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**CHAINS WRAPPED AROUND ONE THING & ANOTHER  
BROKEN ONE BY ONE WITH THE PASSAGE OF TIME**

**NEW WORK SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**

**(LAWRENCE  
WEINER)**

Born in the Bronx, New York, in 1942 and educated there, Lawrence Weiner made what he considers his first work as a mature artist in Mill Valley, California, in 1960. This was a series of explosions set off in the soil, together with the resultant craters, which would seem to link Weiner with the earthworks that were made by other artists over the next decade. He soon returned to New York, however, where for several years he produced only paintings. These were quite different from most work in that medium because he deliberately and repeatedly made them as banal and generic as possible, basing the composition on the image of a television test pattern. By 1966, Weiner was making paintings without making decisions, producing the work in front of an audience whose instructions he solicited as to size, color, and paint application.

## CHAINS WRAPPED AROUND

Early in 1969 he clarified the basis of his art in an often-quoted declaration of intent, which set forth principles to which he has adhered ever since:

1. THE ARTIST MAY CONSTRUCT THE WORK
2. THE WORK MAY BE FABRICATED
3. THE WORK 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

The work Weiner produced at this time took the form of words, which described activities that could be associated with either painting or sculpture, for example, ONE QUART EXTERIOR GREEN ENAMEL THROWN ON A BRICK WALL, or A 2" WIDE 1" DEEP TRENCH CUT ACROSS A STANDARD ONE CAR DRIVEWAY. Some of them, such as A FIELD CRATERED BY STRUCTURED SIMULTANEOUS TNT EXPLOSIONS, related to work Weiner had done in the past, but, as he said in the third part of his statement, he never felt compelled actually to carry out the activities described by his words. It was this dictum, "the piece need not be built," that constituted the essential dif-

ference between Weiner's work and what had come before it. By expressing his work exclusively in words, Weiner had explicitly redefined art, at least in his own practice, so that it was not limited to a particular object made by an artist or according to his instructions but was instead a structure of relations dependent upon the receiver or observer. In doing so, Weiner was one of the inventors of what has since been termed Conceptual Art.

When we first encounter a work by Lawrence Weiner, for example painted as it is here on the gallery walls, a certain confusion inevitably ensues because we have never before come across anything quite like it. Perhaps, we think, it's poetry, but that turns out not to be the case because the work is both too big and too small. In its painted form on the wall it is much too large in scale to conceivably be a poem, yet it is

## ONE THING & ANOTHER

too brief to be even the shortest lyric. It is unlike poetry as well in that it lacks poetic diction—its language is resolutely ordinary. Perhaps, we think, it is a sign; yet there is no imperative, no instruction, and it points the way toward no goal we are aware of seeking, no luggage, no exit. Maybe, then, it's a message, but from whom? A description, then, but to what end, since it lacks specifics? In the present work Weiner declines to tell us what kind of chains are involved, how big they are, what they are made of, and, most significantly, what they are attached to. And how, exactly, does time pass? How long does it go on? we wonder as we stand in the museum. At about this point, we decide that since it is in a museum it must be art, and we are also forced to the perhaps reluctant conclusion that even if we don't know what it is, we do understand exactly what it says. Indeed, Weiner's work is perhaps unique in contemporary art in that it is impossible *not* to understand it.

Embodied as they are in language, Weiner's works have no particular physical form. They have appeared in books, on posters, typewritten on sheets of paper, as recordings, and, in recent years, as words painted directly on a wall. Dependent on the mind of the observer for its completion, Weiner's art has always derived part of its meaning from the context in which it is seen. Although complete in itself as a particular statement or description, the meaning of the work is never-

theless supplemented by the circumstances in which it is received. MORTAR STONE AND SUCH/SET AS A MEANS OF BLOCKING/THE INEVITABLE SLIDE OF/THE LAND BACK INTO THE SEA is currently installed on a steep hill over the Pacific Ocean just south of Los Angeles. The work is painted in large yellow letters at the scale of a billboard on the back of a large garage structure at the top of an enclosed garden leading to an art collector's house and, far below it, the ocean. Entering the space through a small gate, we are at first aware of Weiner's work almost subliminally, as a slight disturbance in our peripheral vision. But, about halfway down the steep slope, it becomes apparent that something is there, and, turning, we encounter a more or less exact description of our own situation and that of the house below and the people who live in it. The work itself, which was

## BROKEN ONE BY ONE

created without any particular location in mind, might in another context be read as an illustration of the general tendency of matter to resume a state of entropy. Here it takes on sharply particular meanings. As a visitor going down the steep slope, we see in a new way the precarious beauty of a particular kind of California life, combined perhaps with a slight apprehension about our own safety in the event of an earthquake. The work's owners, on the other hand, typically experience it in the morning, as they leave their house and ascend the hill. For them the encounter with its yellow letters gleaming in the sunlight must provoke a rather different sense of danger past, of a sort of daily triumph over the risks of life.

Because Weiner's work exists, finally, in our minds, it has an immediacy and purity, what he once termed a "real reality," that previous works of art never had. A recent piece, which like MORTAR STONE AND SUCH was conceived without any idea where it might end up, is currently painted on the top of a concrete tower in Vienna that was erected in World War II as an emplacement for anti-aircraft guns. Because of the history of its supporting structure, SMASHED TO PIECES/(IN THE STILL OF THE NIGHT) inevitably recalls the destruction of war, bombs falling and planes exploding in the air. Since the tower was erected by the National Socialist government that ruled Austria during the Second World War, one can hardly avoid other

associations as well, such as the broken glass of *Kristallnacht*, the infamous night in November of 1939 when Hitler's supporters destroyed property all over Germany that belonged to Jews.

The work in the current exhibition, CHAINS WRAPPED AROUND ONE THING & ANOTHER/BROKEN ONE BY ONE WITH THE PASSAGE OF TIME/(RUSTED FREE)/(BUSTED OPEN)/(PULLED APART)/(MELTED LOOSE) suggests an entirely different set of possibilities, in this case those of freedom rather than destruction. The words imply various ways that freedom can be gained, the sometimes active, sometimes protracted process that it might entail, and the suggestion that it is an inevitable end. Depending on what happens in the mind of an observer, the work can be taken to refer to slavery or to political or personal freedom, but it can also evoke purely physical pro-

## WITH THE PASSAGE OF TIME

cesses as well. On first encountering it, the present writer thought of the chains that ancient city-states sometimes strung across their harbors to prevent entry by enemy fleets, and the accompanying image was of a Phoenician city in the Mediterranean. A visitor to the museum from Eastern Europe, on the other hand, might see Weiner's work from an entirely different historical perspective, as would a South African.

The freedom from restrictions, the bursting of chains that is implied by this work, can be seen as typical of Weiner's art as a whole and the process by which he—and we—create it. By liberating himself and us from the limitations of the particular art object, Weiner has made a real and important advance in the expressive possibilities of art. His work allows us to experience a multiplicity of meanings, and even though he sets us strongly in a certain direction he gives us freedom to think, to feel, and to see for ourselves. It is in fact the freedom his work gives us, together with the gentle insistence that we use it, that is the most extraordinary characteristic of his art.

*John Caldwell*

Curator of Painting and Sculpture

## CHECKLIST

*Chains wrapped around one thing and another...*, 1991

site-specific hand-lettering on walls of North and South Octagonal galleries

*The artist may construct the work...*, 1969

site-specific hand-lettering on wall of Lounge Gallery

Untitled [study for South Octagonal Gallery installation], 1992

mixed media on paper  
22 3/4 x 30 5/8 in. (57.8 x 77.8 cm)

Untitled [study for South Octagonal Gallery installation], 1992

mixed media on paper  
36 1/8 x 37 in. (91.8 x 94 cm)

*Lawrence Weiner*

Born in the Bronx, New York, 1942

Lives and works in New York City

## SELECTED INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

1960

*Cratering Piece*, Mill Valley, California

1964

Seth Siegelau, New York (also 1965, 1968)

1969

Konrad Fischer Galerie, Düsseldorf (also 1970, 1972, 1975, 1977, 1981, 1984, 1985, 1989)

Wide White Space Gallery, Antwerp, Belgium (also 1972, 1973, 1977)

Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland

The Kitchen, New York (also 1977)

1977

Laguna Gloria Museum, Austin, Texas

1978

Renaissance Society, University of Chicago

1980

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago  
Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London (also 1986, 1988, 1989)

1981

P.S. 1, The Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Long Island City, New York

1983

Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland

CAPC/Musée d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1966

25, Seth Siegelau Gallery, New York

1968

*Xerox Book*, Seth Siegelau Gallery, New York

1969

*When Attitudes Become Form*, Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland; Institute of Contemporary Arts, London

557,087, Seattle Museum of Art

January 5-31, 1969; March; July -

August - September [3 exhibitions], Seth

# (RUSTED FREE)

Untitled [study for North Octagonal Gallery installation], 1992

mixed media on paper  
22 3/4 x 30 7/8 in. (57.8 x 78.4 cm)

Untitled [study for North Octagonal Gallery installation], 1992

mixed media on paper  
36 1/16 x 34 1/2 in. (91.6 x 87.6 cm)

Untitled [study for Lounge Gallery installation], 1992

mixed media on paper  
18 7/8 x 23 7/8 in. (47.9 x 60.6 cm)

Untitled [study for exhibition brochure cover], 1992

mixed media on paper  
18 7/8 x 23 7/8 in. (47.9 x 60.6 cm)

Untitled [study for exhibition brochure], 1992

mixed media on paper  
23 1/4 x 31 in. (59.1 x 78.7 cm)

Untitled [study for exhibition brochure], 1992

mixed media on paper  
23 1/4 x 31 in. (59.1 x 78.7 cm)

*All works are courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.*

Galleria Sperone, Turin, Italy (also 1970, 1972, 1973, 1975)  
Art & Project Gallery, Amsterdam (also 1970, 1973, 1979, 1980, 1984, 1985, 1991)

Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, Halifax (also 1971, 1979, 1983, 1986)

1970

Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris (also 1971, 1972, 1974, 1977)

1971

Leo Castelli Gallery, New York (also 1972, 1973, 1974, 1976, 1979, 1981, 1986, 1991)

1972

California Institute of the Arts, Valencia  
Westfälischer Kunstverein, Münster, Germany

1973

Städtisches Museum, Mönchengladbach, Germany  
Kabinett für Aktuelle Kunst, Bremerhaven, Germany (also 1975, 1978, 1981)

1976

Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands (also 1979, 1980)  
Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (also 1991)

# (BUSTED OPEN)

1984

Espace Lyonnais d'Art Contemporain, Lyon, France

1985

ARC/Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris

1986

Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh  
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York (also 1989, 1990)

1987

The Arts Club of Chicago

1988

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam  
Krefelder Kunstmuseum, Museum Haus Esters, Krefeld, Germany

1989

Portikus, Frankfurt, Germany

1990

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.  
Stuart Regen Gallery, Los Angeles (also 1991)

Le Nouveau Musée, Villeurbanne, France

1991

DIA Center for the Arts, New York;

Siegelau Gallery, New York  
*Op Losse Schroeven: situaties en crypto-structuren*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Folkwang Museum, Essen, Germany

1970

*Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects*, New York Cultural Center, New York  
*Information*, Museum of Modern Art, New York  
*Software*, The Jewish Museum, New York

1971

*Sixth Guggenheim International Exhibition*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York  
*Pier 18*, Museum of Modern Art, New York

1972

*Dokumenta 5*, Kassel, Germany  
*Biennale di Venezia*, Videogalerie Schum, Italian Pavilion, Venice  
*Concept Kunst*, Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland

1974

*Idea and Image in Recent Art*, Art Institute of Chicago

1976

*Drawing Now*, Museum of Modern Art,

New York  
*Rooms*, P.S. 1, The Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Long Island City, New York  
*American Art in Europe*, Nationalgalerie, Berlin

1977  
*Bookworks*, Museum of Modern Art, New York  
*A View of a Decade*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago  
*The Record as Artwork*, Fort Worth Art Museum, Texas  
*Radical Attitudes to the Gallery*, Art Net, London

1978  
*About the Strange Nature of Money*,

1982  
*Dokumenta 7*, Kassel, Germany  
*Live to Air* (artists' soundworks), Tate Gallery, London  
*Early Work: Lynda Benglis, Joan Brown, Luis Jimenez, Gary Stephan, Lawrence Weiner*, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York

1983  
*In Other Words: Artists' Use of Language, Part 2*, Franklin Furnace, New York  
*When Words Become Works*, Minneapolis College of Art and Design  
*The First Show*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

1984  
*Biennale di Venezia*, "C'era una volta"

## (PULLED APART)

Städtisches Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf; Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands; Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels  
*INK*, Halle für Internationale Neue Kunst, Zurich; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humelback, Denmark

1979  
*The New American Filmmakers Series*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York  
*Oeuvres Contemporaines des Collections Nationales: Accrochage 3*, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

1980  
*Maria Nordman, Lawrence Weiner, Gerhard Merz*, Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands  
*Sammlung Panza*, Städtisches Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf  
*Artists' Books*, Museum of Modern Art, New York

1981  
*No Title: The Collection of Sol LeWitt*, Wesleyan University Art Gallery and the Davison Art Center, Middletown, Connecticut

(theatrical production with the Zattera di Babele ensemble), Venice

1986  
*About Place*, The Institute for Contemporary Art, P.S. 1 Museum, Long Island City, New York  
*TV Generations*, LACE, Los Angeles

1987  
*Art and Language*, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York  
*Snow, Weiner, Nannucci*, Art Metropole, Toronto; toured Canada  
*Comic Iconoclasm*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London

1988  
*Art Conceptuel I*, CAPC/Musée d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux  
*Modes of Address: Language in Art Since 1960*, The Whitney Museum of American Art, Downtown at Federal Reserve Plaza, New York

1989  
*Les Magiciens de la Terre*, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris  
*Conceptual Art: Une Perspective*, ARC/Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris

1990  
*Rhetorical Image*, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York  
*Inquiries: Language in Art*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

1991  
*Word as Image: American Art 1960-1990*, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston  
*Beyond the Frame: American Art 1960-1990*, Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo

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#### LAWRENCE WEINER: NEW WORK

February 20 - April 19, 1992

*Lawrence Weiner: New Work* is generously supported by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's Collectors Forum. • The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is a privately funded, member-supported museum receiving major support from Grants for the Arts of the San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund and the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency.

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94102-4582



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