

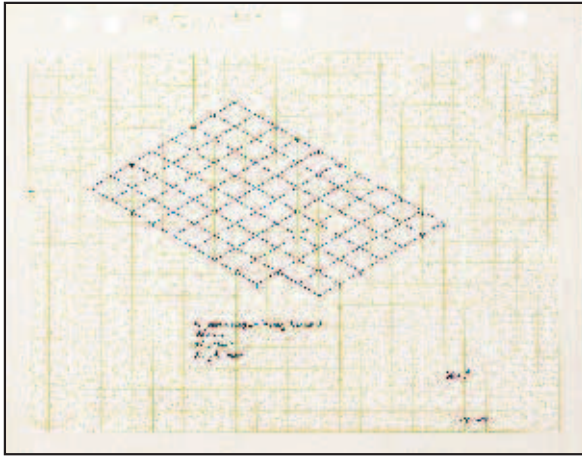
Showing & Telling – Drawing & Writing

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For Lawrence Weiner, drawing is an indispensable part of his activity as an artist. He produced drawings before he developed his use of language in making art in the late 1960s, and has never viewed the linguistic existence of his works as a reason to stop drawing – on the contrary, language as writing, became a natural part of his drawing activity. Weiner's drawings make traditional notions of the purity of the artistic medium seem obsolete, as the drawn is often combined with the written, as well as collaged elements, stamped prints, and diverse methods of coloring. We might therefore ask whether the expression “works on paper” is preferable to “drawings” when categorizing these works, and because the choice of paper is often the artistic decision that demands attention first – pages torn from a notebook, index cards, papers of various shades – we are almost inclined to go a step further and speak of “works *with* paper.”

A look at Weiner's early drawing is instructive for building an understanding of later developments. In the mid-1960s he produced his *Propeller Paintings* and drawings with the same configuration derived from an American television test pattern. Rather than copying this pattern with meticulous precision or introducing aesthetic de-familiarizations, he treated them as completely variable in form and color. Despite the connection to popular iconography, this was not Pop art; despite the geometric exactness of the source image, not Hard-edge or Minimalist painting; and despite the numerous variations, not Systemic painting. Rather, this reveals a basic feature of Weiner's approach to the medium of drawing: namely, his willingness to use familiar abstract graphic signs from various contexts for artistic concerns, varying their significance freely in the process.

At first glance, another series of drawings Weiner made in the same period leaves an antithetical impression. They were done on graph paper and use the grid structure of the paper as a guideline. These drawings occasionally employ hand-drawn lines or handwritten words, producing a structure of darker fields or lines; while adhering to the grid pattern, they thwart the idea that the point is to fill the grid structure of the paper consistently



TURF, STAKE, AND STRING, drawing for the exhibition HAY, MESH, STRING, Windham College, Putney, Vermont, 1968



View of the work installed, Windham College, Putney, Vermont, 1968

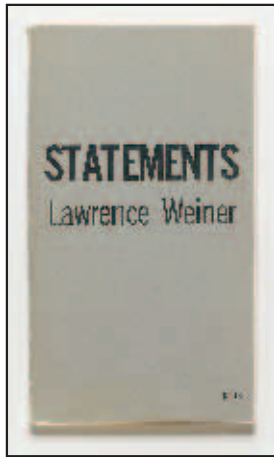
– that is, to accept it unconditionally as a structural requirement. Graph paper is as common a cultural, iconographic guideline as a television test pattern, but the grid pattern is present in or as the drawing paper. The relationship between guidelines and free variation is oriented around this, exercising the notion that hand-drawn lines and handwritten words can be treated equally in the medium of drawing.

Because Weiner's works can be implemented but need not be, and can be communicated orally as well as in writing, they are not tied to any specific form of presentation. If a work is exhibited publicly, Weiner claims the right to decide about the manner of its presentation, taking into consideration the work, itself, and its situational circumstances. The significance of the presentation lies, as a rule, in the nature of the graphic design and in its relationship to the material support or medium of dissemination (invitation postcard, poster, catalog, banner...). The graphic design of architectonic surfaces and printed matter is usually based on preliminary drawings, but only to the extent that they contain specifications of dimension, typeface, color, size, and so forth; they make no claim to inherent value but serve to turn these specifications into a corresponding edition or architectonic design.

The drawing TURF, STAKE, AND STRING (1968), by contrast, does make claim to inherent value. Though it corresponds in graphic form to a work that Weiner realized that same year on an outdoor site at Windham College in Vermont, the drawing of STAPLES, STAKES, TWINE, TURF, was not merely a preliminary drawing that became disposable when the material construction of the work was complete. It was at this point that Weiner decided his works could exist linguistically as "statements" and can, but need not be realized in order to exist. Unlike other artists of his generation who used language to present a concept, he began to use language to refer to material configurations and situations in a reality outside of language. This resulted in Weiner's work #001:

A SERIES OF STAKES SET IN THE GROUND AT REGULAR INTERVALS TO FORM A RECTANGLE – TWINE STRUNG FROM STAKE TO STAKE TO DEMARK A GRID – A RECTANGLE REMOVED FROM THIS RECTANGLE

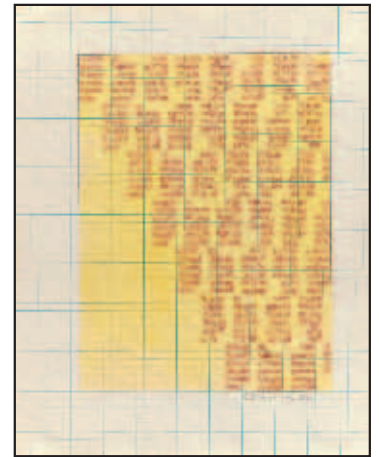
Work #001 as a statement in language is comparable to the drawing TURF, STAKE, AND STRING, since both offer an idea of material relationships without referring to a specific



Cover of the artist's book, STATEMENTS, 1968



Spread from STATEMENTS showing TURF, STAKE, AND STRING in language



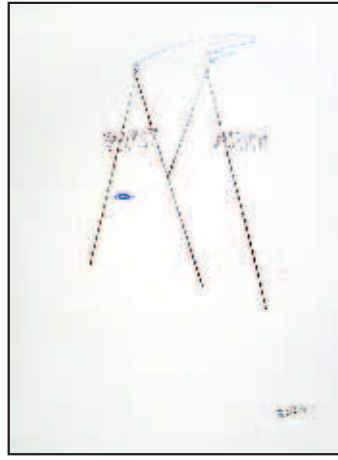
untitled, 1965

material object. Understanding work #001 in language, however, is not contingent upon understanding his drawing, nor is understanding his drawing contingent upon his linguistically concise formulation. Weiner's use of language, however, has a characteristic graphic style that corresponds to his drawings with written words.

In drawings, in his linguistic statement, and in the construction of his works Weiner addresses the concept of removal by initiating a reflection upon the relationship between removal and omission. Talk of "removal" presumes that something was present and was then taken away, while talk of "omission" presumes a perspective from which something should or could be present. We can see a shift in these meanings, however, in the drawing TURF, STAKE, AND STRING, since there is a rectangular grid-pattern within which just two square fields are empty. Nothing is taken away or erased literally, but the idea of omission taking on the character of removal becomes apparent. The same principle applies to the linguistic statement, which noticeably lacks punctuation, and to the material construction of the work, which positions visual elements to establish an additive structure as a guiding principle and emphasizes elements that are linked to the idea of removal. The old *topos* that drawing is the art of omission takes on new meaning: that of omission as removal.

Weiner's drawings do not cultivate a genre, rather they reflect an effort to convey historical orientation.

In relation to Weiner's use of language, including his drawing with language, a polarity can be observed between "open gesture" and "precise definition." Language is always open to many different interpretations and this is stressed by Weiner's use of language fragments and brackets that gesture towards this sense of openness. In order to clarify direct references to the material world and his artistic intent, however, his use of language is up to high precision and compact elegance. Both aspects, the openness and precision, are not mutually exclusive but can be related to make a meaning known. His drawings correlate to this. From a formal and aesthetic perspective, they can be characterized by the polarity between an open gesture of hand-drawn forms – which go hand in hand with intuitive and arbitrary choices of color – and a strict regulation and determination of lines drawn with a ruler or stencil. A look back at his early *Propeller Drawings* and the drawings on graph paper can illuminate intermediate steps leading up to this development. Weiner's drawings do not give the feeling of an iconic presence but rather relate an overall impression that allows us to understand that the drawings are meant to be read



Three drawings each titled, FROM POINT TO POINT, 1995

piece by piece. The viewer cannot help but relate the various elements to one another while looking at them – viewing thus becomes an active and therefore a temporal experience. In this respect, it is instructive to remember that he grappled with Robert Rauschenberg’s *Combine Paintings* early on – Weiner himself produced “environmental paintings,” none of which has survived. Rauschenberg insisted on a piece-by-piece reading of his combines that looks at and weighs each element separately, while managing to ensure that this would not come at the cost of the overall impression. In this context, we should point to the paintings and drawings of Cy Twombly and Jasper Johns as well, since all three artists integrated text into their works: Rauschenberg used text in the form of collaged printed matter, Johns used stenciled words, and Twombly is notable for his scribbled words and phrases. None of these artists ought to be considered a direct role model for Weiner, but taken together they represent a historical layer without which Weiner’s approach to drawing would scarcely have been conceivable.

If we look again to historical guidelines and Weiner’s artistic beginnings to expand on the themes associated with them, we can detect changes in his approach toward the concept of *series*. In his *Propeller Paintings*, this concept was a way of treating all the paintings as aesthetically equal, even though the viewer might have preferences for specific variations. The artistic decision about aesthetic value implies a critical distancing from aesthetic ideas of individual recipients, without denying them the right to these ideas. In a series produced in 1995 under the thematic title *FROM POINT TO POINT*, the viewer senses that the inscription on each drawing can be interpreted graphically in very different ways, and, furthermore, that these varied interpretations reflect that viewer’s own perspective based on his or her orientation in the world; no single graphic interpretation is, or is intended to be optimal. Rather, the works reflect back for the viewer the very conditions under which he or she is viewing. Each drawing is also about itself, just as every line is a graphic sign “from point to point.”

Weiner’s work stems from a questioning of traditional ideas of art. The medium of drawing offers him the opportunity to push this process of questioning further and communi-

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TAKE THE MONEY, 2009



Street installation for The Wrong Gallery, New York, 2003

cate what he has learned in the process of creating art. A drawing such as *TURF, STAKE, AND STRING*, for example, was still quite concretely related to a specific work, but Weiner began using written language in his drawings in a way that such expansions could take graphic form independently of specific works. As variations on a theme, they offer points of view and perspectives to question basic assumptions common to culture. In the process, moral questions come into play. One example of this is the principle of the *quid pro quo* or “give and take” – the idea of “fair exchange,” on which our entire socioeconomic system is based. Weiner himself considers a different idea more fundamental, as he explained in an interview: “Basically, each person is entitled to what his needs are, and each person is supposed to give what he is capable of.”¹ Weiner talks about the seemingly self-evident principle of “give and take” in order to contrast two alternative relationships built around “and”: “give and get” and “have and take.” This, in essence, removes the foundation of normality from the *quid pro quo*, indicating that one thing can be *handed out* for the other, thus disguising its true character. Because Weiner makes the written indications, “MOVING ALONG INEXORABLY” and “DECAY TAKES ON THE GUISE OF ENTROPY” in the same drawing, he points both to the mercilessness of the “have and take” and to the general effect of hiding that is manifest within it – the effect of hiding the effect of hiding. Regarding cultures as systems burdened with entropy is a reasonable assumption, but if the decline of a culture mercilessly induced by the “have and take” gives the appearance of a natural process – and one that the “have and take” is apt to deal with – then we can say: “Entropy becomes decay manqué,” as stated in the second drawing on the same theme.

The two drawings from 2008 contain additional elements, however, both written and drawn. The written text reads “FROM PETER TO PAUL” in one drawing, and “PETER GIVE / PAUL TAKE” in the other. The former suggests the idea of a gift that does not presume a gift of equal value in return, while the latter is associated with the idea of a gift given of free will but taken in order to possess (that is, to “have and take”). Hence “give” is related to “take,” and suggests the idea of “give and take,” while the assignment of graphic and written elements makes clear that we should think of it neither as an exchange value nor just.

The graphic vocabulary Weiner employs is similar to the one he uses in the drawing series *AUTUMN MOON ROMA*, also from 2008. In this series, he presents various cases in which “PETER,” “PAUL,” and “WHIT” are related to one another. An overarching grammar

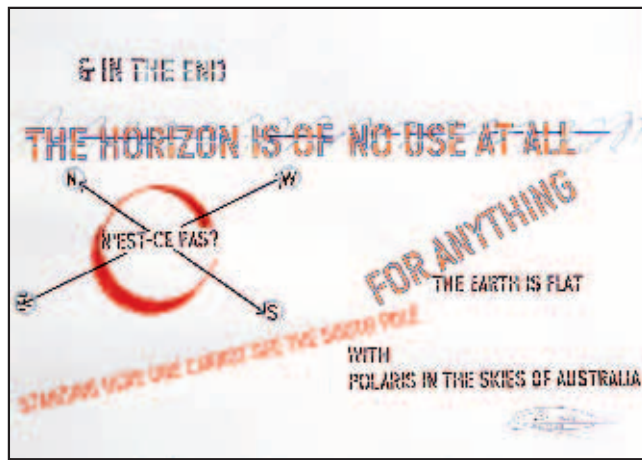


Street installation for The Wrong Gallery, New York, 2003

of drawing emerges through the distribution and transformations of the repeated graphic elements; it is self-explanatory, while demanding constant reconsideration. Curved lines not only establish connections between different elements but also gesturally characterize the nature of these connections by their dynamic and color; perhaps they do not do so *per se*, but these relations are implicit in the interplay among elements. The drawings reflect aesthetically on the events between Peter, Paul, and Whit. The key elements at play include three crescent moons (positioned differently in each drawing) on a semicircle with the text “AUTUMN MOON” placed above or beneath its associated crescent moon. The six small hexagons recall screw heads – hence something “built” – and collections of larger rectangles stand for some commodity to “give,” “take,” “get,” or “have.” In their various arrangements and colors, they also stand for the specific condition of “giving,” “taking,” “getting,” and “having.” The high memorability of Weiner’s vocabulary of graphic signs and configurations benefits its diverse utility. The graphic significance of this visual vocabulary lends an emblematic quality, but seems so reduced and open that the idea of a codified meaning never comes up. It is the context of its use that provides insight into meaning by pointing to the grammatical structures at work.

Historical precedents for this kind of graphic narrative include El Lissitzky’s children’s book, *About Two Squares* (1922), which was also intended to be a “drama” for adults. But whereas Lissitzky’s work uses familiar geometric figures and a pioneering Constructivist typography to convey “views” of the Revolution and the structure of a new and more just world order, Weiner innovates a visual grammar that employs diverse graphic elements to critically examine ideas about our social coexistence. Because these ideas – like the *quid pro quo* – are usually considered self-evident, Weiner uses drawing to relate a visual grammar to them that is not self-evident, but idiosyncratic and auto-explicative. In the process of aesthetic reflection (in the form of self-examination) he tests seemingly self-explanatory ideas concerning our social coexistence, our relationship to nature, and our orientation in the world.

We have examined several very early examples of Weiner’s approach to the medium of drawing and several works produced forty years later. Together, they form a historical bracket that can be understood as part of a larger thematic field – very much analogous to the way Weiner uses brackets in his drawings. What makes it possible to relate either side of the brackets is the fact that Weiner’s practice as an artist opens up opportunities



untitled (& IN THE END), Iceland, 2003

to test common basic assumptions for aesthetic reflection and dialectic discussion.

In the beginning, Weiner posed questions such as: What does an aesthetic decision mean in relation to aesthetic experience? What does omitting something mean as opposed to removing it? How can these two things be related? What does that mean for the relationship between a work that exists linguistically, its rendering in a drawing, and its material realization? These considerations occupy a historical place that we have grown accustomed to calling Conceptual art. But questions are more important than art historical terms; they reach farther and they go farther, often occurring in relation to geographic contexts (Iceland, the Rhine, Zurich, Australia, and the South Pole are reference points). Weiner uses drawing to negotiate the possibility of orientation as such – as a possibility that concerns us. The geographical cannot be opposed to the historical, as the natural cannot be opposed to the social.

Weiner's drawings do not cultivate a genre; rather they reflect an effort to convey historical orientation. This stance is unmistakable in the themes they address: "away from Aristotle," "the pursuit of happiness," "simultaneous realities," an indication that "horizon" should increasingly be understood as a verb and not a noun. The concept of the horizon has long been equated to an ultimate means of orientation, but Weiner bluntly counters this idea by displacing the significance of the word to the likes of an activity – an activity that is not oriented according to "the" horizon, but creates and displaces horizons. To the extent such activity can be understood as one of self-organization and in turn, as one of human sense perception, Weiner's drawings create new latitude for the self-organization of sense perception, and hence create new opportunities for thinking about historical orientation.

This latitude leads beyond traditional ideas – beyond traditional ideas of drawing and beyond the idea that drawing should be judged inferior to other artistic media. Again and again in the history of art there has been a suspicion that it can be advantageous to abandon the prestige of an ambitious and technically elaborate medium. Traditionally, however, the usual justification for this advantage is that a conceptual status is inherent in the medium of drawing. By contrast, with regard to Weiner's art – precisely because it

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has often been burdened with a clichéd idea of “Conceptualism” – it is important to point to the decidedly sensory character of his drawings. There is no antithesis here between the conceptual and the sensory, the aesthetically focused versus the thematically focused.

If we take into account the fact that Weiner not only makes frequent use of the motif of a ship but also describes routes and corresponding means of orientation, so that his drawings recall entries in a logbook (especially since draftsmen were often indispensable members of the personnel of early oversea expeditions), it becomes clear what advantage the medium of drawing might have over more ambitious and elaborate media. A contrast can help clarify this. In the 1970s the filmmaker Hollis Frampton developed the concept for his monumental *Magellan* cycle, in which he wanted to reflect on the history of the medium of film on a metahistorical level; in the 1980s Frank Stella created his monumental *Moby Dick* series; and at the start of the twenty-first century Gerhard Richter produced an extensive series of reverse glass paintings titled *Sinbad*. The theme of circumnavigating the globe is clearly a powerful one, however in Frampton’s case the name Magellan is merely a metaphor; in Stella’s case the name Moby Dick evokes a dramatic tale; and in Richter’s case the name Sinbad evokes the idea that such a narrative should be regarded as a tall tale, making the aesthetic experience a skeptical one. That may open up latitude for aesthetic reflection, but it is focused primarily on the medium in question, on the activity of telling a story, on the role of the narrator and of the imagination, and on the impossibility of reflection that goes beyond oneself under these conditions. What Weiner offers as drawing, presents in it, and shows by it is nothing imaginary, but rather a real possibility of orientation that reveals the possibility of orientation as such.

¹ Lawrence Weiner: “A Conversation with Barbaralee Diamondstein,” in Gerti Fietzek and Gregor Stemmrch (eds.), *HAVING BEEN SAID: WRITINGS AND INTERVIEWS*

OF LAWRENCE WEINER, 1968–2003. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005, pp. 290–97, esp. 294.