ART
GALLERY
NSW

40 YEARS
KALDOR PUBLIC
ART PROJECTS

1977/1998
SOL
LEWITT

1977/1998
SOL
LEWITT

PROJECT 1977

Wall drawings

All two part combinations of arcs from four corners, arcs from four sides, straight, not-straight & broken lines in four directions.
March – July 1977
Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney

Lines to points on a grid. On yellow: Lines from the center of the wall. On red: Lines from four sides. On blue: Lines from four corners. On black: Lines from four sides, four corners and the center of the wall.
March – April 1977
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

PROJECT 1998

Wall pieces
30 July – 29 November 1998
Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

The system is the work of art; the visual work of art is the proof of the System. The visual aspect can't be understood without understanding the system. It isn't what it looks like but what it is that is of basic importance.

In my case, I used the elements of these simple forms – square, cube, line and color – to produce logical systems. Most of these systems were finite; that is, they were complete using all possible variations. This kept them simple.

Just as the development of earth art and installation art stemmed from the idea of taking art out of the galleries, the basis of my involvement with public art is a continuation of wall drawings.

Sol LeWitt, 'Sentences on conceptual art', in *0–9*, New York, January 1969

SOL LEWITT

All two part combinations of arcs from four corners, arcs from four sides, straight, not-straight & broken lines in four directions. Installed at the Art Gallery of NSW in 1977
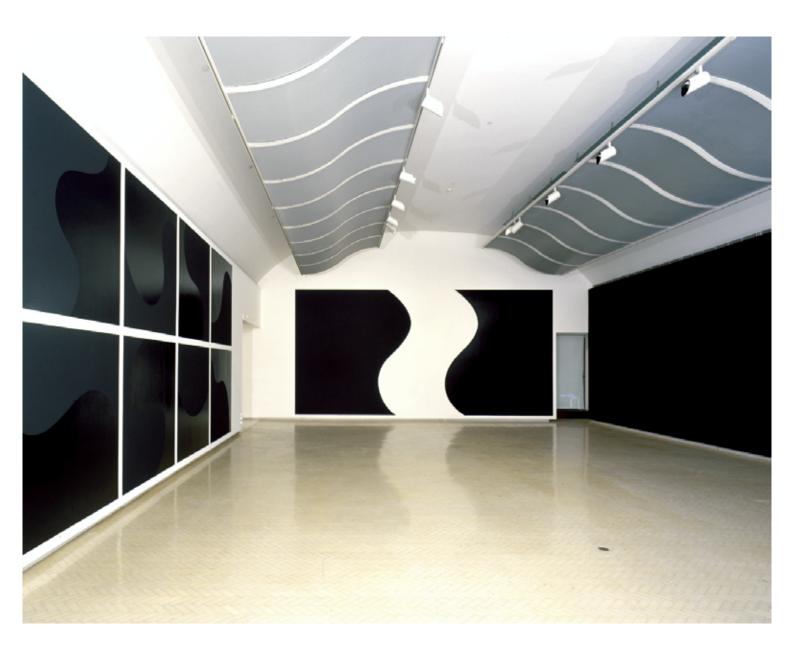
Photo: Kerry Dundas. Courtesy the Art Gallery of New South Wales © Sol LeWitt, licensed by Viscopy Australia

SOL LEWITT

from left:
Wall drawing #824 1997
Wall drawing #825 1997
Wall drawing #870 1997
installed at the Museum of Contemporary Art,
Sydney, in 1998

Photo: Paul Green. Courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art,
Sydney © Sol LeWitt, licensed by Viscopy Australia

1977/1998
SOL
LEWITT

INTRODUCTION

Conceptual artist, sculptor and painter Sol LeWitt was one of the most influential artists of his generation, with hundreds of solo shows worldwide since 1965. A minimalist (though he fought being called one), LeWitt strove to 'recreate art, to start from square one', reducing his art-making process to bare elements – lines, curves, geometric shapes, primary colours and so on. He was also a conceptualist who wrote: 'Ideas can be works of art; they are in a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be made physical.' His wall drawings – like those seen in Australia for LeWitt's Kaldor projects in 1977 and 1998 – illustrate this important shift in the creating, exhibiting and collecting of art. His method was to devise a set of instructions that could be carried out by others and executed at different places at different times. He pointed out that architects produced designs that builders made and were still regarded as artists. As often as not, he didn't even get to see the finished versions. Starting with what might seem a rather dry method, LeWitt's work dazzles: it is graceful, delicate, luminous, and nearly as weightless as thoughts.

ARTIST

Sol LeWitt
born 1928 in Hartford, Connecticut, USA
died 2007 in New York, USA

The son of immigrants from Russia, Sol LeWitt graduated with a bachelor of fine arts from Syracuse University. After serving in the Korean War, he moved to New York City and pursued his interest in design, doing paste-ups, mechanicals and photostats for a magazine before working as a draftsman for the architect IM Pei. In 1960, he took a job at the book-counter of the Museum of Modern Art, where his co-workers included fellow artists Robert Ryman, Dan Flavin and Robert Mangold.

Like many artists at the time – Jasper Johns and Roy Lichtenstein among them – LeWitt sought to escape the dominance of abstract expressionism, with its large-scale paintings and emotionally loaded brushwork. He began to explore a new method of making art that eliminated the arbitrary and subjective. In 1967, he published his renowned text 'Paragraphs on conceptual art' in the journal *Artforum*.

LeWitt had his first solo exhibition at the Daniels Gallery, New York in 1965 and participated in several significant group exhibitions of minimalist and conceptual art during the late 1960s and early '70s, including *Primary structures* at the Jewish Museum, New York in 1966 and *Live in your head: when attitudes become form* at the Kunsthalle Bern, in Switzerland in 1969.

From late '60s, he used black pencil lines to transect pencilled grids. In his *Wall structures*, graphite lines were placed directly onto the architecture, like frescos, exploring not only the space but also its contours. Later his wall drawings reintroduced illusionistic space, his colours became more subtle, and his

graphic technique more complex. Then he added human factors and the work eventually veered into unforeseen, chancy territory: for example, asking one person to draw an irregular line and for others to attempt to copy it.

By the early '70s LeWitt's art made frequent use of open, modular structures that originated from the cube. In the 1980s, after living in Spoleto, Italy for a few years, he began using great, close ranks of colour. His later works reconciled sculpture and design by the creation of ensembles conceived in situ, or with multicoloured wall drawings echoing his white wood pieces. His very last works were black drawings made from taping together two pencils and rhythmically rolling them through his fingers to create loopy, twisting effects against the backdrop of white walls.

A major display of LeWitt's wall drawings is currently on show until 2033 at the Museum of Modern Art Massachusetts.

LeWitt was also a founder of the artists organisation Printed Matter, which continues to produce artists books – an important part of LeWitt's own practice.

PROJECT: 1977

Sol LeWitt saw art as an object-producing, not an object-based, practice. He could write instructions for the production of work, conceived beforehand, and reapply it to the specific shape and size of the support. His 1977 wall drawing in Sydney for his Kaldor project – *All two part combinations of arcs from four corners, arcs from and four sides, straight, not-straight & broken lines in four directions.* – was conceived in 1972 but customised to the double height wall that joined the Art Gallery of NSW's old and new wings. With the help of assistants chosen from Alexander Mackie College, LeWitt completed the floor-to-ceiling project in March 1977.

At the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, in the same month, LeWitt installed *Lines to points on a grid. On yellow: Lines from the center of the wall. On red: Lines from four sides. On blue: Lines from four corners. On black: Lines from four sides, four corners and the center of the wall*.

Variations of each work were published in an artists book created for the project.

PROJECT: 1998

John Kaldor invited Sol LeWitt to make a large exhibition of acrylic wall drawings for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, which was displayed along with earlier works from John Kaldor's collection. LeWitt's work had grown bolder since his previous Kaldor project; it was more colourful and less cerebral and delicate. The wall pieces at the MCA were sponged on and layered in gloss and matt acrylic black and primary and secondary colours, like frescos. Sensual sine-waves undulated in ways that matched the architecture and lighting in the building. The elegant methodology and logic remained intact, but with an improvisational panache.

WORLD EVENTS: 1977

_ Elvis Presley found dead
_ Release of *Star Wars*, directed by George Lucas, launching the epic film franchise
_ Disco music becomes the rage
_ Train derailment in the Sydney suburb of Granville kills 83 people
_ Walter de Maria installs *The New York earth room* in New York and *The lightning field* in New Mexico
_ Exhibition of earth art opens at the Hirschorn Museum, Washington DC
_ The work of Australian landscape painter Fred Williams exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, New York
_ **6th Kaldor project:** Sol LeWitt's *Wall drawings* installed at the Art Gallery of NSW and Melbourne's National Gallery of Victoria
_ **7th Kaldor project:** Richard Long creates *A straight hundred mile walk in Australia* and *A line in Australia* near Broken Hill as well as *Bushwood circle* at Melbourne's National Gallery of Victoria and *Stone line* at the Art Gallery of NSW

WORLD EVENTS: 1998

_ US President Bill Clinton impeached on grounds of perjury
_ Anti-impotence drug Viagra on the market
_ Google search engine emerges
_ Colourful Apple iMac computer launched
_ Release of *The Truman Show* and *Pleasantville*, films that blur the boundary between the real and hyper-real
_ Fox Studios Australia opens in Sydney
_ Patrick Corporation sacks 2000 workers in Australia to try to improve efficiency on the waterfront
_ Nicolas Bourriaud develops the idea of relational art, where the audience is envisaged as a community
_ Biennale of Sydney, *Every day*, artistic director Jonathan Watkins
_ **11th Kaldor project:** Sol LeWitt's *Wall pieces* exhibition held at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

THEME
Conceptual art

All of the significant art of today stems from conceptual art. This includes the art of installation, political, feminist and socially directed art.

Sol LeWitt interviewed by Saul Ostrow, *BOMB*, no 85, fall 2003

Conceptual art emerged as an art movement in the 1960s. For the first time since the early 1920s (the time of the Russian LEF and European De Stijl), art theory came to the fore. Crucial to conceptual art was the reassessment of the work of Marcel Duchamp (especially the unassisted ready-made) and the recognition of the importance of language and a growing understanding of the way meaning emerges from a position in a system (via philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose *Philosophical investigations* was published posthumously in 1953). As Wittgenstein argued, when investigating meaning in language, one must 'look and see' the variety of uses to which a word is put.

For conceptual artists, art wasn't an end in itself but a way of making a statement about art. Artistic production became a way of 'doing philosophy', or at least for finding between art and philosophy a way to explore the epistemological basis of culture, ie the nature of knowledge, or how we know what we know.

When Duchamp put a urinal in an art gallery and called it *Fountain* 1914, he questioned the rules by which art was made and expanded its possibilities. If not the emotional and psychological source of the work, what is an artist? Traditionally something made by hand, a manual achievement, what do we mean by a work of art? What's the nature of the creative act? What's the situation of the artist in a world dominated by mass-produced goods?

The 'already-mades' caused an epistemological break with the past: the work was not about its meaning, it was about its function within a given context. Art history is still reeling from the pitiless matter-of-factness of non-art objects finding their way into the sanctified precincts of the museum.

A work by another conceptual artist, Joseph Kosuth, comprises a photographic enlargement of a dictionary definition of a chair, a photograph of a chair and a real chair. *One and three chairs* 1965 hints at Magritte's famous *The treachery of images (This is not a pipe)* 1929, with its underlying implication that this is only a representation of a pipe. As a consequence it does what all paradoxes do, it leaves you having to reconcile what seem like antithetical propositions. So emerged an art of ideas and barbed queries using art as a way to address how we read and produce meanings. Conceptual art was like algebra and calculus after centuries of counting eggs and measuring cloth.

COLLECTION CONNECTIONS

Relevant works in the Art Gallery of NSW collection
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection

• **Joseph Kosuth** (USA, b1945)
One and three tables 1965
wooden table, gelatin silver photograph, and photostat mounted on foamcore; 120 x 310 x 58 cm installed
Mervyn Horton Bequest Fund 1999 102.1999.a-c

In the series *One and three*, Kosuth poses the question, 'What do we mean by a specific word such as "table"?' He placed a pre-existing object in a gallery space next to a photograph of that object taken in situ, and a dictionary definition of the word used to describe, generically, that object. The viewer is led to compare the levels of accuracy in communicating meaning through both visual and verbal means. The dictionary definition is more accurate as a generic description of a table, whereas the

photograph is more accurate as a description of this specific table. Yet removed from its functional context and placed in a gallery, even the table itself is only a sign: a three-dimensional and generic 'example' of what might be meant by the word 'table'. Displayed as a triptych, the three signs for 'table' are all ultimately unsatisfactory as signifiers of the word if shown to an individual who had never before come across the notion of 'table'. By exposing the limitations of language in such seemingly simple and concrete words as 'chair', 'table' or 'broom', Kosuth questions the possibility of using any language, and specifically, the language of the visual arts, to convey the meaning of more abstract phenomena such as 'love', 'spirituality' or even the meaning of the word 'art' itself.

• **Ian Burn** (Australia; USA, b1939, d1993)
No object implies the existence of any other 2005
synthetic polymer paint on wood, mirror, lettering; 64.5 x 64.5 x 3 cm frame
Rudy Komon Memorial Fund 1990 1317.1990

In the 20th century, the perennial contest between form and content became a structuring element of artistic endeavour. Abstraction (as 'pure form') seemed to deny any representation of the real (the banished 'content'); yet paradoxically, abstraction paved the way for the emergence of conceptual art. It did this by breaking the nexus between reality and appearance: a visual logic that had dominated Western art since the Renaissance. This development is perhaps most succinctly expressed in Burn's *No object implies the existence of any other.* The work consists of the title text painted on a mirror. While reading the words that deny the possibility of visual representation, the viewer confronts his or her own likeness in the mirror. The obvious contradiction in this work marked a phenomenological impasse in the language of abstraction.

• **Lawrence Weiner** (USA, b1942)
(THIS AND THAT) PUT (HERE AND THERE) OUT OF SIGHT OF POLARIS 1990
synthetic polymer paint; dimensions variable
Mervyn Horton Bequest Fund 1993 564.1993

This work was conceived specifically for the 8th Biennale of Sydney in 1990 and was installed under Weiner's supervision. At the time he was planning this work, he was also working on a commission for an outdoor public sculpture in Holstebro, Denmark: *(SOME OF THIS) + (SOME OF THAT) GENTLY PLACED UNDER THE LIGHT OF POLARIS*. These two works are closely related in concept, one situated where the North Star (Polaris) is noticeably high in the sky and the other situated at the other end of the world, where the North Star is not visible at all. In an artist's statement printed in the biennale's catalogue, Weiner wrote: 'Essentially the question is whether or not a change in venue does in fact bring about a change in value. With a material moved here & there does the displacement give not only the materials but as well the assemblage another use for art within the society it finds itself functioning with. Is the placement of the object in relation to the human being the point or is the placement of the human being in relation to the object the fact?'

• **Robert Owen** (Australia, b1937)
Lisa's lake 1973
pencil and crayon; 25.5 x 25.5 cm
Thea Proctor Memorial Fund 1974 93.1974

Cadence #1 (a short span of time) 1973
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 5 panels
259 x 838 cm overall
Purchased 2004 291.2004.a-e

• **Hilarie Mais** (England; Australia, b1952)
Breaker 1988
tree timber grids, oil paint; 3 panels: 185.5 x 185.5 x 9 cm each
Gift of the artist 1994 584.1994.a-c

Grid: doors II 1987
two timber grids, oil paint; 229.5 x 234 x 6 cm overall
Rudy Komon Memorial Fund 1988 506.1988.a-b

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_ Adachiara Zevi, *Sol Lewitt critical texts*, powerHouse Books, New York 1996

Websites
_ Kaldor Public Art Projects
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_ Kaldor Public Art Projects Explorer, Art Gallery of NSW
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/kaldor_projects

_ Sol LeWitt, Museum of Modern Art
www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/305

_ Sol LeWitt, Lisson Gallery
www.lissongallery.com/#/artists/sol-lewitt/

_ Sol LeWitt: a wall drawing retrospective, MASS MoCA
www.massmoca.org/event_details.php?id=27

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

Sol LeWitt has been called a minimalist artist and a conceptual artist. Define these terms. Identify elements and qualities from LeWitt's Kaldor projects (1977 and 1998) that meet these definitions. Can any of the artworks in these projects be considered both minimalist and conceptual? Discuss the role of titles in LeWitt's work. They are literal and descriptive. How is this in keeping with the ideas behind his work?

LeWitt's practice developed, like that of other artists of his generation, as a reaction to abstract expressionism. Investigate LeWitt's contemporaries. Outline the common elements in the artworks they produced and the ideas they were interested in. Identify what it was about abstract expressionism that they were reacting against. How did this take form? Examine how developments in art practice occur. Is it simply a matter of reacting to that which came before or is there something more to it?

Investigate the influence of LeWitt's background in design, paste-ups and photostats and his work as an architect's draughtsman on his signature work as an artist. Assess how his interest in Renaissance masters and frescos is also evident in his work. LeWitt's work has synergies with street and graffiti art, which came to prominence in the 1970s. Compare the processes, materials and attitudes of these approaches with LeWitt's. Do you agree that LeWitt bridges high-art culture and theory and low-fi art culture?

Like Renaissance masters, LeWitt often did not complete the installation of his work himself but had others do it using written instructions in his absence. Read some of LeWitt's instructions. Do you think it is clear what is to be done? In what ways do the instructions leave things open to subtle interpretation and differentiation? Often the same instructions would be used for installations in multiple locations. Would you consider these the same or different artworks? Although often read as objective and cool in presentation, discuss the underlying subjectivity and humanity in a Sol LeWitt artwork.

Investigate how context and the making of meaning are at the forefront of conceptual art practice. Consider LeWitt's choice of the adjoining wall between the Art Gallery of NSW's 19th-century Grand Courts and its 20th-century modernist galleries for part of his 1977 Kaldor project. Outline how this selection was as much a conceptual one as a practical one.

Examine LeWitt's use of formal elements such as line, shape, colour and scale. How does this reflect his interest in systems and his process of paring back to the essence of art-making? Assess the composition of the works LeWitt exhibited at the Art Gallery of NSW in 1977 and the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1998. Outline the way each drawing responded to the space in which it was installed, considering in particular the difference in materials and application.

Discover what happens to a LeWitt wall drawing once an exhibition has run its course. Consider the implications for LeWitt's work being collected within the gallery system. Is the work permanent in some sense, even if it is not visible?

Research the importance of Marcel Duchamp in the development of conceptual and minimalist art. Consider how his 'ready-mades' proposed more questions than answers about the nature of art and artists, and why this is still playing out today. Investigate other conceptual artists and compare their work to LeWitt's. Discuss how not only formal qualities but theory and ideas really came to the fore in the making of conceptual art. Do you think a conceptual artwork is just a by-product of an idea or is it something more?