

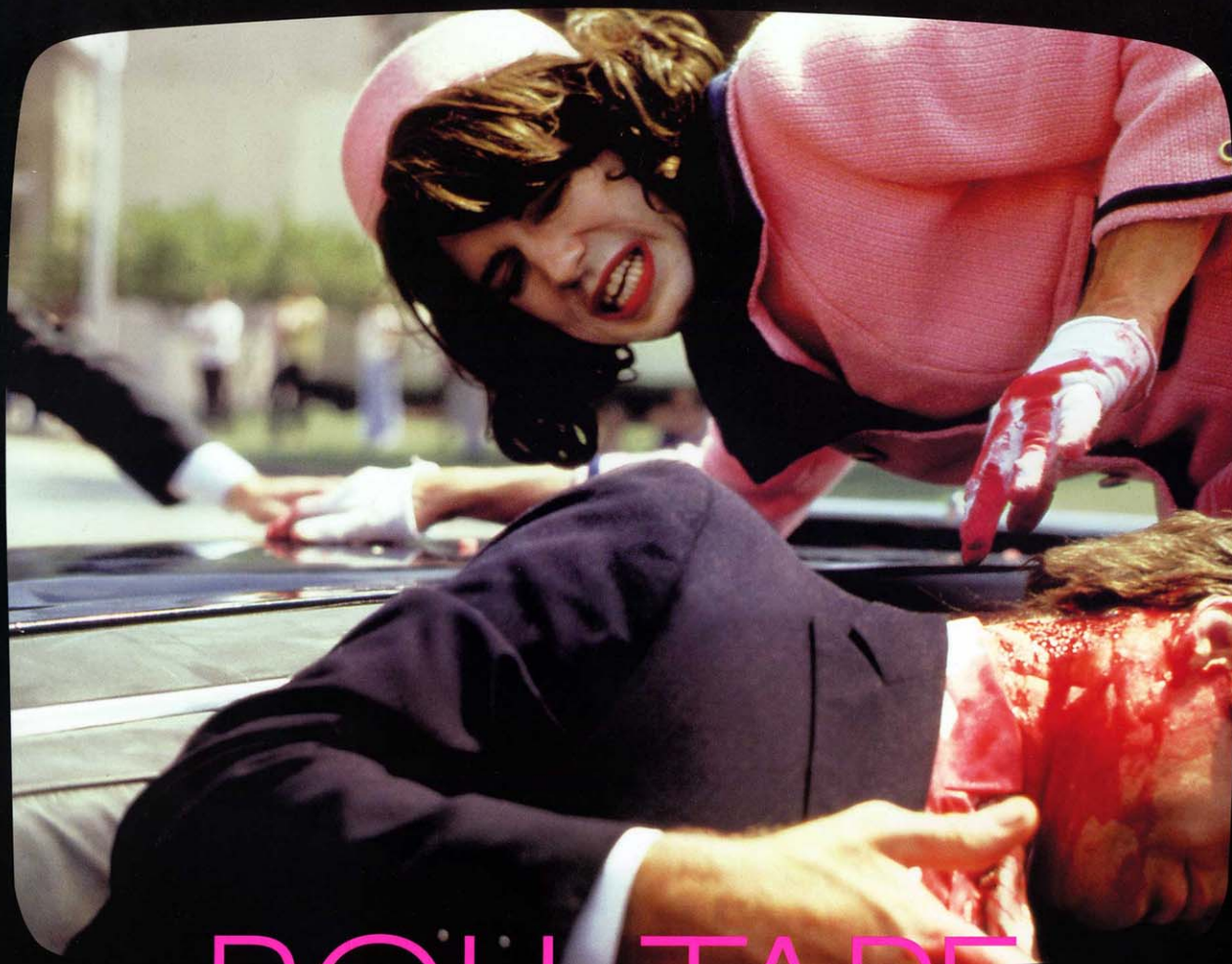


Lawrence Weiner  
Modern Painters  
March 2008

# MODERN PAINTERS

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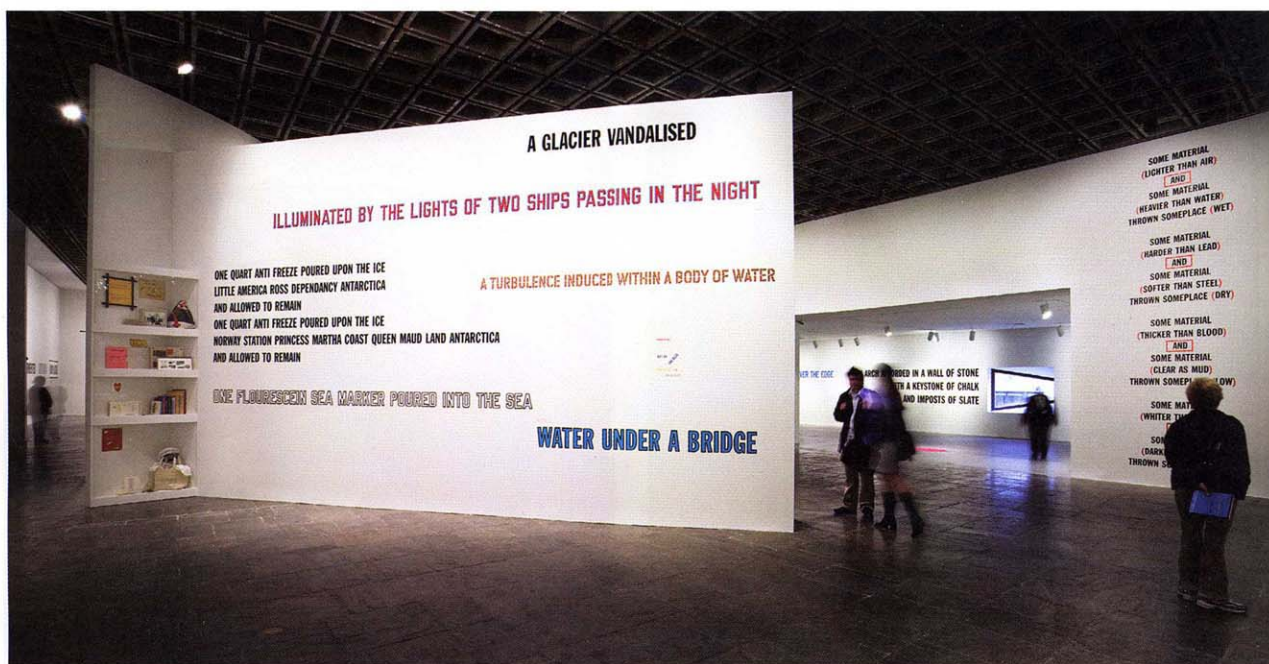
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# Lawrence Weiner Modern Painters March 2008



INSTALLATION VIEW OF "LAWRENCE WEINER." WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK, 2008. COURTESY WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART.

## North America

### NEW YORK

#### LAWRENCE WEINER

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

"The limits of language mean the limits of my world," Wittgenstein wrote in 1921, thereby evoking a world that could be frustratingly narrow, but also had the potential to expand indefinitely. Lawrence Weiner discovered for himself the expanse of such a world in February 1968 when he participated in a group exhibition at Windham College in Vermont. His contribution was typical of the site-specific proto-Conceptual work being made at the time: a grid on that spot, marked with stakes and twine, with one rectangular section removed. But the students, who were accustomed to playing touch football on the field, took it on themselves one night to remove even more of the work to make room for their game. For Weiner, the event was revelatory. He realized that he never wanted to make work that would impose an idea, or a physical boundary, on someone else. Shortly after the experience, he wrote that "prolonged negotiation is not the role and/or use of either the art or the artist." Since then, Weiner's primary medium has been language, and the work continues to exist as words: A SERIES OF STAKES SET INTO THE GROUND TO FORM A RECTANGLE TWINE STRUNG FROM STAKE TO STAKE TO DEMARK A GRID A RECTANGLE REMOVED FROM THIS RECTANGLE.

Language may not physically block someone from doing something, but it can still be brutal and destructive, dictatorial and draconian. But Weiner, with his cryptic (and sometimes oddly legalistic) phrasing, deliberately leaves things open-ended, and his first US retrospective illustrated this generous philosophy beautifully. In fact, Weiner is the only artist so far, at least in this critic's experience, to have transformed the ordinarily stuffy galleries at the Whitney into a space that felt warmly exploratory and ad hoc. Rather than creating a rabbit warren of rooms, using temporary walls to direct shuffling viewers from one work to the next, Weiner designed the exhibition so that one stepped off the elevator to find three curved walls fanning out into the main room. Because the works weren't organized chronologically, one was allowed to wander freely,

making comparisons and indulging tangents, transiting back and forth, perusing. In a way, it was like being at a lively social function, bouncing from one conversation to the next, laughing or frowning depending on the topic. Immediately there was a sense of choice, a feeling promptly confirmed by the artist's 1969 *Statement of Intent*, which framed one of the three entryways. Reading top to bottom, the piece begins with three conditions: 1. THE ARTIST MAY CONSTRUCT THE WORK 2. THE WORK MAY BE FABRICATED 3. THE WORK NEED NOT BE BUILT. Following these is the conclusion: 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. To my mind, "receiver" has always been synonymous with "spectator," and with that statement, Weiner turns passive spectators into active participants.

And such participation does occur, often involuntarily, as when one encounters the words *SUNFLOWERS CUT AND STREWN UPON SOME APPLES FALLEN FROM THE TREE & LAID TO REST* (2007) or the 1990 piece that reads *MILK GLASS BROKEN IN THE LIGHT OF SUNSET [RED]*. One can easily imagine the sharp, sweet smell of decaying fruit and flora, or picture the striking still life on a windowsill, much in the manner of William Carlos Williams's plums in the icebox or Ezra Pound's faces in the crowd. Except that where poets embrace metaphor, Weiner eschews it with an antipathy not unlike Donald Judd's resistance to "illusion" in art. *IF YOU SHIT ON THE FLOOR IT GETS ON YOUR FEET* is the blunt, matter-of-fact message inscribed on one of the several hundred posters Weiner has designed throughout his career, a selection of which was densely hung on a large wall in one of the main rooms.

Indeed, Weiner's commitment to multiples (the populist form of distributing art) was in full evidence in a long vitrine full of pencils and pens, buttons, matchbooks, postcards, watches, bags, Swiss Army knives, T-shirts, and more. While the glassed-in case gave the objects a preciousness that seemed at odds with the otherwise inviting nature of the show, the multiples conveyed Weiner's desire to make art that exists in "the stream of life." Viewers familiar with the opaque phrases printed on walls in a sans-serif, all-caps font may have been pleasantly surprised to see other graphic elements like swoops and curves, as well as Weiner's removal pieces (in which a rectangular section of drywall is scraped away, revealing the rough surface underneath) or such ephemeral acts as *TWO MINUTES OF SPRAY PAINT DIRECTLY UPON THE FLOOR FROM A STANDARD AEROSOL SPRAY CAN* (1968). There was something mischievous about the puddle of hot-pink spray paint on the floor, and recognizing that sense of play is key to understanding, and perhaps to appreciating, what might otherwise be perceived as relatively dry, unemotional Conceptual art. (Take, for example, the inherent fetishism of *STRETCHED AS TIGHTLY AS POSSIBLE: SATIN AND PETROLEUM JELLY*.) Among all the artists of his generation, Weiner stands out for being the most human and earthy—and for having a slightly naughty sense of humor. —CLAIRE BARIANT