

SOL LEWITT

September, 12 – October, 31, 2015

“Every step around [LeWitt’s] work brings unexpected intersections with infinity.”

Robert Smithson

Sol LeWitt (1928 - 2007) was something of a late starter as an artist. He had studied art in the 1940s and afterward continued privately painting and drawing while working as a graphic designer in New York City, but it was not until well into the 1960’s, when LeWitt was in his mid-30’s, that he began producing and exhibiting a significant body of work. Once he found his artistic stride, however, LeWitt quickly developed into an astonishingly prolific artist, producing thousands of works over the course of the next four decades, and in the process becoming one of the most influential artists in the international vanguard of his time and a major figure even today.

What might be considered LeWitt’s earliest ‘mature’ works were sculptures in a Minimalist visual idiom: isolated forms with smooth, hard finishes. LeWitt, however, soon discerned the dead-end toward which Minimalism’s insistent perfectionism was leading it; the pristine simplicity of a white cube affixed to a white wall could be made neither more pristine nor more simple. In response, LeWitt -- inspired in great measure by the 19th century photographer Eadweard Muybridge and his studies of human and animal locomotion -- began searching for “a means of getting away from formalism: to get away from the idea of form as an end and rather to use it as a means.” Not just shape, and not just a single shape, but rather “a language and a narrative of shapes” that would be determined by a pre-established system or ‘concept’ -- hence the term ‘Conceptual Art’, the movement which LeWitt, in both his work and his writings, did so much to develop.

In order to be able to activate and utilize “form” as a “means,” LeWitt elected to work with basic shapes, such as cubes (whether solid, open or skeletal) and lines, that might function as modules, elements that are at once independent and interdependent, a visual lexicon always subject to LeWitt’s artistic syntax and grammar. By the same token, LeWitt’s ‘concepts’ were generally quite simple (“ludicrously simple,” in LeWitt’s own estimation), consisting, for instance, of simple numeric progressions or sequences of color combinations. The visible, tangible, results, however -- the delicate lattices, the muscular installations, the mind-boggling and genre-breaching series of permutations -- were not simple at all, but rather beautifully complex and complexly beautiful, delights for both the intellect and the eye, often achieving what Smithson referred to as “intersections with infinity”.

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Throughout his career, drawing was central to LeWitt's practice, a daily and even obsessive activity that ranged from his delicate and highly personal works on paper to the numerous 'wall drawings' for which he became so well-known. Basic to LeWitt's drawing methodology is his "Lines in Four Directions" -- a sort of template or tool-kit with which to develop far-reaching drawing systems, and a motif which LeWitt would employ again and again in different media, formats and scales throughout his career. LeWitt's drawing practice also extended to "gouaches" -- painted works of gouache on paper, of a wide chromatic range and variety of shapes. LeWitt only began to produce such works in 1986, upon his return to the USA after residing in Italy for an extended period. Nonetheless, he would go on to create thousands of gouaches during the rest of his life. Taken together, these works constitute a major (and as yet not sufficiently examined) part of his overall body of work. Their formal concerns simultaneously inform and are informed by his work in other media (especially but not exclusively his wall-drawings), serving as a kind of time-line for his artistic concerns during this long and fruitful period of his career. They are among his most personal creations, produced while working alone each morning in his studio in rural Chester, Connecticut, even while dozens of his 'assistants' were executing his celebrated wall drawings in venues around the world. They range from meditative to bold, enigmatic to joyous, hypnotic to entrancing. They too, in their own way, offer their own "unexpected intersections with infinity."

George Stolz

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