

LAWRENCE WEINER became one of the most influential artists of the 20th century because he had the strength to retain an offside position. In order to understand how he developed his extraordinary vision of art it is indispensable to elucidate an incident that occurred in April 1968, when Weiner was twenty-six years old. Although he had not undergone the formal training of an art-school, he began to exhibit paintings as early as 1964 when he showed a number of boldly simplified pictures of television test images that he called *propeller paintings* at Seth Siegelau's gallery on 56th Street in Manhattan. Because he was acquainted with some of the pioneers of minimalism, he was, in the spring of 1968, invited to participate in an exhibition at *Windham College* in Putney, a remote town in Vermont, together with Carl Andre and Robert Barry. The invitation came from a professor of sculpture with the caveat that there were almost no financial resources.

Weiner decided to create an outdoor installation. On a patch of lawn he drove thirty-four wooden stakes into the ground, each at a distance of one foot, so that they formed a rectangular grid of seven by ten feet. Cords of twine were then tacked to the stakes that lay on the ground like a net. The deadpan title of the work simply itemized the materials used: *Staples, Stakes, Twine, Turf*. The strict geometrical structure of the work was somewhat undone because Weiner detached two of the one by one foot squares at one of the corners of the large rectangle. He had already experimented with such a removal in some of his paintings in order to emphasize the conventional character of their shape.

On April 30th, the day of the opening, Weiner discovered that students had damaged his work and to some extent even demolished it. They had been upset because they could no longer use the lawn for their ball games. It would have been understandable to deal with this unexpected form of audience participation by simply condemning it as coarse vandalism. Weiner, however, did not take this easy way out. He rather tried to understand the reasons that had led the students to their blatant dismissal of his work. In this way he eventually developed a new strategy of art that he subsequently could rely on for the rest of his life.

In his interpretation of the Windham incident, Weiner initially reverted to the categories of *conception* and *realization*. Concerning the conception of his work, it was obvious that he had developed a precise plan and even made a sketch, so that there was no doubt about the appearance of the finished work. Concerning the realization, it was equally clear that it had proceeded

without any problems. As a consequence it is even now, more than fifty years later, still possible to get an accurate impression of Weiner's work by means of descriptions and photographs, although it has long ago ceased to exist.

From this it could be concluded that the conception of a work is much more important than its realization. This is, of course, the traditional view that already applied to the works of the old masters. When a painter like Raphael received a commission to paint an altarpiece, it was first of all determined (and usually also recorded in contracts) what should be shown on it. So, the problem that Weiner had to deal with was an old one; his solution, however, was new. He presented it nine months after his sojourn in Vermont in a very short, programmatic text published in the catalog of a group exhibition in New York. There the text was printed on an otherwise blank page without a title, but meanwhile it is usually referred to as his *Statement of Intent*.

The text consists of two parts that are subtly differentiated by the typographic layout. The first half is composed of three sentences printed on three numbered lines, each with a dot after the number, but no dot at the end of the sentence.

1. *The artist may construct the piece*
2. *The piece may be fabricated*
3. *The piece need not be built*

These three options are all well known from the art of the past. The first possibility – that a piece be executed by the artist without co-workers – is generally considered to be the most appropriate. The second possibility – that the piece be fabricated by other persons – is not so highly esteemed although it is well known that painters like Raphael had workshops with apprentices and assistants who were more or less involved in the production of their works. If the same occurs today, however, it is not so readily acknowledged. While some artists (such as Cindy Sherman and Gerhard Richter) still produce their work entirely on their own, many others have a staff of employees and some even have their works occasionally (like Martin Kippenberger) or regularly (like Jeff Koons) produced entirely by others. The third option – that the piece not be realized at all – seems either trivial or a bit odd, but it was also already taken in account by traditional theories of art. In Lessing's *Emilia Galotti*, for instance, the question is raised whether Raphael would not still have been "*the greatest painterly genius if he had unfortunately been born without hands*".

So far Weiner's observation that a work of art can either be realized by the artist or by somebody else or not at all, still remains within the conceptual framework of traditional art theory. But then a change occurs. Weiner adds a fourth and final sentence that has no number at the beginning, indicating that this is a comment on the situation described above. It reads like this: "*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.*"

Here it is first asserted that all three possibilities mentioned are equivalent and none is incompatible with the intentions of the artist. And at this point Weiner switches from description to an overt act of prescription. The task to choose one of the three options is delegated to a figure who is introduced under the name of *the receiver*.

Who is this *receiver* and what might he or she receive? The choice of words suggests that he or she receives a message, a piece of information, or perhaps a suggestion that allows him or her to decide about the work of art that is at stake. This decision, to be sure, does not concern the interpretation of work, but rather the question whether it has a right to exist or not.

Artists might normally conclude that they must realize their conceptions simply because, by definition, it is art that they produce. Thus Weiner himself had mindlessly and selfishly proceeded from the assumption that he had a license to do whatever he wanted at *Windham College*. But then it turned out that his well-meant installation had been perceived as the hostile intrusion of an arrogant New York artist who ruthlessly occupied and confiscated common property in the name of his obscure ambition. Weiner must have been deeply afflicted by the insight that his work might have had harmful effects on others whose needs had not been taken into account. Something like this should not happen again.

As a consequence, Weiner no longer tried to understand the situation in terms of conception and realization. These categories only work within an immanent view of the artwork. Required was a broader perspective that would place the artwork not only in relation to the artist who invented it. The final decision had to be granted to the receivers. The artist had no right to force them to accept his work. Art, just like other goods, cannot be understood if it is only seen under the aspect of its production, it must also be considered in relation to its consumption. On the most general level

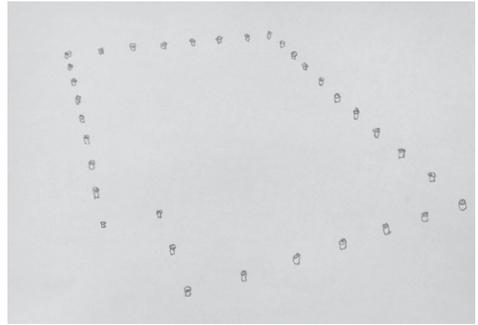


fig. 5

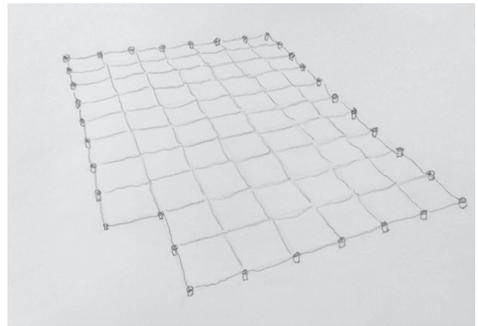


fig. 6

one could, thus, say that decisions about art are part of the task of allocating goods and needs or, as far as commodities are concerned, the problem of adjusting supply and demand. The artworld, however, is not only governed by the mechanisms of the market, but to a large extent also by power. This seems to be the reason why Weiner preferred a theoretical model based on an interplay of proposals and assessments.

The artist, in Weiner's opinion, has the right – maybe even the duty – to come up with proposals to produce something, but the decision about the actual production cannot be made by the artist but only by those who *receive* his proposal. These receivers are not only members of the artworld. Artworks appeal to the public in general, and since a public never consists of a homogeneous mass, the decision about art lies with each receptive individual who feels him- or herself to be addressed by it.

Weiner's respect for the public goes even further. The public is not only invited to judge art—it is also invited to create art. Just like Beuys, Weiner is convinced that everybody can be an artist. This does, of course, not mean that everyone is able to paint a Madonna with

the same virtuosity as Raphael. Everyone is, however, able to fabricate a *piece* like Weiner's installation in Vermont. It is pretty safe to assume that not only an artist, but also countless other people would have been able to drive wooden stakes into the lawn. A special training or talent is not required. This is already indicated by the terms Weiner uses to describe the activities required to realize his work: *to construct, to fabricate and to build*. Nothing is said about painting, drawing and chiseling, and from this one can conclude that Weiner is speaking about creative interventions in a very broad sense.

Possible results of such interventions were described in a book that was published by Weiner in December 1968 shortly before his *Statement of Intent*. The book was printed in one thousand copies; it was sold for \$1.95, and it contained sixty-four unpaginated pages with only a few printed lines, in which the words were often unorthodoxly hyphenated from one line to the next.

The title of the book was *Statements*. This is surprising because it contains no statements at all. Every entry describes objects and their properties, but – with only one single exception – this never amounts to a complete sentence. A typical example is this: “*One piece of plywood secured to the floor or wall*”. Ten words contain the information that a sheet of plywood of unspecified size has been screwed or glued to some floor or wall in a place that remains unidentified. Time and space are not determined, and they do not change because nothing happens. The board of plywood was attached a long time ago; it is over and done with, and nobody knows whether anything will ever happen again. The description gives the impression of a situation that does not call for action, but rather for contemplation. The world is at rest, but that entails that all possibilities are still open so that one may very well wonder whether, as in the famous poem by Eichendorff, a song might still be sleeping in all the things so that the world could start to sing if we would only hit upon the magic word.

Weiner is unmistakably a hard-boiled romantic, but that does not entail that he always shows it. His language is laconic and void of enthusiasm. Yet the very dryness of his words is only meant to open up a space for those who read his texts. This can be seen, for example, in his description of the installation at Windham College (again taken from his *Statements*): “*A series of stakes set in the ground at regular intervals to form a rectangle, twine strung from stake to stake to demark a grid.*” That sounds precise, but in fact it

isn't, because not everything needed to construct the work is actually mentioned. We are not told how many pegs have to be inserted, nor do we learn how far they should be apart. Weiner's information is intentionally incomplete. This marks a fundamental difference from Sol LeWitt's notion of *conceptual art*, where everything is strictly specified in advance, even that which is not specified. It might very well be optional to draw the straight lines in one of his wall-drawings by hand or with a ruler, but if that is so, it must be confirmed by the instruction.

Weiner has always been more radical in his respect for the sovereignty of others. As early as 1970, in an addendum to his *Statement of Intent*, he declares that there are no right and no wrong realizations of his conceptions. That means that ultimately everything is possible, so that someone who does not like to put wooden stakes in a lawn or attach plywood to the wall might just as well bake a cherry pie.

There is one respect, however, in which Weiner was determined to keep an uncompromising attitude. When it comes to the typographical design of his texts, he does not allow anyone to interfere, and he would never delegate this task to anyone else. Weiner always publishes his texts in a sophisticated form that he has worked out himself, and the *receivers* of his messages receive them always in a highly elaborate and typographically advanced form that serves as a permanent reminder that everything that we do can be done in a careful and meticulous way.

This admonition would, of course, be of special relevance to those who would decide to follow Weiner's paradigm by creating objects according to a description he has given. A closer inspection, however, would certainly reveal that this has hardly ever happened. In the beginning the artist himself sometimes took his clue from his own descriptions by removing a piece of plaster from a wall or spraying paint on a surface, but this happened less and less. Thus, we may conclude that very little of what Weiner envisioned has actually been realized. This, however, cannot compromise his strategy in the slightest. The general aim of all of his proposals is the admonition to stay in close contact with the material world and to hold manual work in high esteem. This attitude usually does not lead to the creation of spectacular objects suited as merchandise for the art market. Weiner defends the dignity of ordinary activities such as screwing a sheet of plywood to the wall. Thus, it is hardly surprising that he had a particular sympathy for Piet Mondrian, who installed

little colored panels in his apartment on the *rue du Depart* near the Montparnasse train station in order to remind himself of the invisible connections of his room to the world outside. Mondrian never claimed that these panels were works of art. He simply used them to shape his own life.

Giving a shape to one's own life is, for Weiner as well, doubtlessly much more important than creating works of art. Therefore, all of his inventions can only be examples, and nobody can be urged to take notice of them. Each person is responsible for himself or herself, and whether someone is susceptible to Weiner's offerings simply depends on the kind of life he or she is leading.

It is well-known that Weiner often quoted Ludwig Wittgenstein's remark that "*an expression has meaning only in the stream of life*". In 1958, at the age of sixteen, Wiener had attended courses in literature and philosophy at *Hunter College* and it is easy to imagine that he must have been fascinated by the whole mode of thinking in Wittgenstein's late work, excerpts of which were for the first time posthumously published in 1953 under the title *Philosophical Investigations*. Here was a philosopher who, for example, found it interesting to think about the question of how to deal with a piece of paper inscribed with the words "*five red apples*". Very likely, Weiner also read Norman Malcolm's book *Ludwig Wittgenstein – A Memoir* in which the author emphasizes how important (and how typical) it was for Wittgenstein always to remember that an expression only has meaning in the stream of life. This, of course, was Wiener's conviction just as well and he described it as *absolutely anti-Duchamp*. Duchamp had to be accused of depriving all things of their authentic materiality by transforming them into mere bearers of arbitrary meaning. As pure signs they are irrevocably removed from our real life and we can no longer rely on them. Weiner pleads for the exact opposite. It is a nuisance for him that our environment is increasingly transformed into a shallow spectacle. In his opinion, we should better cherish the physicality of things and their concrete materiality. With this attitude, it is easy to end up in an offside position. But defending such a position might in the long run prove more valuable and meaningful than its opposite. We should therefore be grateful to Lawrence Weiner for his tireless insistence on the belief that everything that falls offside must find a place to rest.

KARLHEINZ LÜDEKING, Berlin, April 19, 2022

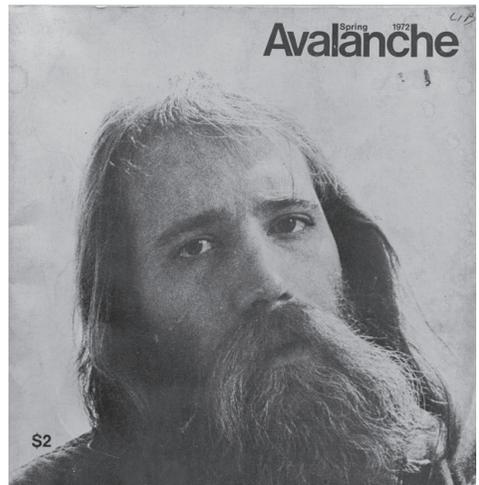


fig. 7

FIG. 5, 6 KARLHEINZ LÜDEKING, *Lawrence Weiner's Installation 1968*, Windham College, Sketches (2022).

FIG. 7 LAWRENCE WEINER, in: *Avalanche*, No. 4, (New York: Willoughby Sharp, Liza Bear, 1972).