

# **Lawrence Weiner: AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE**

Whitney Museum of  
American Art

Essay by Morjorie Welish

**Art Monthly**

## Lawrence Weiner: AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE

Whitney Museum of American Art

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Whenever you hear the word Public, think 'Remedial'. Public Service Messages, as they are called in the US, spread where people congregate and travel, are meant to appeal to civic responsibility through memorable tag lines: FRIENDS DON'T LET FRIENDS DRIVE DRUNK or CHILDREN WATCH WHAT YOU DO SO WATCH WHAT YOU DO. Lawrence Weiner's writing may have emerged under the warrant given it through Conceptual Art, but it is being tested through the discourse of advertising with which it now affiliates.

After a trial period of unmaking things (by cutting away a corner of a painting) or of merely placing one thing upon another (setting a chunk of stone upon a table), Weiner went about making self-evidence palpable in another way, and so staked his claim in Conceptual Art praxis with a few works that still remain among his best. From 1968, this ars poetica:

1. THE ARTIST MAY CONSTRUCT THE WORK
  2. THE WORK MAY BE FABRICATED
  3. THE WORK NEED NOT BE BUILT
- EACH BEING EQUAL AND CONSISTENT WITH THE INTENT OF THE ARTIST THE DECISION AS TO THE CONDITION RESTS WITH THE RECEIVER UPON THE OCCASION OF RECEIVERSHIP.

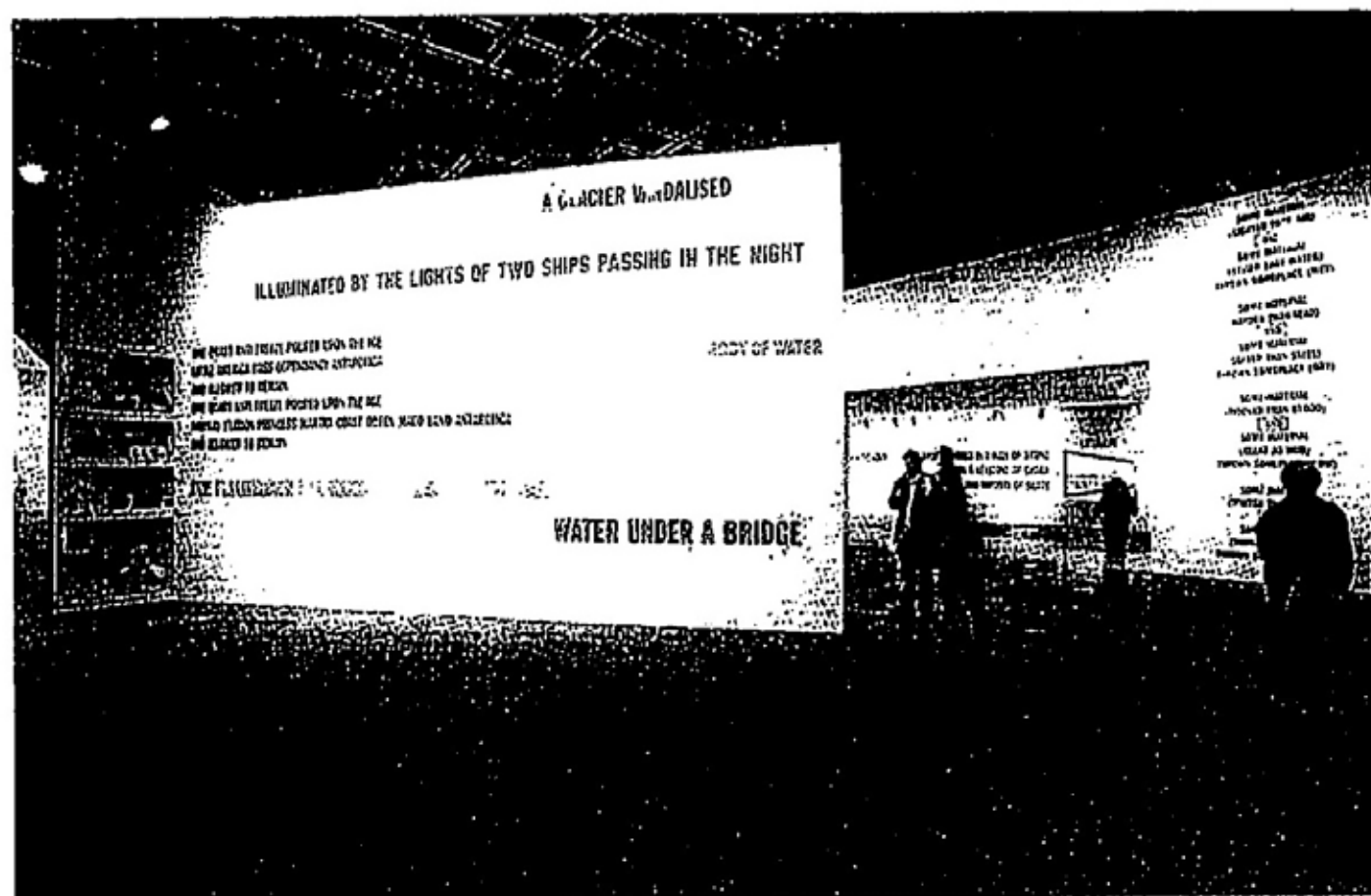
A manifesto in the form of a set of instructions, these words direct our attention away from things as such and towards a pragmatic of provisional manufacture. Imagined modal relations are realised in words that describe the possibility of an artwork, and these are deemed equivalent to the work that is the work of art itself. Answerable to this is the other half of the statement, which attempts to hand over

authority from the artist to the viewer. In the hope of changing the relation of consumer to producer, Weiner has formulated a kind of contractual reciprocity whereby the authority to (re)produce a work of his is ceded to the one who now owns it.

Public inscriptions of the sort written by Weiner may founder in the attempt to elevate tone, raise a commonplace to the status of wisdom or other otherwise change the line of argument and, in so doing, may lose control of the rhetoric. By choosing 'receivership', does Weiner really mean a method of enforcing repayment of debt (under bankruptcy)? Hmm. What Weiner seeks to designate by 'receivership' is an economy of exchange value in a reciprocal arrangement between artist and collector. In wanting to avoid 'owner' and 'ownership' or even 'steward' and 'stewardship', Weiner alights on a set of general terms to which he can subscribe but which are already in circulation. Point taken. It happens, however, that their special nomenclature dominates.

Weiner's most sure rhetorical footing occurs in recycling basic elements and their potential relations. The passage that begins: SOME MATERIAL / (LIGHTER THAN AIR) / AND / SOME MATERIAL / (HEAVIER THAN WATER) / THROWN SOME PLACE (WET) / SOME MATERIAL / (HARDER THAN LEAD) / AND / SOME MATERIAL / (SOFTER THAN STEEL) / THROWN SOME PLACE (DRY) does its job. By informing structuralist tactics with environmental rhetoric, Weiner justifies that inscription perfectly.

Favoured are the material and symbolic relations of water and stone. Weiner tends to prefer manipulating these substances to extract a logic of combinatory relations and so an economy of the land and its resources. Not included in the show is the perennially sound WATER MADE IT WET. Neither will the viewer find words as inscribed across an old Manhattan house front, WATER SPILLED FROM SOURCE TO USE. These remain among the better samples of folk wisdom Weiner has devised for specific locales that can 'travel' to different places as well as survive generic installation in a gallery. Singly or in combination, these plain posits capture the ethical tenor of inscription traditionally placed



Lawrence Weiner  
installation view

over doors and mantels but which can be transposed from private to public space and take their homey instruction with them. Here, turned to the street, the advertisement for responsible economy is evident but, owing to sentences declarative not imperative in style, quite unlike the commercial advertisement with which it competes.

The retrospective staged in Marcel Breuer's Whitney Museum is exceptionally well crafted for inducing recognition of the *mélange* characteristic of street life: angled walls that play havoc with sight lines and changing scale from gargantuan to minute, in a smart analogy to the urban cut-and-paste signage that surrounds us. Meanwhile, the words of the artist are not installed chronologically but calculated with orienting and disorienting viewpoints from which perspectivism is an inevitable lesson. If the viewer were to restage a chronological presentation of the works, it would be evident that Weiner's rhetorical style tracks his generational concerns, from minimal words-as-structures to post-minimal words-as-functions. For the latter see, for instance, the three separate participial pieces FERMENTED, RUPTURED and DISPLACED. (Even where not obviously ethical an ethical lesson is almost always embedded.)

Recently adapting a literary stance, Weiner has tried his hand at composing adages that exploit the postmodern montage effect. Although he does not escape awkward campiness and is subject to producing occasional howlers – CRYSTALLIZED WITH THE DRIPPINGS FROM TREES THAT CAME FROM THE LAND [FOREVER AMBER] – Weiner does succeed in compiling several early statements for montage effect and in so doing constructs one ambitious wall inscription worth quoting in its entirety: A GLACIER VANDALISED / ILLUMINATED BY THE LIGHTS OF TWO SHIPS / PASSING IN THE NIGHT / ONE QUART OF ANTI FREEZE POURED UPON THE ICE / LITTLE AMERICA ROSS DEPENDENCY ANTARCTICA / AND ALLOWED TO REMAIN / A TURBULENCE INDUCED / WITHIN A BODY OF WATER / ONE QUART OF ANTI FREEZE POURED UPON THE ICE / NORWAY STATION PRINCESS MARTHA COAST QUEEN MAUD / LAND ANTARCTICA / AND ALLOWED TO REMAIN / ONE FLOURESCEN SEA MARKER POURED INTO THE SEA / WATER UNDER A BRIDGE.

This inscription of substance draws its rhetoric from the commonplace yet also from the arcane, from the sentimental yet also from the technical, to establish a statement wherein a situation is made articulate. Where the impetus to explore makes its mark (from antifreeze to shark repellent), it disturbs the environment – this, the obvious 'lesson'. In

concatenating already written texts, however, Weiner's *cento* provides a more complicated temporal statement of this same condition. Indeed, dynamical forces are what one reads here through intentional acts oblivious of consequence. Here the montage effect induces an allegory through appropriation of language in the public domain that nonetheless compels the receiver to read the relationships between and among elements for the *Realpolitik* lodged therein.

Weiner's textual generation is very populous, with turf wars being fought for the right to say certain things on behalf of a public implied in the rhetoric chosen by each artist. It would make an interesting study to examine how Weiner places his writing in the crowded field: closer to Ed Ruscha's Pop phraseology at times than to the grammar deployed by Thomas Locher, impinging on Ian Hamilton Finlay's ideological motto and remaining far from – oblivious to? – Nancy Spero's feminist laughter and anti-war scream. A greater challenge, however, lies in finding the gumption to compare these and other such inscriptions not with contemporaneous Conceptual Art, not even with public service messages of some distinction, but with the literature from which the inscription itself derives. The real judges of this methodologically expanded field must also include the likes of Bertolt Brecht, who gave us: 'It is evening. Two folding boats / Glide past, two young men in them, / Naked. Rowing side by side / They talk. Talking / They row side by side.' (Translated by Edwin Morgan) and of Ovid, who wrote: 'Dripping hollows out rock.'

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