving force for making art in his *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, thus envisioning new dimensions of authorship and modes of production, in succession of Marcel Duchamp's readymades, the American writer Lewis Lapham made the *Wall Drawings* conceived by the artist since 1968 a subject of discussion in the October 1987 issue of *Harper's*.⁶ Not only did Lapham take the opportunity to discuss the paradoxical market value of an art form that was largely immaterial, he also pursued a critique of the general socio-political situation in the United States through a surprising analogy. At the outset of his essay, Lapham gives an example for the simple but complex structure of the production and distribution processes LeWitt created within an extensive oeuvre, before describing the sale of an “idea of a drawing”—or more precisely, the right to its execution—, at Christie's in New York for \$26,400 in the spring of 1987. The title of the work, quoted by the author as *Ten Thousand Lines Ten Inches Long, Covering the Wall Evenly*,⁷

lection, in Margaret Sundell (ed.), *Drawing Dialogues: Selections from the Sol LeWitt Collection* (New York: The Drawing Center, 2016), 17-25.

5 Swenson, 2015, 145.

6 “The idea becomes the machine that makes the art.” See Sol LeWitt, *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, in *Artforum* (June 1967), 79-83 and *Sentences on Conceptual Art*, in 0-9 (1969), 3-5 and *Art-Language*, 1 (May 1969), 12.-23. See on the history of the *Wall Drawings*: Sabeth Buchmann, *Denken gegen das Denken. Produktion, Technologie, Subjektivität bei Sol LeWitt, Yvonne Rainer und Hélio Oiticica* (Berlin: b_books, 2007), 147-197.

7 The complete title of this work known as *Wall Drawing 86* is listed in Christie's auction catalogue as *Ten thousand lines ten inches (25cm) long, covering the wall evenly*. The *Wall Drawing* was executed for the first time at the Bykert Gallery in New York in June 1971, and was initially drawn directly on the gallery wall by R. Holocomb and Kazuko Miyamoto using pencils (black graphite).

already referred to the instructions as a central motif underlying all various versions of *Wall Drawings* by the artist. [Fig. 3] Sold as a certificate, the works could be drawn by the



Fig. 3: Sol LeWitt, *Lines from the Center, the Corners and the Sides*, white chalk on black-painted wall, drawn by the artist, Joe and Ryo Watanabe, January 1976. Installation view (detail) of the exhibition *Drawing Now: 1955-1975*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (21 January 1976 until 9 March 1976). The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. IN1117.2. Photograph by David Allison.

© The LeWitt Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

owners or trained draftsmen, as well as other people, especially including non-artists. In his essay, Lapham satirizes the market value of the *Wall Drawings*: “Within the span of a single generation LeWitt’s minimalist aesthetic has come to define the character of postmodernist politics, sex, literature, and war.”⁸ The author continues to ask: “What else is the presidency of Ronald Reagan if not the work of conceptual art? Like LeWitt, the President has a talent for promoting what isn’t there.”⁹ Although seemingly unrelated, Lapham touched a nerve by twisting the adaptability of an artistic concept, beyond a cunning characterization of a powerful political figure. In fact the author mirrored satirically what the American

literary scholar Russell Berman assessed in the mid-1980s as a postmodern aestheticization of everyday life, the flipside of the disintegrated autonomous artwork, a “universal disappearance of an outside to art [...], since social order has become dependent on aesthetic organization.”¹⁰

The open concept of LeWitt’s works is adapted and aimed at seemingly unrelated contexts. At the end of a boom decade in the art market – that is to say, the 1960s in which the *Wall Drawings* came into being – Lapham’s juxtapositions include processes in the

8 Lewis Lapham, Notebook: Wall Painting, in *Harper’s* (October 1987), 12-13, 12.

9 Lapham, Notebook, 1987, 12.

10 R. A. Berman, Modern Art and Desublimation, in *Telos*, No. 62 (Winter 1984/1985), 31-57, 48.

culture industry which occurred at a time of political turmoil that triggered new ways of thinking about the socioeconomic positioning of artist and work.¹¹

In the late 1950s, the perception of a male artist's personality changed in accordance with a shift of attention away from predominantly large canvases. Instead, Allan Kaprow's 1964 analysis became apparent: "The artist[s] of today's generation [lead] an increasingly expedient social life for the sake of a career rather than just for pleasure. In this they resemble the personnel in other specialized disciplines and industries in America."¹² In a professional environment perceived as increasingly competitive, in which some artists were no longer described as primarily opposing capitalist modes of production, but rather as adjusting to them, the art gallery system changed as well – to the extent that even a mental image of air could be offered for sale.¹³

Alexander Alberro pointed out that the negation of the artwork as commodity by Conceptual art is perhaps the greatest myth surrounding the movement, however, its emphasis of an artwork's idea in favour of the execution not only pushed the limits of its comprehension, but also of the art market in general.¹⁴ In the early 1970s, Lucy Lippard referred to the discrepancies of the phenomenon: "It seemed in 1969 [...] that no one, not even a public greedy for novelty, would actually pay money [...] for a xerox sheet referring to an event past or never directly perceived, [...] Three years later, the major conceptualists are selling work for substantial sums here and in Europe [...]. Clearly, whatever minor revolutions in communication have been achieved by the process of dematerializing the object (easily mailed work, catalog and magazine pieces, primarily art that can be shown inexpensively and unobtrusively in infinite locations at one time), art and artist in a capitalist society remain luxuries."¹⁵ The developments in the art market coincided with the appearance of a new, young and educated type of art collector, mapped by Francis V.

11 See i.e. Sol LeWitt's contribution *Some Points Bearing on the Relationship of Works of Art to Museums and Collectors* on the occasion of the public Hearing of the Art Workers Coalition at the School of Visual Arts in New York on 10 April 1969; published in Alicia Legg, ed., *Sol LeWitt* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1978), 172.

12 Allan Kaprow, *Should the Artist Be a Man of the World?*, in *Art News*, 63/3 (October 1964), reprinted under the title: *The Artist as a Man of the World*, in Jeff Kelley, ed., *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life. Allan Kaprow* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 47-48, 48. See the essay included in the same volume: *The Legacy of Jackson Pollock* (1958), in which Kaprow states: "Young artists of today need no longer say, 'I am a painter' or 'a poet' or 'a dancer.' They are simply 'artists.' All of life will be open to them. They will discover out of ordinary things the meaning of ordinariness." (1-9,9)

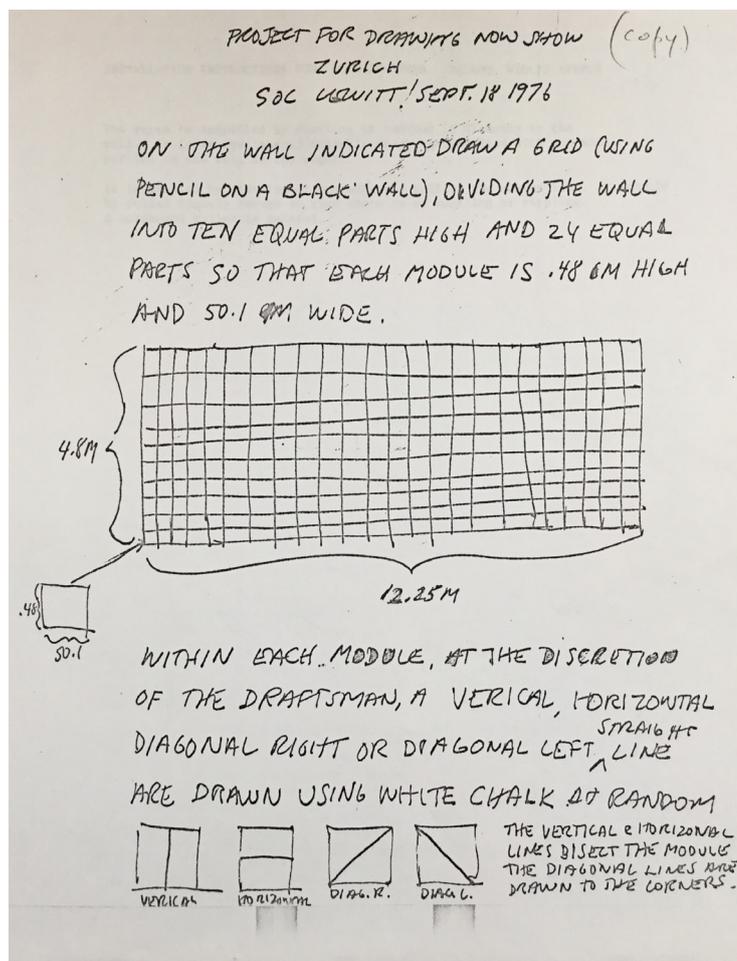
13 See Jack Burnham, *Alice's Head: Reflections on Conceptual Art* in *Artforum* (February 1970), 37-43.

14 See Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003). Suzaan Boettger has shown that the anti-gallery stance that was voiced in the wake of Minimalism and Land Art since the late 1960s did not lead to an abandonment of art galleries – despite challenges of the established market system. Rather, the role of some gallerists changed to that of patrons. See Boettger, *Earthworks: art and the landscape of the sixties* (Berkeley: University of California, 2004), 209-215. See also V. Ginsburgh; A.-F. Penders, *Land Artists and Art Markets*, in *Journal of Cultural Economics*, 21 (1997), 219-228.

15 Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 263.

O'Connor in the fall issue of *Artforum* in 1972, who was searching for art as a commodity as introduced by pop art: "prestigious to own and conspicuous to display."¹⁶

As the art theoretician and curator Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen stated in 1989, "the shock had adjusted to the convention. The more provoking a work of art [was] meant to be, the more likely it end[ed] up in the living room of the provoked."¹⁷ In addition,



Schmidt-Wulffen remarked that the market success of art led to the paradoxical situation that demand repeatedly exceeded supply, "a completely new situation for avant-garde art", which also led to an acceleration of art production.¹⁸ Referring to an ever-increasing number of large exhibition projects, the Munich-based gallerist Bernd Klüser postulated: "A provoking avant-garde doesn't exist anymore, because the 'bourgeoisie' as the former 'bogyman' does not allow itself to be provoked, but consumes, integrates, and speculates."¹⁹

Wall Drawings in the Art Market

The complex repercussions resulting from the fact that the immaterial *Wall*

Fig. 4: Copy of installation instructions by Sol LeWitt for the exhibition *Drawing Now: 1955-1975*, organized at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, for its exhibition at Kunsthaus Zurich, where the show traveled from 23 January until 9 March 1976. © The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence

16 Francis V. O'Connor, Notes on Patronage: The 1960s, in *Artforum* (September 1972), 52-56, 52. Vgl. Catherine Dossin, *The Rise and Fall of American Art, 1940s-1980s. A Geopolitics of Western Art Worlds* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2015).

17 Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen, Das wahre Schöne und die schöne Ware, in: *Jahresring. Jahrbuch für moderne Kunst* (36/1989), 32-43, 35. [transl. by the author] Here, "avant-garde" is used by Schmidt-Wulffen in general terms, as introduction of "new forms of presentation, production and marketing" by artists (Ibid, 32).

18 Ibid.

19 Bernd Klüser, Vorwort, in Bernd Klüser; Katharina Hegewisch (eds.), *Die Kunst der Ausstellung. Eine Dokumentation dreißig exemplarischer Kunstausstellungen dieses Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt am Main/Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1991), n.p. [transl. by the author].

Drawings cannot be validated by connoisseurship, since the artist no longer necessarily executes his own work, were aptly summarized by the critic Lawrence Alloway: “Now in one way LeWitt’s walls have a great deal to do with the sensuous process of execution, inasmuch as he leaves many of the on-site decisions to draftsmen, so long as they remain within the proposed system. However since the wall emerges as a work by LeWitt in a sense that it does not count as a work by the draftsmen, we can say that LeWitt demonstrates the possibility of drawing as pure ratiocination. [...] control is not a matter of manual participation but rather of setting up a system within which the execution of his system can only produce a LeWitt.”²⁰ An example for such instructions is a project the artist contributed to the travelling exhibition *Drawing Now: 1955-1975*, which Bernice Rose organized at The Museum of Modern Art in 1976, tracing the autonomy of artist drawings towards other genres since 1955, albeit with varying success.²¹ In his installation sheet for the exhibition at Kunsthaus Zurich the artist provided a basic framework with wall measurements and line types; to be executed on the museum wall “at the discretion of the draftsman”.²² [Fig. 4]

The significant market success of the *Wall Drawings*, characterized by a direct marking of institutional walls while being relatively inexpensive to conceive,²³ was made public in the course of the prominent auction at Christie’s in spring 1987, which brought together the highest concentration of works of Minimal and Conceptual art at auction until that point. [Fig. 5] The sale’s prominence was not only established by twenty-five record prices from the prestigious collection of the Gilman Paper Company – with a total of \$2,923,140 it contributed to the second highest auction result ever for a Contemporary Evening Sale, achieving a grand total of \$15,314,940.²⁴ It also generated publicity for works on offer such as Hans Haacke’s *On Social Grease* (1975), with quotes by known businessmen and politicians on the relationship between art and commerce. It made one of the record prices of which fifteen percent had to be paid to the artist in accordance with the initial sales agreement.²⁵ Also offered at auction was the aforementioned *Wall*

20 Lawrence Alloway, Sol LeWitt: Modules, Walls, Books, in *Artforum* (April 1975), 38-43, 38. See Toni Hildebrandt, *Entwurf und Entgrenzung. Kontradispositive der Zeichnung 1955-1975* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2017): “Gegen alle Regelmäßigkeiten und Repetitionen setzt LeWitt das praktische Moment des Irrtums und der Unschärfe. Die *Wall Drawings* führen letztlich den Schein ihrer Systematik *ad absurdum*.” (246)

21 See Bernice Rose, ed., *Drawing Now* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1976).

22 See in general Sol LeWitt, *Wall Drawings*, in Legg, Sol LeWitt, 1978, 169 as well as *Doing Wall Drawings*, in *Art Now*, no. 2 (June 1971), n.p. In the event of any sales, the existing works were to be removed from the walls of the previous owners.

23 See Rosalind Krauss, *Linie als Sprache*, in Werner Busch, Oliver Jehle, Carolin Meister, Hg., *Randgänge der Zeichnung* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2007), 283-302: “Diese Linien haben nichts mit der Aufgabe zu tun, eine andere Welt zu projizieren. Vielmehr sind sie Teil eines Versuchs, etwas zu tun, das man als den Wunsch beschreiben kann, gerade in *dieser* Welt zu zeichnen oder sie zu markieren.” (284) See also Carolin Meister, *Ohne Illusionen. Von anderen Räumen der Zeichnung*, in Angela Lammert, Carolin Meister., Jan-Philipp Frühsorge, Andreas Schalhorn, eds., *Räume der Zeichnung* (Nürnberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2007), 170-179.

24 See Judd Tully, \$15 Million for Art, in *The Washington Post* (6 May 1987).

25 See Roberta Smith, When Artists Seek Royalties On Their Resales, in *The New York Times* (31 May 1987). Judd Tully reported that the piece was sold to Gilbert Silverman for \$99,000. The artist’s contract was

Drawing by LeWitt, whose benefits were advertised wittily by the gallerist John Weber, the former director of the influential Dwan gallery: “Museums love them – when they are not on view, they present no storage problems.”²⁶ Within a time span of not even

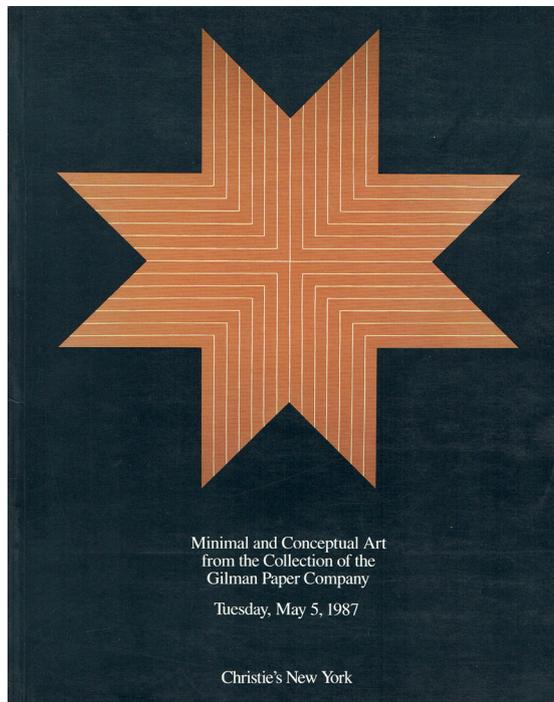


Fig. 5: Cover, Auction catalogue, Minimal and Conceptual Art from the Collection of the Gilman Paper Company, Tuesday, 5 May 1987, Christie's, New York.

twenty years, over 500 *Wall Drawings* were conceived whose prices Weber quoted in 1987 as having increased from circa \$2,800 at the time of the first works in the late 1960s to between \$25,000 and \$500,000 each in the late 1980s, depending on size and complexity.²⁷ Weber, who had exhibited LeWitt since the early 1970s, characterized the success of the simultaneously flexible and stringent works: “In an art market that relies heavily on unique art objects that can be sold as commodities, jettisoning precisely those attributes might seem like an act of professional suicide. But the ingenuity of LeWitt’s conception of the wall drawing has allowed him to make his work publicly available for exhibitions, while still reserving the right to sell the ‘exchange value’ of the work as a thing unto itself, available for ownership and resale through the usual art market-avenues.”²⁸ The gallerist continued: “In a peculiar pure form of capitalism, the collector of a LeWitt wall

based on an initiative taken by Seth Siegelau, who organized the first Conceptual art exhibitions in his gallery from 1964 until 1966 (and afterwards from his apartment). Siegelau worked on the adaptable contract with the lawyer Robert Projansky.

- 26 Rita Reif, Art of the Mind’s Eye is the Object of Unusual Auction of Conceptual Works, in *The New York Times* (30 April 1987). Vgl. James Meyer, Paige Rozanski, *Dwan Gallery: Los Angeles to New York, 1959-1971* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2016). Dwan was heiress to a fortune generated by shares of Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing (3M), which made her widely independent of sales. With the exception of 1969, the gallerist known for granting a large degree of freedom to the artists she represented, organized yearly solo exhibitions with LeWitt between 1966 and 1971. The artist introduced the gallerist to Robert Smithson, whom Dwan accompanied on her travels since the late 1960s. She became one of Smithson’s most important sponsors and also presented material related to his land art work *Spiral Jetty* in Utah, executed in April 1970.
- 27 Ibid. However, in the first years, the prices fluctuated depending on the context: In 1970, Max Protetch offered a *Wall Drawing* for \$1,200 in his young gallery in Washington (founded in 1969). Interview by the author with Max Protetch in Santa Fe, New Mexico on 15 October 2015. Among Protetch’s early collectors of LeWitt drawings and other instructions were Gilbert and Lila Silverman from Detroit, who assembled the world’s largest Fluxus collection (over 4,000 works in various mediums), donated to the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2008.
- 28 John S. Weber, Sol LeWitt: The Idea, The Wall Drawing, And Public Space, in Garry Garrels, ed., *Sol LeWitt: A Retrospective* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2000), 89-99, 96.

drawing purchases not a commodity, but a certificate and a set of directions allowing her/him to call an idea into being in order to experience it.”²⁹ This “uncoupling of exchange value from display potential”³⁰ coincided with extensive marketing in institutional circles and even included theft protection: firstly, because the work was not executed *in front of* the wall, but directly *on* it, and secondly, because its instructions did not have to be executed and were neither time-bound nor stationary.

Their institutional adaptability and openness are a distinguishing feature of LeWitt’s *Wall Drawings*. His serial work points to the fact that the artist did not subordinate his output to any hierarchical principle, a characteristic noted by Dan Graham, co-founder of the New York-based John Daniels Gallery with David Herbert, who had organized LeWitt’s first solo exhibition in the spring of 1965. Richard Bellamy’s progressive Green Gallery had begun to show the works of artists like Donald Judd, Robert Morris and Dan Flavin about a year before, and closed in 1965. Likewise, the John Daniels Gallery exhibited largely unknown artists like Flavin and Jo Baer, and even planned an exhibition with Robert Smithson, but also had to close after one season due to insufficient funding.³¹

In the years before his accidental death in July 1973, Smithson increasingly confronted the art industry. He took issue with the market-related implications of Conceptual art, which he accused of fetishizing ideas, “by isolating them from their material surroundings and thereby capitulating to and extending the traditional ideological function of art for the bourgeoisie: it further denied or obscured the role of the art object in the marketplace and hence further divorced art from life.”³²

The Administration of Distribution

In the context of the Art Workers Coalition (AWC), whose activities LeWitt supported, Conceptual artists demanded the highest possible artistic freedom and autonomy, especially with regard to art institutions.³³ In 1968, Smithson argued in a similar vein: “The mental process of the artist which takes place in time is disowned, so that a commodity

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid, 97.

31 See Dan Graham, *My Works for Magazine Pages: “A History of Conceptual Art,”* in Brian Wallis, ed., *Dan Graham. Rock My Religion: Writings and Art Projects, 1965-1990* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), xviii-xx, xviii.

32 Blake Stimson, *Conceptual Work and Conceptual Waste*, in Michael Corris, ed., *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 282-304, 284. Stimson elaborates: “Smithson argued, Conceptual art did naively serve the business needs of galleries and museums and collectors in the wake of the postwar boom in the art market.” See Robert Smithson, *Production for Production’s Sake* (1972), in Jack Flam, ed., *Robert Smithson. The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 378.

33 See Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). The Art Workers Coalition (1969-1971) brought together numerous artists and intellectuals demanding improvements of exhibition and distribution conditions.

value can be maintained by a system independent of the artist.”³⁴ This opposition is also apparent in a text from 1972, a year before the much debated auction of the collection of Robert and Ethel Scull at Parke Bernet first publicly highlighted contemporary art as a lucrative investment opportunity: “The artist sits in his solitude, knocks out his paintings, assembles them, then waits for someone to confer the value, some external source. The artist isn’t in control of his value. And that’s the way it operates.”³⁵ Despite Smithson’s criticism it cannot be ignored that industrial support was a necessary basis of his work. Caroline Jones has indicated that sponsors and supporters as enablers of land art were a firm part of the system under attack. In the case of Michael Heizer this also included Scull, who was in contact with Dwan. The Texas-based family de Menil wielded enormous influence with a fortune from the oil business. As Jones states: “There is nothing pernicious about such creative philanthropy – but one cannot position the works it supports as necessarily or intrinsically critical of the ‘system’.”³⁶ In his *Wall Drawings*, however, LeWitt operated within a system that ambiguously transcended institutional control, while artists like Smithson ultimately depended on patronage.

The art historian Benjamin Buchloh observed that the objectivity, absolute neutrality and administrative poignancy that Conceptual art aspired to – in 1967, LeWitt postulated “he would want [the conceptual artist’s work] to become emotionally dry”³⁷ – showed a strong connection to a bureaucratic structure characterized by rules, classifications, and a controlled distribution of information. Buchloh perceived the core of all conceptual practices as “rigorous and relentless order of the vernacular of administration [miming] the operating logic of late capitalism.”³⁸ LeWitt was primarily concerned with the potential of a creative community, albeit framed and guided by the artist. In 1984, he stated: “Ideas cannot be owned. They belong to whoever understands them.”³⁹ On 17 May 2018, LeWitt’s *Wall Drawing #533*, executed in 1987, was sold at Sotheby’s Contemporary Art Day Sale in New York for \$287,500.

34 Robert Smithson, *A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects*, in *Artforum* (September 1968), reprint in Jack Flam, ed., *Robert Smithson*, 1996, 100-113, 111.

35 Conversation with Robert Smithson (22 April 1972), Edited by Bruce Kurtz, in Jack Flam, ed., *Robert Smithson*, 1996, 262-269, 262. Regarding Scull, see: Edward Jeffrey Vaughn, *America’s Pop Collector: Robert C. Scull. Contemporary Art at Auction*, Dissertation (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies).

36 Caroline A. Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 352.

37 Sol LeWitt, *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, 1967.

38 Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions*, in *October*, vol. 55 (Winter 1990), 105-143, 142/143. Buchloh also emphasizes that, “both Pop and Minimal Art had continuously emphasized the universal presence of industrial means of production, or, to put it differently, they had emphasized that the aesthetic of the studio had been irreversibly replaced by an aesthetic of production and consumption.” (125) See also the exhibition *Objects and Logotypes: Relationships Between Minimal Art and Corporate Design* which Buzz Spector devised for the Renaissance Society of Chicago (on view from 20 January until 23 February 1980).

39 Andrea Miller-Keller, Excerpts from a Correspondence, 1981-1983, in Susanna Singer et al., *Sol LeWitt Wall Drawings 1968-1984* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1984), 18-25, 21.

The artist's "operational logic" – even though it was remembered by a contemporary as not being "as calculated as it might seem"⁴⁰ – nevertheless appears symptomatic for a tumultuous time in advanced capitalism, in which scepticism towards the possibility of an effective avant-garde became increasingly apparent in Europe, where Conceptual art had first been supported and received in the 1960s. In response to a questionnaire on the possibilities of art as anti-establishment in the United States at the time, the Italian magazine *Metro* published pragmatic remarks by LeWitt in June 1968: "An artist [...] can do nothing except to be an artist [...] It would be better to live on a small island."⁴¹ These point to an assertion Andreas Huyssen made in view of the "American postmodernist avant-garde," outlined as "not only the endgame of avant-gardism," but also as marking the "decline of the avant-garde as a genuinely critical and adversary culture."⁴² LeWitt and the historical avant-garde had in common that they challenged solidified aesthetic ideals and broke open the autonomous art object by subordinating an artwork's execution – frequently handed over to others – to its conceptualization, nonetheless without attempting to destroy the very institution of art.⁴³ The artist could not escape what Huyssen assessed with regard to the reception of the historical avant-garde in the 1970s: that the "counter-measures [it] proposed to break the grip of bourgeois institutionalized culture [were] no longer effective."⁴⁴ LeWitt ultimately operated within an affirmative culture of postmodernism, in which "any theory, even if it is issued as a critique of the culture industry, will end up only as a form of promotion for that very industry."⁴⁵

Martin Hartung is a doctoral fellow at the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (gta) at ETH Zurich, where he researches the history of architectural projects in the art market.

40 Interview by the author with Max Protetch in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on 22 April 2017.

41 Anna Nosei Weber; Otto Hahn, *La Sfida del Sistema. Inquiry on the Artistic Situation in the U.S.A. and in France*, in Adachiara Zevi, ed., *Sol LeWitt, Critical Texts* (Rome: AEIUO, 1994), 84-85 (original: *Metro*, no. 14 (June 1968)). Here, LeWitt writes: "The art of our time is not submerged, not underground, not unrecognized – but is there. So there is no need for any kind of idea of avant-garde." (83)

42 Andreas Huyssen, *The Search for Tradition: Avant-Garde and Postmodernism in the 1970s*, in *New German Critique*, No. 22, Special Issue on Modernism (Winter, 1981), 23-40, 34.

43 See Peter Bürger; Bettina Brandt; Daniel Purdy, *Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of "Theory of the Avant-Garde"*, in *New Literary History*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Autumn 2010), 695-715.

44 Huyssen, 1981, 36. In his attempt to show how the project of the avant-garde continued after the Second World War, Hal Foster (through critical engagement with the influential theory of Peter Bürger (1974; first published in English in 1984)) emphasized a "deconstructive testing" of the institution of art by the neo-avant-garde, rather than focusing on "the so-called failure of both historical and first neo-avant-gardes to destroy [it]." (Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 1996), 25.) To a first neo-avant-garde Foster counts Robert Rauschenberg, Allan Kaprow, Jasper Johns, Arman, the Nouveaux Réalistes. The second is comprised of members associated to Minimal and Conceptual art.

45 Rosalind Krauss, "A Voyage on the North Sea". *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 33. The quote is related to a statement Marcel Broodthaers made in the magazine *Interfunktionen* in the autumn of 1974.