

Lawrence Weiner: Laudation

Roswitha Haftmann Prize, Kunsthaus Zürich, 21.5.2015

Dear Lawrence, dear Alice, Ladies and Gentlemen,

**'BITS & PIECES PUT TOGETHER TO PRESENT A SEMBLANCE OF A WHOLE'**

This is a work by Lawrence Weiner one might appropriately use to open a laudation, since what could better describe an oeuvre than this sequence of words, literally enacting their proposition on the wall: bit by bit, as we read, it purportedly assembles itself into a unity. So does this work speak about art? Certainly it does, but not with irony: rather, with sober objectivity, for is there any whole that is not illusory? What exists is language; there are the things in the world that it names, and the constant assembling of these things by human beings so as to create, for a moment, something else. Lawrence Weiner, as the materialist he has always called himself, has also understood sculpture as a displacement of mass: 'I realized sculpture was about "Put in Place", volume or mass put in place.' Of mass that is moved from one place to another – and one thinks here of the sculptures of Carl Andre and Ulrich Rückriem, among others – without there being a right or a wrong place for it.

Lawrence Weiner is one of those artists who began, in the mid-1960s, to consider not only what a painting or a sculpture is, but what a painting or a sculpture signifies. This was more than a merely stylistic or thematic question, since it addressed all of the certainties theretofore associated with the work of art. What were the categories one encountered, what were the conditions of their establishment and perception, and what role did the artist play in all of this? Contemporary texts and interviews suggest the considerations forcing artists not to develop an aesthetics, but at first merely to observe and draw conclusions. In answer to questions about an artwork's appearance they created newfangled forms, such as Donald Judd's early wall objects in 1962, which were neither paintings nor sculptures; or Dan Flavin, who opted for fluorescent tubing instead of conventional painting or sculpting media; or Fred Sandback, who saw the partition of a space as a sculpture; or Michael Asher, who intervened in the material conditions of the exhibition space; or indeed Lawrence Weiner, who described his works in a range of materials linguistically. The concentration on

such an individual aspect made sense at that historical moment, with an eye to using this precise excerpt to return once again to the whole. And to this end, that one excerpt had to be considered and studied carefully; it was, from that point on, cathected by an artist.

When a young Lawrence Weiner was producing his first sculptures and paintings in the 1960s, he noted the divergence between his work, with its describable, reifiable qualities, and the moment at which it was perceived by the viewer and conceived, understood as something specific; the divergence between the general and the particular, which arises in reception. The more objectified and abstract the artwork became, the farther apart these two poles drifted. All one needed to do was follow American art, where the process was at work in exemplary fashion – from Jackson Pollock's all-over paintings and Barnett Newman's colour fields to the black-in-black paintings of Ad Reinhardt. These last exerted a strong attraction on Weiner, since the specific, the particular seemed to have been virtually expunged from them. Weiner's answer to these paintings was to inscribe the trace of the particular into such solipsistic, hermetic painting, to excise something, materially and symbolically, from its perfection – just as he was to do later, in a celebrated work, when he proposed removing a section of the Wall. He removed a corner from the large-format monochromes he was painting at the time and added a coloured strip to one of the long ends by spraying colour onto the painted surface. The size of the corner removed and the colour of the strip were agreed with the painting's purchaser. To Weiner, this was entirely analogous to the contemporary Californian trend of customizing cars with stripes along the bodywork.

Weiner was still 'just' a painter, in his own words; but he had grasped the fact that the work was part of a structure, a triangle consisting of the artist, the work and its recipient, the person who contemplated and perhaps acquired it. Weiner saw this less as a social or sociological observation, and more as a pragmatic situation. The meaning of a work is not given in advance, nor can it be determined by its author alone, but rather arises from the relationship between those concerned to the particular object, considered now less as a specific thing than as a general sign. If the work is an element of a structure, then it is like any word or sentence: without fixed form or meaning; instead, it is mobile, dependent on the factors upon which the work is contingent. Weiner thus concluded that his task

was to formulate the work; that he might produce it, but was not obliged to do so; and that this last could also be delegated to a third party. 'Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership' was the key sentence in the statement that served as a preamble to his work from 1969 on. Whether the work is built, and who does the building, is up to its recipient, who not only shows it or purchases it, but takes responsibility for it as well: as in the case of the piece 'A CUP OF SEA WATER POURED UPON THE FLOOR'.

Such analysis is all well and good; what Weiner did with the insight was decisive for his art. In the first place it meant that his works existed solely in linguistic form, as descriptions of situations with materials, without a grammatical subject or conjugated verb, since the actors only showed up when the work had been formulated. His pieces first circulated on slips of paper and in catalogues; later they were painted on walls but could also be presented elsewhere – Weiner used them to design posters, published artist's books in which his works filled the pages, produced films in which his works were recited, recorded albums with musicians on which his works were sung. Posters, books, films and music had the advantage of allowing others to interact with the works contained as part of their lives, and thereby to play a role, their role. Their pithy formulation allowed his works to install themselves at a wide range of sites without question, and to remain there; and thus Weiner had achieved something essential. If his pieces were sequences of words that could be represented one way or another, then they required a support upon which they might be made visible and legible. There are works that address this very fact:

#### **SUPPORTED DESPITE THE LACK OF A BUTTRESS**

This support is not something timeless, like a sequence of words: it is temporally contingent because a part of culture, where it finds its place and its function. I am thinking not only of the walls of a gallery or museum, where Weiner's works have been exhibited, but rather of the many other walls or objects that bear works of Weiner's, among them three public squares in Zurich – Bellevue, Helvetiaplatz and Limmatplatz, where words of steel have been inlaid into the asphalt. The support for a given work was always meticulously selected, a bit mischievously as well. In Weiner's words, this intervention amounts to 'to place an informal object (the art) within a formal construct (the culture)'. By bumping up against

a particular culture and being assumed by it, art transforms a culture, a culture transforms itself. Where Weiner's sentences are read they become a part of life, of a society that, consciously or not, accepts them and does something with them. But just what can one do with them?

Since Weiner's works consist of language, they can be translated for each specific site. 'BALL BEARINGS OR ROUND STONES MADE TO ROLL OUTSIDE OF WHAT THERE IS' can be found in Zurich in German and Italian. Weiner's pieces on walls or floors are not pictures, they are not poems, they are not communiqués: they describe objects, a situation, no more and no less. A poem makes language flare up, and the latter reflects itself in rhymes and other formal strictures. For their part, Weiner's sentences are entirely oriented towards their objects: objects are put into relation with other objects. The words describe something that one could construct materially: a sculpture, in other words; and Weiner has indeed always described himself as a sculptor, not so as to ally himself with any particular tradition but rather to stress that he is concerned with the material itself, and not with images of it, that every work is something material and consists of language and the materials named by it. And that is also true of his works: the words are placed, as if objects had been lined up paratactically: 'ON TOP OF THE TREES'. But because the words are themselves a material thing, written characters for example, they also describe their own material appearance: capital letters are arrayed with capital letters and together form a word, a sequence of words. For Weiner, letters and words are like pieces of wood or iron, 'ball bearings or round stones'. Weiner is not a language artist; he uses language as if it were not language, the words mute objects, like the steel plates Carl Andre lays on the ground. A paradox, of course; but therein lies the answer to the question: What do people at Limmatplatz make of the words they find at their feet? If Weiner denies the poetic dimension of these words, if these words are what they are, then the only thing creating a context is their syntax. It is not Weiner speaking to us, and the linguistic form is not the image of a higher order that might be responsible for the objects and the people that use them: it is used as required. Language is an object like any other, in principle fungible and utile, factually declarative and malleable, without any distance from material reality, a mere designation: 'In fact, what has art got to do with a world order? Nothing. Language is red paint.'

In fact – because we are confronted with facts and not with anything subjective, we are free to do something with these works, the way we are when encountering a painting or a sculpture. Every epoch, every culture, every individual takes something from it and relates that something to what it does, to what it believes, to how it lives. The work remains unscathed, and continues to exist. ‘SOME FLOWERS CUT AND STREWN UPON SOME APPLES FALLEN FROM THE TREE & LAID TO REST’. Is this an epitaph, is it an Arcadian reflection or simply a still life? It is not Weiner’s work that intends these ways of reading; they are the business of those who stand before the work and construct it, in the broadest sense, for themselves. Its linguistic nature guarantees free access to the work – whether on the material level of a collection, or on the intellectual level of interpretation: a work composed of language can be appropriated by anyone who reads it.

Facts instead of metaphors, that was the motto of 20th-century American art; or, in William Carlos Williams’ formulation: ‘No ideas but in facts.’ The idea of the factual reality of the work of art was foundational for Jackson Pollock, for Barnett Newman, and for Weiner’s friend John Chamberlain as well. The work as the sum of independent components – colour, surface, material – corresponds to Weiner’s informal object, to the work that is consigned to its reader. It no longer matters whether we are talking about a painting, a sculpture or a sentence. Reality instead of categories – that is the dream of an art that has freed itself of all history and explication, so as to become ineluctable reality. Like all great artists, in his work, Weiner approaches the real – word by word, material by material, arrayed without mystery, and therefore completely indecipherable. ‘A BIT OF MATTER AND A LITTLE BIT MORE’. Just a little bit more material, or a little bit more meaning?

But Lawrence Weiner would not be the artist he is today if there were not more to it than that. With an art consisting of language, an artist could be invisible, could disappear; and yet Weiner behaves in exactly the opposite fashion: he is almost unbelievably present, believing as he does in the figure of the artist, in that figure’s mission in culture, in society; believing as he does in that figure’s ethical function. Ethics, the canon of true and virtuous action, makes great demands. How are its maxims to be derived from art, whose works, while binding, refuse any and all unambiguous statements? What do Weiner’s sculptural sentences

in particular have to say to such questions? They do not prescribe, nor do they preach, for Weiner sees the artist not as a guru, nor as a saviour; all forms of metaphysics and artistic ideology are alien to him. His pieces represent a pragmatic conception of the here and now, acting without prejudice in art, and in everyday life; and, as he once confided to me, pragmatism is the true idealism. The artist's only task can be to explain that things are in everyone's hands, that artists do not vicariously solve the problems posed by a given epoch. When the United States Declaration of Independence defends the right to 'Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness', it is clear that the general nature of these words calls out for the particular. This is what the artist in Weiner's sense plays with: or, as he says, 'Play Tic Tac Toe and hope for the best.'

Dieter Schwarz