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That Some of Sol Lewitt's Later Wall Drawings Aren't Wall Drawings

Sol LeWitt is probably most famous for wall drawings. They are an extension of work he had done in sculpture and on paper, in which a simple rule specifies permutations and variations of elements. With wall drawings, the rule is given for marks to be made on a wall.

In the earliest wall drawings, the marks are made with pencil on a white wall that has no special preparation. For example, *Wall Drawing 11* (1969) calls for horizontal, vertical, diagonal right, and diagonal left lines, following this rule: “A wall divided horizontally and vertically into four equal parts. Within each part, three of the four kinds of lines are superimposed.” A particular inscription of *Wall Drawing 11* is erased or painted over after an exhibition is complete, but this does not destroy the work. It can be drawn elsewhere. Provided that the rule is followed, the new inscription is as much *Wall Drawing 11* as the earlier one was.

Although LeWitt wrote of wall drawings as conceptual art, it is important to note that the work is not *merely* the idea or the instruction. It is importantly different than a single-instance mural, but it is nevertheless something realized on actual walls. Contrast, for example, Yoko Ono’s *Closet Piece II*— an instruction piece which has this rule: “Put one memory into one half of your head. Shut it off and forget it. Let the other half of the brain long for it” (*Grapefruit: A book of instructions and drawings by Yoko Ono*, 1970). Jesse Prinz claims that this and other works in Ono’s book *Grapefruit*

perfectly exemplify Sol Lewitt’s precept that artworks are ideas, and that it doesn’t matter whether they are (or can be) physically instantiated. Lewitt’s own works never realized that vision as well as Ono’s. (*Artbouillon*, July 11 2013)

Prinz paraphrases LeWitt’s claim (in the journal *Art-Language*, 1969) that “Ideas can be works of art” and that “ideas need not be made physical.” But there is a

difference between something that *need not* be realized and something that *cannot* be realized. *Closet Piece II* does not specify an act that you could actually carry out, and moreover it is unclear what you would even do if you were to try. Ono's piece is more like a poem with the grammatical form of an instruction than it is an actual instruction.

Regarding conceptual art (in the article quoted above) LeWitt writes, "The concept of a work of art may involve the matter of the piece or the process in which it is made. ... Once the idea of the piece is established in the artist's mind and the final form is decided, the process is carried out blindly. There are many side effects that the artist cannot imagine." When others implement the artist's work, the implementation may produce results which the artist did not intend or foresee. This would be impossible if the idea were one that could not possibly be instantiated. So defining a process that might actually be executed is crucial for the instructions to constitute a wall drawing. The specified procedure for marking up a wall does not depend on being realized on this or that wall, but the instructions are not just an evocative piece of prose. They present a rule which might be followed on some wall or every wall.

In short, a wall drawing is an algorithm for generating a mural. I mean *algorithm* here in the literal sense of "a specific set of instructions for carrying out a procedure" (Eric Weisstein, *Mathworld*).

Lewitt made lots of wall drawings over the years. Over time, he moved beyond just pencil on rectangular white walls. In the catalog of the 2000 LeWitt retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Brenda Richardson notes several turning points: reference in the instructions to architectural features of the wall (1970), ground colors other than white (1975), shapes rather than merely lines (also 1975), india ink rather than pencils or crayons (1981), color ink washes (1983), and acrylic paint (in the 1990s). In the same publication, Gary Garrels highlights the shift from lines to bands, shapes, and blobs, as well as the introduction of "purer, sassier, and electric" color. Importantly, these changes are aesthetic rather than conceptual. An algorithm may refer to corners on the wall, it may specify shapes, and it may specify colors. Although the resulting wall drawings realize different ideas, the fundamental core of what it is to be a wall drawing remains. What this list of changes overlooks is that some of the later wall drawings deviated from the original, fundamental innovation. *Wall Drawing 793B* (1996) consists of irregular wavy bands of color that are not laid down according to some rule, but instead are specified in a drawing which LeWitt provided. In realizing it at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in 2008, draftsmen proceeded by projecting LeWitt's original drawing onto the wall and tracing it. This is not an algorithm but instead is a familiar, old-school way for a mural to be painted: The master painter does preparatory sketches, and assistants help realize those sketches on a wall.

LeWitt's revolutionary invention was that a mural could be the realization of an

algorithm for marking a wall rather than just a marked wall. Critics like Richardson and Garrels, so quick to remark on the introduction of sassy color, miss that this gets left behind in later work like *Wall Drawing 793B*.

To sum up, impossible-to-implement instruction works (such as Ono's *Closet Piece II*), algorithmic works (such as LeWitt's *Wall Drawing 11*), and works realized by following preparatory sketches (such as LeWitt's *Wall Drawing 793B*) are different in kind. Taking the core feature of a wall drawing to be that it is algorithmic, a later LeWitt like *793B* is a wall drawing in name only.

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Notes and references

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Gary Gerrels, *Sol LeWitt: A Retrospective* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2000); ref. on pp. 31-2.

Wall drawing 793b at MassMOCA

<https://massmoca.org/event/walldrawing793b/>

Others have noted the connection between wall drawings and algorithms but do not mention the shift in later work like *793B*. See Domenico Quaranta, *Lewitt's ideal children*, *Arte e Critica*, (44/45), December/March 2005/2006 and Casey Reas, *Software structures*, *Whitney Artport: The Whitney Museum Portal to Net Art*, June 3 2004.

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