



Figure 1
Sol LeWitt, Wall Drawing #146, September 1972

I would like to delve into a visual and conceptual analysis of conceptual artist Sol LeWitt's Wall Drawings, drawing from the ideas of semiotics, traditional fine art, and computer rendered graphics. Sol LeWitt emerged as one of the early pioneers of a small but fascinating movement in art called Conceptual Art. Leading artists who participated in this movement, such as Joseph Kosuth, On Kawara, and Lawrence Weiner, maintained that the essence of a work of art was in the conception of a work or idea by the artist, and not in the physical products created by or

representing the idea. For example, in Joseph Kosuth's "One and Three Chairs," the artwork is the idea of the chair, represented the word "chair," a photograph of a chair, and the dictionary definition of chair. The work explores of the idea of the signifier, signified, and referent as studied in semiotics, and questions the role of the artist in creating a work; can he simply conceive an idea and let it be art, aside from any physical product?

In Sol LeWitt's Wall Drawings, such as the one pictured in Figure 1, the essence of the work lay in the conception of the specific lines/shapes to be drawn on a wall, and not in the final product. LeWitt's process involved conceiving the idea for the specific wall drawing and giving instructions to workers who executed the drawings in the exhibition spaces. Thus, a single "Wall Drawing" work would appear differently in different exhibitions because it would be executed by different people and in different spaces. In the specific wall drawing above, done in blue crayon and varying in size depending on the exhibition space, the work consists of two-part combinations of blue arcs from corners and sides and blue straight, not straight, and broken lines. The instructions were given to the draftsmen by LeWitt, who conceived of the idea/instructions for creating the work, and it was executed without his presence in the space.

This skews the normal role of semiotics in the analysis of fine art works. In traditional works, such as a portrait, the signifier, the painting of the person, is the work of art, and the signified (also referent in this case), the person painted, is not the art. In LeWitt conceptual art, the idea of the sign is distorted; the wall drawing of lines/arcs on the wall, which can be looked at as the signifiers of LeWitt's idea, are not the artwork, but the signified concept acts as the artwork itself. In this sense, LeWitt questions the idea of an artist; the artist was traditionally the painter, sculptor, or illustrator of a piece, but in this movement, he did not necessarily need to be, such as in LeWitt's case—conceiving the work was enough of an act to create a work of art.

LeWitt's Wall Drawings can also be related to vector graphics in the realm of 2D computer graphics. In the way that vector graphics are objects rendered by the computer as entire objects that can be scaled/translated/transformed as a whole, LeWitt's instructions usually consisted of descriptions of entire objects in relation to each other rather than focusing on exact dimensions. For example, in the instructions depicted in Figure 2 below, he instructs for a square of 14 inches to be divided into two equal parts with the first part matte black and the second part glossy black.

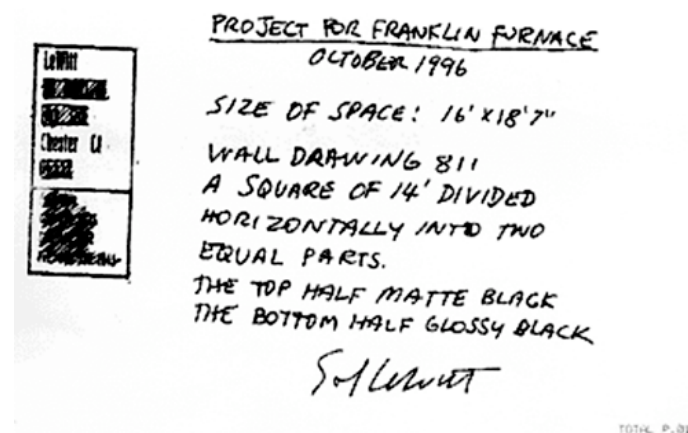


Figure 2
Le Witt, Instructions for Wall Drawing 811 at Franklin Furnace, 1996.

In this way of conceiving the work, he does not call for two specific rectangles of 14"x7" each and adjacent on the 14" side, or for any mention of coordinates (ie. instructing that inch 1 through 14 be painted matte black, etc.), but he refers to the entire square as an object to be divided by the executers. Another example lies in figure 1, where the lines (broken, straight, and not straight, as written in the instructions), are treated as entire lines that were to be connected with other lines at specific spots; they are not specific coordinates or dimensions in space in the way of raster graphics. In this way, the method of thought relates to vector graphics and the idea of manipulating entire objects instead of raster-based pixel by pixel (or inch by inch, in the case of the Wall Drawings) execution.

I am fascinated by the movement of Conceptual Art because it challenges the very essence of art and what makes someone an artist. If someone can be considered an artist for simply conceiving a thought, and the thought can either produce physical evidence or not at all, then the very roots of fine art and the idea of originality and aura are contested. Even starting with Duchamp, whose urinal piece consisted of the act of putting an object (the urinal) in an exhibition space, began the entire questioning of the idea of process and creation in art, and of context of objects in specific environments; Duchamp's act of *placing* the urinal in the gallery space made him the artist, the decider that it was an art work, whereas a normal urinal in a restroom, though physically the same as Duchamp's, would not be art.

Because this act of creation of a work of art is reduced to a thought or action, documentation of the art is very important in considering conceptual works. The Conceptual movement is unique in that each of the artists working in it conceived and documented their works differently; the concept of *thought* as a medium opened up the possibilities to an infinite degree, and works ranged from being specific dates and what happened on each of these dates, to wall drawings, to written documentations of ideas that had been thought of at a specific time. Therefore, the field of perception is significantly less important in conceptual art because often, the understanding of the piece did not rely on perception of a visual product—only on some sort of portrayal of an idea, whether linguistically, symbolically, visually, etc. Perception, design, and aesthetics are almost lost in this movement of art where the works did not rely on visual representation.

In relation to Walter Benjamin's concept of aura, which he said was lost in the age of mechanical reproduction, do conceptual works even possess aura? It can be said that the conception by the artist maintains auratic quality, and he describes the idea to the viewer/audience through physical means or linguistic means, but it can also be said that if the art is in the conception of a list of instructions, then the auratic quality is lost because it can be executed infinitely.

Sol LeWitt's Wall Drawings embodied the crux of Conceptual Art in that it separated the physical execution from the conception of the art itself, but LeWitt was also one of the less radical conceptualists in that he still relied on something visual and physical as *evidence* of the art, as documentation of his idea. Other conceptual artists went out on further limbs, using written statements to describe an event that had occurred as an artwork, or displaying dates to show that the events that had occurred on that day were the art (On Kawara).