

The ABCDs of Sol LeWitt



Complex Forms and Pyramids

LeWitt introduced the term “complex form” in 1966 when he wrote in “Serial Project” that, “A more complex form would be too interesting in itself and obstruct the meaning of the whole. There is no need to invent new forms.”¹⁸ In this and later statements, he drew a distinction between the basic cubes and squares used in modular works such as *ABCD 9 (Row)* and forms devised by the artist or complicated shapes such as rectangles, trapezoids, and parallelograms.¹⁹

He would return to this concept of the complex form twenty years later when he originated these commanding and elaborate structures, beginning with the pyramids in 1986. Like LeWitt’s earlier works, the idea of the complex form is embodied in its many variations. They, too, were produced through a plan and simple working method that led to serial-like transformations of a fundamental premise. LeWitt assigned points, often at random, to the intersections of axes on gridded paper. These coordinates, which were sometimes connected by lines, plot the footprint and specify the form’s multiple heights and planes. Fabricators built the works from these minimal plans and corresponding models. LeWitt could not fully anticipate the exact shape these structures would ultimately take.²⁰

This faith in process and commitment to artistic play characterized LeWitt’s approach to his work from the outset. The principles expressed at the beginning of his career provided a foundation on which he continued to build an inner aesthetic dialogue. Until his death in 2007, he remained convinced that conceptual artists could “leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.”²¹ Despite the seeming logic of his method, he understood that art was about defying the expected, questioning assumptions, and embracing the unanticipated.

—Erica DiBenedetto, Williams College Graduate Student
in the History of Art, Class of 2009

as the “outer form.” Group A contains open inner and exterior forms; group B, closed inner and open exterior; group C, open inner and closed exterior; and group D, closed inner and exterior. The number 9 refers to the location of the sets within the letter groups comprising the entire *Serial Project*.¹¹

LeWitt later identified a Muybridge photogravure of a running man as “the inspiration for making all the transformations” among the *Serial Project* elements.¹² “As the Muybridge was a narrative of a man running so the combinations of a serial work functions as a narrative also. And also each part encapsulates the entire process and whole idea.”¹³ Likewise, *ABCD 9* conveys the concept of *Serial Project* because the legibility of the system is preserved in the row.

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Principle D: “Conceptual art is made to engage the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or emotions.”¹⁴

LeWitt’s art was formulated around the notion that a variety of interpretations was expected. In published correspondence with curator Andrea Miller-Keller about the wall drawings, LeWitt stated, “Ideas cannot be owned. They belong to whomever understands them.”¹⁵

For the viewer, reader, or “collaborator,” LeWitt endeavored to make accessible the information necessary to understand the artwork. He published and exhibited writings, sketches, designs, and maquettes; they held as much import for LeWitt as the art object because they also communicated the essential idea and the artist’s process.¹⁶ In the late 1960s and 1970s, he used the written word—whether in titles, instructions, or texts—to describe forms.

LeWitt also incorporated the process of articulation into the artwork itself and, in certain cases, played with the relationship between words and images. In *The Location of Six Geometric Figures*, written descriptions state the exact placement of the respective forms floating in the boxes above them. Faint lines, numbers, and the letters A, B, and C sketched in pencil are artifacts of the artist following his own directives and identifying the many points halfway between other points and sides. The complexity of the language contrasts with the straightforward nature of the shapes.

In *Modular Wall Structure*, the structure itself clearly shows the process: five cubes by five cubes flanked by four by four followed by three by three and so on. The compartments are at once components and composition, factors and foundation. In the catalog of his first retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art in 1978, LeWitt remarked that around 1965 he devised a formula to standardize the proportions of open cube structures like this one: “a ratio of 8.5:1 between the material (wood or metal) and the spaces between it was decided upon. As with the white color, the 8.5:1 ratio was an arbitrary decision, but once it had been decided upon, it was always used.”¹⁷ These forms were painted white to draw attention to the structure rather than the surface of the work.

¹ Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” in *Sol LeWitt: A Retrospective*, Gary Garrels, et al. (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Art, 2000), 369. Reprinted from *Artforum*, vol. 5, no. 10 (June 1967): 79-83.

² LeWitt, “Drawing Series 1968 (Fours),” *Studio International* 180, no. 910 (April 1969): 189.

³ LeWitt, “Paragraphs,” 369.

⁴ Unpublished typescript of talk by Sol LeWitt to the “Art Now” class at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Nova Scotia, March 20, 1970, quoted in Lucy Lippard, “The Structures, The Structures and the Wall Drawings, The Structures and the Wall Drawings and the Books,” in *Sol LeWitt*, ed. Alicia Legg. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1978), 25.

⁵ LeWitt, “Paragraphs,” 369.

⁶ LeWitt, “(Fours),” 189.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ LeWitt, “Serial Project No. 1,” in *Retrospective*, 373. Reprinted from *Aspen Magazine*, sect.17, nos. 5-6, 1966, n.p.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ LeWitt, “Serial Project,” 373-374.

¹² Andrew Wilson, “Sol LeWitt Interviewed,” in *Sol LeWitt: Critical Texts*, ed. Adachia Zevi (Rome: Libri de AEIUIO, 1995), 124. Reprinted from *Art Monthly*, No. 164, London, March 1993.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ LeWitt, “Paragraphs,” 371.

¹⁵ Andrea Miller-Keller, “Excerpts from a Correspondence, 1981-1983,” in *Sol LeWitt Wall Drawings 1968-1984*, ed. Susanna Singer (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1984), 22.

¹⁶ See LeWitt, “Paragraphs,” 371.

¹⁷ LeWitt, “Illustrations: Works by Sol LeWitt, 1962-1977, with His Commentaries,” in *Sol LeWitt*, 59.

¹⁸ Sol LeWitt, “Serial Project,” 373.

¹⁹ See LeWitt, “Paragraphs,” 370 and Miller-Keller, “Excerpts,” 19.

²⁰ David Batchelor, “Within and Between,” in *Sol LeWitt: Structures 1962-1993*, Batchelor, et al. (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1993), 23; Luciano Elisei and Moreno Orazi, “Nota tecnica esplicativa riguardante le modalità di esecuzione delle “piramidi” e delle “forme complesse” in *Sol LeWitt: Opere recenti, pyramids, complex forms, e folding screens*, Achille Bonito Oliva et al. (Perugia: Electa, Editori Umbri Associati, 1990/1992), 75-77.

²¹ LeWitt, “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” in *Retrospective*, 371. Reprinted from *Art-Language* 1, no. 1 (May 1969): 11-13.

The ABCDs of Sol LeWitt presents the fundamental principles of Sol LeWitt's art and ideas that he developed in the 1960s, and then reinterpreted over the course of a forty-year career. LeWitt's *oeuvre* includes drawings, photography-based works, artist's books, prints, gouaches, structures (the term he preferred for his three-dimensional objects), and over 1200 wall drawings. As a practitioner and thinker, LeWitt established new methods for making art and re-envisioned the relationships among artist, viewer, and artwork. His innovative ideas informed both Minimalism, in which artists often created series from primary geometric elements, and Conceptual Art, in which artists prioritized the artwork's underlying idea or process over its physical realization.

In the museum's Aaron Gallery, statements from LeWitt's writings are paired with early drawings and structures from the 1960s and 1970s. The installation of the Weston Rotunda considers how the artist applied the principles informing his first forays into Conceptual Art to his later *Pyramids* and *Complex Forms*, multifaceted structures comprised of irregular angles and edges. The selection is inspired by a gift to the Williams College Museum of Art of *Complex Form #3* from Sol and Carol LeWitt in 1993.



Sol LeWitt (American, 1928–2007) *From the Word "Art": Blue Lines to Four Corners, Green Lines to Four Sides and Red Lines Between the Words "Art" on the Printed Page*, 1972; colored ink and pencil on paper, 8.5 x 9 in. The LeWitt Collection, Chester, CT. Photo by R.J. Phil.

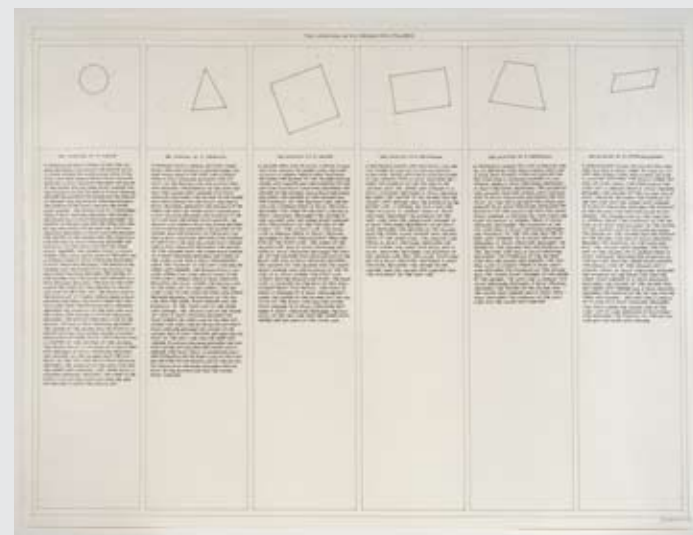
This exhibition inaugurates a series of exhibitions and programs organized by the Williams College Museum of Art to complement *Sol LeWitt: A Wall Drawing Retrospective* at MASS MoCA. The retrospective, featuring over 100 wall drawings, is an ongoing collaboration among MASS MoCA, the Yale University Art Gallery, and the Williams College Museum of Art. Designed by the artist, this unique installation will remain on view at MASS MoCA for 25 years.

Principle A: "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art."¹

This profoundly important sentence from LeWitt's pioneering text "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" has influenced artists and art historians since its first publication in *Artforum* in 1967. It summarizes a central tenet of LeWitt's practice— that the idea underpinning the artwork is its most essential component. The idea is the *raison d'être* and a driving force, and the work is its visual counterpart.

With this principle, LeWitt established the artist's role as one engaged foremost with mental, rather than manual, activity.

In the case of wall drawings, such as *Wall Drawing #959: Uneven Bands from the Upper Right Corner* installed in the museum's atrium, the primacy of the idea inspired a collaborative

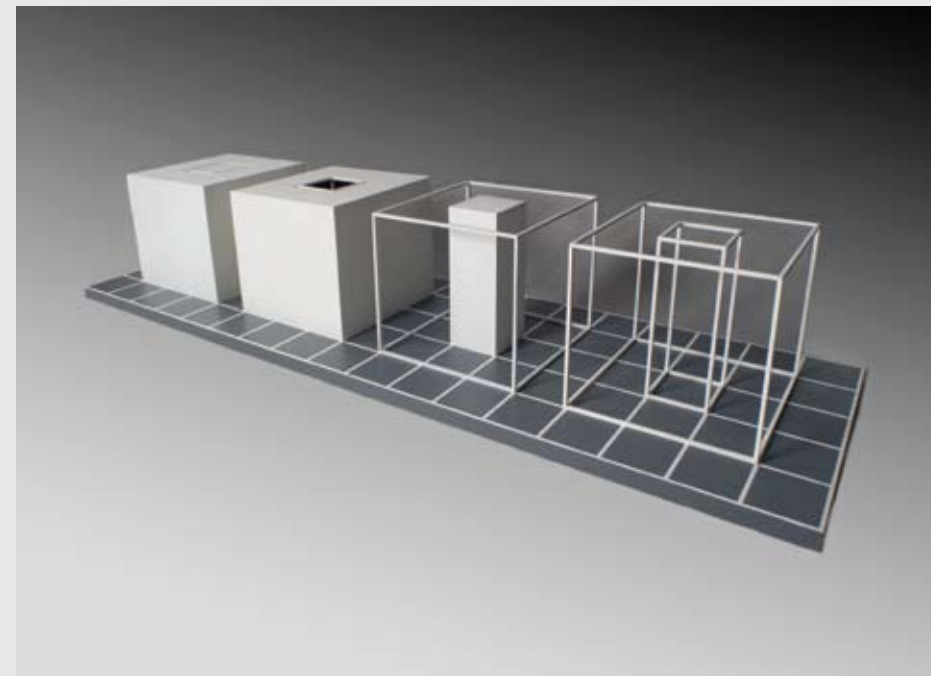


Sol LeWitt (American, 1928–2007) *The Location of Six Geometric Figures*, 1974; ink and pencil on paper, 22 x 30 in. The LeWitt Collection, Chester, CT. Photo by R.J. Phil.

process with ephemeral results. LeWitt formulated written and visual instructions for making wall drawings, and the artist's trained assistants, sometimes aided by students, implemented these directions in a particular site. Occasionally, his instructions invited their improvisation.

Executed directly on the wall without the artist's physical involvement, the premise of the artwork is emphasized more than the product. In an early article, the artist remarked, "Two-dimensional works are not seen as objects. The work is a manifestation of an idea. It is an idea and not an object."² Without a transportable support like a canvas or piece of paper, wall drawings circulate as a set of instructions with a certificate signed by the artist. They can be carried out and effaced *ad infinitum*, denying the specificity of the original installation.

As with language, which is constituted by sets of rules and words, LeWitt created work by developing a plan and using a pared-down artistic vocabulary of lines, colors, and geometric forms to express the underlying idea and to generate its permutations. He explored the unbounded, aesthetic potential of rearranging these essential components in deliberate variations and sequences. Lines, for



Sol LeWitt (American, 1928–2007) *ABC D 9 (Row)*, 1966; refabricated 1994; painted steel; platform and nine elements, 20.375 x 102.25 x 30.5 in. The LeWitt Collection, Chester, CT. Photo by R.J. Phil.

example, could produce a network anchored in preexisting structural features of the surface on which they were drawn, such as in *From the Word "Art": Blue Lines to Four Corners, Green Lines to Four Sides, and Red Lines Between the Words "Art" on the Printed Page*.

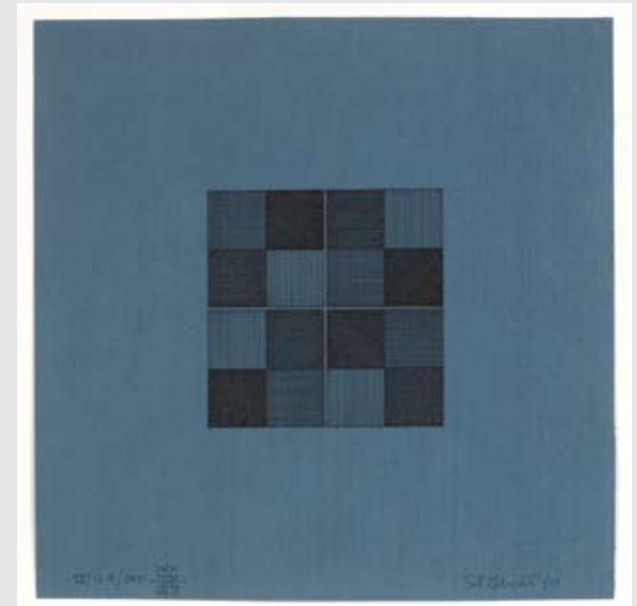
Principle B: "To work with a plan that is pre-set is one way of avoiding subjectivity. It also obviates the necessity of designing each work in turn. The plan would design the work."³

Central to LeWitt's practice was the use of predefined plans to realize the artwork. By articulating guidelines in advance, LeWitt avoided making spontaneous choices that might dilute or obscure the idea. The system determines the work's resolution.

In 1970, the artist said, "I have to know A, B, C and D. I can't go from A to D without knowing what's in between."⁴ LeWitt arrived at "D" by following the progression from A to B to C systematically, not by envisioning a final form before beginning the work. The sequence appears to be immutable and inevitable. However, LeWitt's practice was methodical without being over-determined and integrated the unexpected without being impulsive. His rule-based process restricted outcomes within a discrete work while providing seemingly endless

opportunities for future works. As the artist wrote, "Some plans would require millions of variations, and some a limited number, but both are finite. Other plans imply infinity."⁵

For example, LeWitt's *Drawing Series* examines all combinations of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal lines from left to right and from right to left ("the four different absolute directions") drafted in the quadrants of subdivided squares. In the related explication, "Drawing Series 1968 (Fours)," published in the April 1969 volume of *Studio International*, LeWitt described the system that produced the sequence of lines: "Each drawing is composed of four squares which are in turn divided into four squares, each with a different value (1, 2, 3, 4). Each quarter has a 1, 2, 3 and a 4. These series contain all twenty-four permutations of 1 2 3 4."⁶ *Drawing Series IV/12 B/2431* is the twelfth possible configuration. By creating "A" and "B" versions of the series—the first with only the basic line types, and the second with the line types superimposed—he explored further variations of the system.⁷



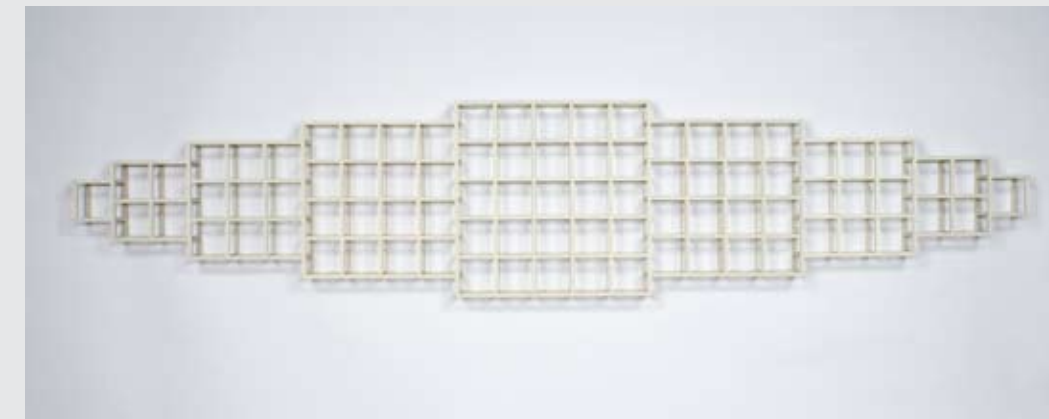
Sol LeWitt (American, 1928–2007) *Drawing Series IV/12 B/2431*, 1969; ink on blue paper, 11.25 x 11.25 in. The LeWitt Collection, Chester, CT. Photo by R.J. Phil.

Principle C: "The serial artist does not attempt to produce a beautiful or mysterious object but functions merely as a clerk cataloging the results of his premise."⁸

Influenced by Eadweard Muybridge's (1830–1904) sequential photographs, which capture people and animals in motion, LeWitt developed compositions in which individual components are iterations of surrounding components. In serial art, "regulated changes" of a subject are visually charted.⁹

One of LeWitt's first experiments with seriality was *Serial Project No. 1 (ABCD)*, 1966, a structure and related publication in *Aspen Magazine*. In the text, he outlined the arrangement of nine "sets," or combinations, of open and closed cubes and squares in the structure's quadrants (titled groups A, B, C, and D). LeWitt defined the cube and square as organizational elements, likening these shapes to a work's "syntax" and later to its grammar.¹⁰

ABCD 9 (Row), one of the nine sets, is extracted from the overall framework. It consists of four cubes containing an "inner form," a square, the same height



Sol LeWitt (American, 1928–2007) *Modular Wall Structure*, undated; painted wood, 19 1/16 x 94 x 4 1/4 in. The LeWitt Collection, Chester, CT. Photo by R.J. Phil.