

**SOL
LEWITT**
**A WALL
DRAWING
RETRO-
SPECTIVE**

MASS MoCA

**Welcome to
Sol LeWitt: A Wall
Drawing Retrospective,
a collaboration of the
Yale University Art
Gallery, the Williams
College Museum of Art,
and MASS MoCA.
On view here are
105 wall drawings,
installed on three floors
of a 27,000 square foot
mill building specially
renovated for this
show. The work will
be on view for an
unprecedented
25-year period.**

Sol LeWitt is perhaps best known for separating the act of conceiving a work of art from the act of executing it, an approach to art-making he outlined most concisely in his 1967 statement: “The idea becomes the machine that makes the art.” If you are not familiar with Sol LeWitt’s work and the conceptually based approach to art-making that he and other artists pioneered in the 1960s, you might enjoy knowing how LeWitt came to make his wall drawings, which were first described with concise language and clear diagrams that he and/or others could apply directly to specific walls in any given location.

LeWitt’s sources were as wide-ranging as his interest in art history, music, science, and design: Responding early in his career to the 19th-century experiments of photographer Eadweard Muybridge, who fastened together and then triggered banks of cameras in rapid succession to record discrete sequential representations of animal and human locomotion, LeWitt adopted what his good friend and fellow artist Mel Bochner came to describe as “the serial attitude”. Muybridge’s work was revelatory to LeWitt in many ways, especially in how it enabled motion—the gait of a horse, the flip of a gymnast, the twirl of a dancer—to be perceived in elegant visual passages that dramatically expanded human perception and thought. Some of LeWitt’s earliest paintings and sculptural constructions in the 1960s paid homage to Muybridge, but in 1968 his work took a new direction when he conceived his first wall drawing and executed it at the Paula

Cooper Gallery in New York City. The essential visual grammar LeWitt employed to compose this first wall drawing consisted of four kinds of straight lines—vertical, horizontal, diagonal right to left, and diagonal left to right—which he drew in black pencil in carefully measured sequences within 32 identically sized squares. In each square he chose a combination of two of the four straight lines, thus setting forth all possible ways in which these four lines could be combined into a series of two. Although LeWitt executed this first wall drawing in his own hand, he quickly realized that others could participate in the making of such drawings, just as musicians are guided by composers’ scores to give direction to their individual, ensemble, or orchestral performances.

LeWitt presented his next nine wall drawings in Los Angeles, Düsseldorf, and Rome, entrusting their realization to the hands of others, before returning again to the Paula Cooper Gallery in 1969 to produce *Wall Drawing 11* [1](#). This work, the earliest included in this retrospective and located on the first floor of MASS MoCA’s Building #7, was first executed by LeWitt, along with artists Adrian Piper and Jerry Orter. It sets forth the ways in which three of his four kinds of straight lines can be drawn in combination within four equally sized quadrants on a wall.

A year later, in 1970, LeWitt grappled with the broader conceptual inclusion of architecture in his wall drawings, conceiving the instructions for *Wall Drawing 51. All architectural points connected by straight lines* [2](#), also installed on the first floor. This work, which LeWitt dictated be drawn with a contractor’s blue chalk snap line, has since been realized in numerous buildings throughout the world, and in each instance the resultant combination and length of lines are discreetly different, depending on the specifics of the architectural circumstances. In some of LeWitt’s early, formative works, he began to add the three primary colors—yellow, blue, and red—greatly increasing the possible permutations of his four kinds of straight lines from what had previously been sequential combinations rendered only in gray graphite pencil. LeWitt’s expanding visual vocabulary is especially clear in *Wall Drawing 85. A wall is divided into four horizontal parts. In the top row are four equal vertical divisions, each with colored lines in a different direction. In the second row, six double combinations; in the third row, four triple combinations; in the bottom row, all four combinations superimposed* [3](#).

Shortly thereafter, LeWitt decided that the visual vocabulary guiding his line drawings need not be restricted to combinations of straight lines, or be drawn only within discrete squares and/or

bands of four colors on white walls. He soon set forth a number of new works, each describing and diagramming other ways in which lines could fill a wall, for example *Wall Drawing 46. Vertical lines, not straight, not touching, covering the wall evenly* ❶ and *Wall Drawing 86. Ten thousand lines about ten inches (25 cm) long, covering the wall entirely*. These works allowed the assistants who would draw them certain latitudes of judgment and process, and wall drawings such as these are never realized in exactly the same way from one venue to another. Other wall drawings LeWitt created in the 1970s introduced even broader notions of performative freedom and chance to those who were to execute his works, much as composers such as John Cage, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass and choreographers Merce Cunningham, Yvonne Rainer, and Trisha Brown were doing at the same time.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, LeWitt continued to develop his visual vocabulary, also broadening the variety of materials used to execute his rapidly growing body of work. Many of the wall drawings he created in this period included a repertory of basic geometric figures and forms. *Wall Drawing 295. Six white geometric figures (outlines) superimposed on a black wall* ❷, for example, is an austere masterpiece that LeWitt created in 1975, and yet this work also resonates visually and historically with Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*. It is essential to keep in mind that LeWitt—in addition to being a pioneering Conceptual and Minimalist artist—held fast a deep respect for the classical antecedents of visual art, architecture, music, dance, and other creative disciplines. He never laid claim to the notion that drawing on walls was a unique creative conception of his own, and he was quick to point out that the first evidence we have of human drawing exists on cave walls, or that the masterful traditions of fresco and mural painting began many centuries ago and continue strongly to this day. Indeed, he once said, “I would like to produce something that I would not be ashamed to show to Giotto.”

During this same period, LeWitt began to give color a bolder and greater visual presence

in his wall drawings. He did so by employing latex paints, India inks, Pelican water colors, and, most recently, Lascaux light-fast acrylic paints and washes to further explore color, which he initially had confined in his works to yellow (Y), blue (B), red (R), and gray (G), much as he had first explored lines using only four basic types of lines.

LeWitt began using bold primary colors in his wall drawings during the early 1980s, and commenced experimenting with the ways in which primary colors could be applied to walls—either individually in various densities, or superimposed one atop the other. He also swiftly figured out how he could best communicate such color combinations and effects to his growing legion of assistants: by noting clearly on his diagrams which individual color or color combination was called for within every wall drawing, stating in abbreviated letters how their specific densities and/or hues were to be realized by applying a particular sequence of color applications. For example, an intense single color might be described as RRRR (red, red, red, red), and a mixed hue of color might be described as YBBGG (yellow, blue, blue, gray, gray). Many from this period of experimentation are featured on the second floor; especially beautiful in its wide variety of hues is *Wall Drawing 681C* ❸, also on view—in another rendition—at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

Many other wall drawings LeWitt conceived from the late 1980s onward employ brilliant primary colors rendered with acrylic paints. At times LeWitt combined them with the complementary colors of orange, purple, and green, generating even greater complexities of color within exuberant compositions consisting variously of serial bands, arcs, squares, circles, loopy lines, and complex geometric and isometric forms. These works pack tremendous visual punch and open up complex optical spaces, especially when produced on such a grand scale as is seen in this retrospective. *Wall Drawing 915* ❹ and *Wall Drawing 1042* ❺ on the third floor of Building #7 exemplify this aspect of the artist's work and reside not far from *Wall Drawing 821* and *Wall Drawing 822* ❻,

The wall drawings in this retrospective were executed by Beverly Acha, Chip Allen, Aaron Andrews, Emily Arauz, Takeshi Arita, Cameron Arnold, Chris Cobb, Sylvia Birns-Swindlehurst, Alexandra Bouwsma, Matthew Capezuto, Kim Carlino, Jennifer Chain, Sachiko Cho, Elizabeth Christ, Andrew Colbert, Emily Colman, Megan Dyer, Lacey Fekishazy, Miriam Foster, Alison Gaby, Corin Godfrey, Alexander Guerrero, Sarah Heinemann, Karli Hendrickson, John Hogan, Gabriel Hurier, Julia Isenberg, Aran Jones, Rebecca Kane, David Kant, Noa Kaplan-Sears, Clinton King, Nicholas Kozak, Sophia LaCava-Bohanan, Georgia Lassner, Robert Liles, Roland Lusk, Samuel McCune, Diana Mellon, Kristina Mooney, Susan Morrow, Nancy Nichols, Hidemi Nomura, Anna Pickens, Tomas Ramberg, Amy Rathbone, Jessica Robinson, Anna Robinson-Sweet, Alexandra Rose, Anthony Sansotta, Benjamin Schweizer, Miyo St. Clair, Wim Starkenburg, Jordan Starr-Bochiccho, Laura Staugaitis, Nobuto Suga, Michael Benjamin Vedder, Julia Wagner, Jo Watanabe, and Zach Whitehurst.

in which LeWitt chose to distinguish black-on-black wave forms and black-on-black bands with alternating matte and glossy surfaces.

As LeWitt's wall drawings of the past two decades became increasingly complex with respect to color calculation and application, the craft and hand skills needed to execute them also become increasingly demanding. This required LeWitt's many assistants to develop not only careful measuring and drafting skills but also preparatory projection, drawing, and refined masking techniques that often preceded subsequent paint-rolling, acrylic wash application, drying, and varnishing procedures. Nonetheless, as the thinking, technical materials, and hand skills needed to realize LeWitt wall drawings evolved over time, the artist's basic visual vocabulary remained remarkably lean, direct, and concise. All lines, colors, figures, forms, and dimensions needed to execute a particular wall drawing continued to be communicated clearly by LeWitt to those who worked with and for him in his increasingly global practice. He came to conduct something akin to a far-flung visual orchestra, one whose players—both seasoned and young apprentices—were active the world over.

During the last four years of his life, as he became ill with cancer, LeWitt still continued to work daily, almost without interruption, creating new wall drawings at an amazing pace. Among the most beautiful of the more than 1,260 wall drawings LeWitt created between 1968 and 2007 are his late black-and-white scribble drawings. Six of these works have been drawn to conclude his retrospective on the third floor of MASS MoCA's Building #7. Standing before them, you will sense immediately how these late works are imbued with a transcendent aura of light and luminosity. LeWitt created these last wall drawings by returning to the simple and direct way he made his first wall drawing back in 1968, once again using just graphite pencil lead to render the figures, forms, and passages of light, whose shimmering presence is achieved through carefully measured bands and densities of hand-scribbled lines. These last wall drawings—in which single lines are, as LeWitt instructed, "taken for a random walk" of immense density and complexity—comprise a visual crescendo to one of the greatest bodies of contemporary art created in our time, one specifically conceived by LeWitt so that people other than himself could partake in the realization and enjoyment of his art in perpetuity.

Jock Reynolds

The Henry J. Heinz II Director
Yale University Art Gallery
November 2008

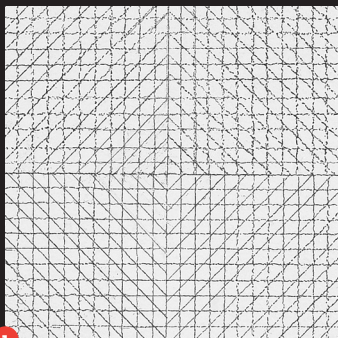
Sol LeWitt: A Wall Drawing Retrospective is a collaboration of MASS MoCA, Yale University Art Gallery, and Williams College Museum of Art.

www.massmoca.org/lewitt

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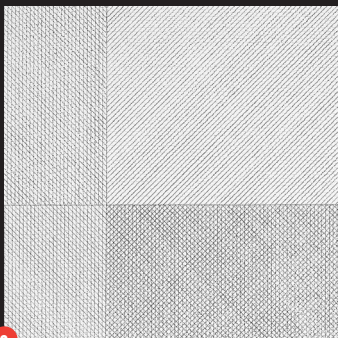
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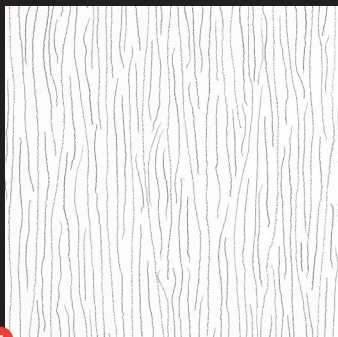
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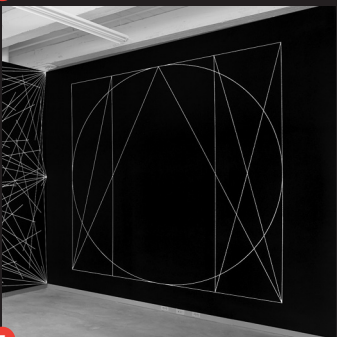
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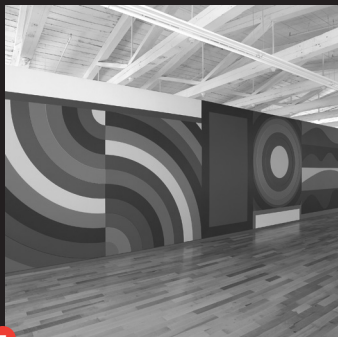
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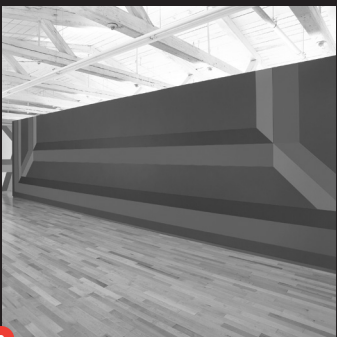
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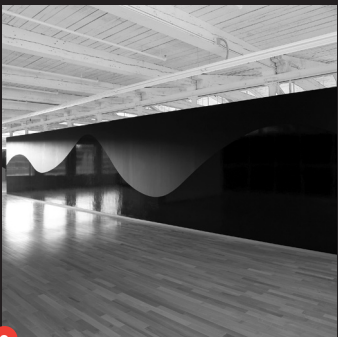
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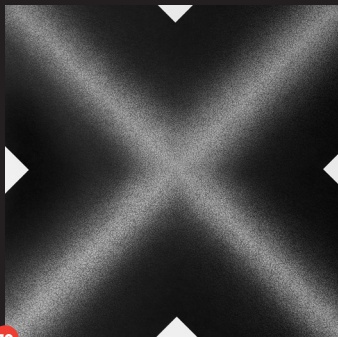
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1. Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Anna Marie and Robert F. Shapiro, B.A. 1956 / 2, 3, 4. LeWitt Collection, Chester, Connecticut / 5. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with matching funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Modern and Contemporary Art Council (M.76.103) / 6. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection, 1993 / 7, 8, 9. Courtesy of the Estate of Sol LeWitt / 10. Detail of *Wall Drawing 1247. Scribbles 7 (PW)*, 2007. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Donald Fisher, San Francisco / Photos by Kevin Kennefick