Crown Point Press
Newsletter
Spring 1997

Overview

Understandings and Misunderstandings

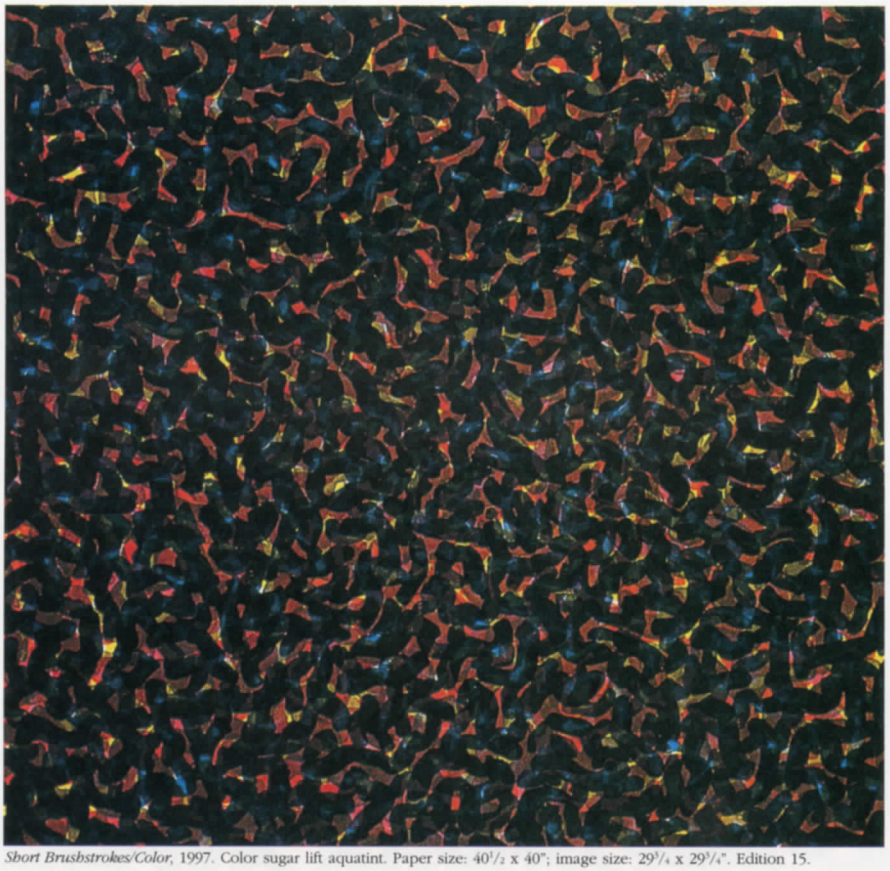
Crown Point Press and the Prints of Sol LeWitt

I first met Sol LeWitt in 1971 when he rang the doorbell of my home in Berkeley, and my two big dogs almost knocked him down the steps. "Is this the Crown Point Press?" he inquired politely, looking around at my ten year old son building a fort in the front yard. The press, which I had founded nine years earlier in 1962, was in my basement, and LeWitt was the first artist I worked with from outside California. He had come all the way from New York that day, and I can't—for the life of me—remember now why I wasn't expecting him.

To make matters worse, I didn't have any idea what his work was like, or why it mattered. That first day he covered a small square plate with fine scribbles and asked me to print it in yellow, then ink it in red, turn it, and print it again on top of itself, then do the same thing with blue, and then with black. I was mystified. But I did it. This year, 1997, twenty-six years later, my printers and I did it again—a larger plate, with a more complex image, but the same concept. In the meantime, I have been thinking about why Sol LeWitt's work matters.

"One usually understands the art of the past by applying the conventions of the present, thus misunderstanding the art of the past," LeWitt wrote in 1967. We misunderstand not only the art of the past, but also that of the present, by applying whatever conventions we are personally harboring to any art that we see. At that time, 1971, I thought I was getting away from the conventions of abstract expressionism, which I had adopted in the late 1950s when I was in art school. But I must not have gotten very far away, because I still thought self-expression was the reason for making art.

Jackson Pollock, one of the key abstract expressionists, said that students should concentrate on "saying something" rather than on learning techniques. But Willem de Kooning, the other key—who died recently at the age of 92—was classically trained and his painting showed his training. So the presence or absence of techniques from the past is really not the issue. The best abstract expressionists differed widely from one another in the way their paintings look. What they had in common was angst—struggle that showed in the art. The generation of artists coming behind them were impressed by their great energies, but needed to change. Robert Rauschenberg, in a grand gesture, erased a de Kooning drawing. Andy Warhol, while keeping the wrist action of abstract expressionism, emptied it of angst. Jasper Johns flattened out the push-pull of its deep, falling-away space.



Short Brushstrokes/Color, 1997. Color sugar lift aquatint. Paper size: 40½ x 40"; image size: 29¾ x 29¾". Edition 15. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

In 1962 when I founded Crown Point Press, and began working with Richard Diebenkorn, he was pretty well-known as what was called a second generation abstract expressionist. But he was making a big change in that he had begun consciously using things he saw in the real world as his inspiration. He kept a gestural approach, but now he was no longer looking into himself for inspiration. "I started looking at things," he explained to me, "because my paintings kept reducing themselves to a horizon line." Whether Diebenkorn worked figuratively or abstractly, however, he still kept the struggle in his painting. Critic Kenneth Baker, in writing about de Kooning, called this "adding and retracting, diving and resurfacing, the process that creative work entails." By this time in history,

Scribbles Printed in Four Directions Using Four Colors, 1971. Paper size: 15 x 15"; image size: 7⅛ x 7¼". Edition 8. Printed by Kathan Brown. Published by Parasol Press, New York and Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut.

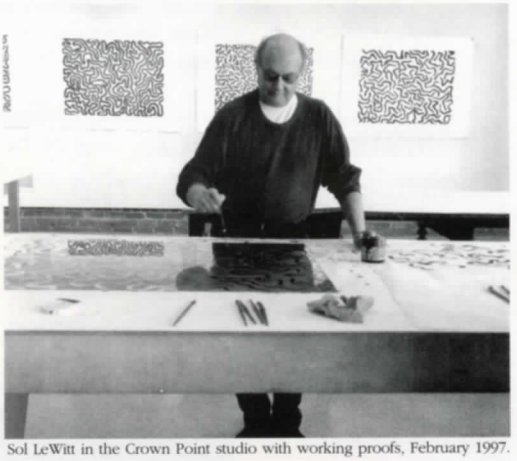
we all believed creativity was tied to struggle. Enter Sol LeWitt.

The first plate LeWitt drew when I first worked with him in 1971 was titled "Lines Not Long, Not Straight, and Not Touching." Then he did "Bands of Color in Four Directions" and then he covered a whole plate with cross-hatched lines and made two editions of prints from that plate, one a black square, the other a yellow square. No struggle. (Except for me, as the printer!)

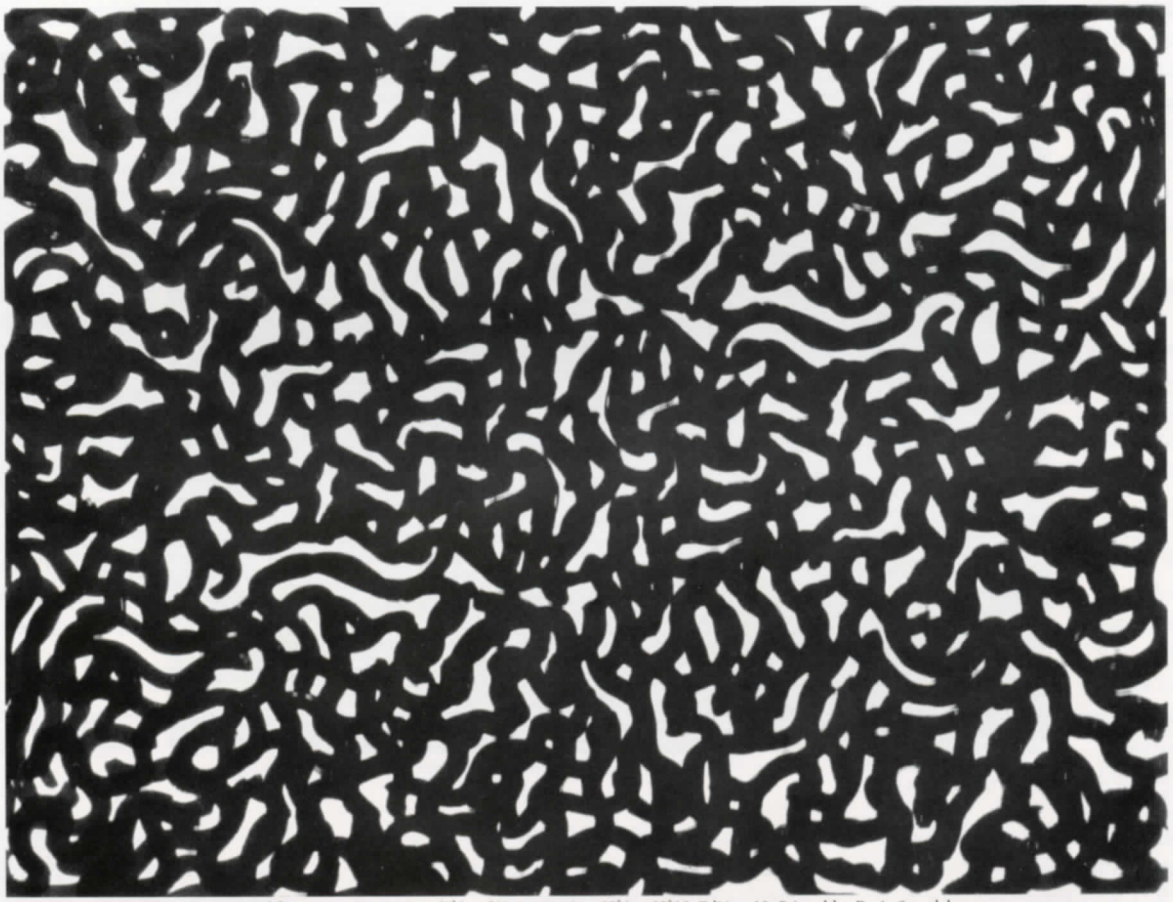
I'm going to copy a long quote from LeWitt's writings of 1967, and then break it up into parts and talk about each part.

poseless. It is usually free from dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman. It is the objective of the artist who is concerned with conceptual art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator, and therefore usually he would want it to become emotionally dry. There is no reason to suppose, however, that the conceptual artist is out to bore the viewer. It is only the expectation of an emotional kick, to which one conditioned to expressionist art is accustomed, that would deter the viewer from perceiving this art."

Now, let's take that long quote



Sol LeWitt in the Crown Point studio with working proofs, February 1997.



Black Curvy Brushstrokes, 1997. Sugar lift aquatint. Paper size: 40 1/2 x 50"; image size: 29 3/4 x 39 3/4". Edition 10. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

Here's the quote: "When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purapart. "All of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art." Conceptual artists are planners, but it's my experience in working with some of them that they rarely can make all the decisions beforehand. They do try to get the conditions right before they begin, and to have a good idea where they're going. Expressionist artists are more inclined, as the artist Giorgio Morandi once remarked, to "jump into the water before they learn to swim."

"The machine that makes the art" is an image that relates to structuralist philosophy, which speaks of a "compendium of signs" and "literature that is

already written." Many conceptual artists like better what is called a "post-structuralist" idea: the world is a vast framework of disorderly subjects waiting to be thrust into contexts that make them useful to somebody. And they think this big conglomeration is more interesting to explore than the inner self, which tends to be rather predictable. Some conceptual artists use actions as a way of exploring; others use language or systems. LeWitt's approach is to use very simple systems, with each work's system expressed in its title. "Curvy Brushstrokes/Color" and "Irregular, Angular Brushstrokes" are descriptions of simple systems, for example. First generation conceptual artists are generally concrete and literal. The heavy theatricality that seems now to be associated with conceptual art is a fairly recent development.

Irregular, Angular Brushstrokes, 1997. Color sugar lift aquatint. Paper size: 51 1/2 x 40 1/2"; image size: 39 1/2 x 29 1/4". Edition 25. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

Earlier, when I brought in the references to philosophy, maybe some of you thought, oh, this art is intellectual, and you have to understand some theory to get it. But in his very next sentence, LeWitt says, "This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless." That it is purposeless is of great importance. It is not made with the idea of trying to persuade someone of something, or manipulate their feelings, or even to express a conviction the artist holds. Purposes are found for it by individuals who get on its wave length, but the artist doesn't have an agenda concerning his audience.

The next part of the quote is especially interesting to printmakers: "It is usually free from dependence on the skill of the artist as craftsman." LeWitt draws all his prints with his own hand, but he normally does not touch his primary works, which are wall-drawings and sculpture made by others according to his instructions. I sometimes hear worries from collectors that prints may be "less original" than other art forms, but in fact artists often have assistants who perform various roles in making art of all types. LeWitt, however, standing on the principle that art should not be precious and hallowed, has others make most of his work for him. Altogether, he produces a great deal of work; he wants it never to be in short supply. This keeps his prices low, despite the enormous regard in which his work is held.

LeWitt worked with us in our San Francisco studio, drawing his images directly on copper plates, which the printers processed and proofed. In the photograph on page two you can see him working, with the first stage of several prints on the wall. He had it in mind to do something like his 1971 print "Lines Not Long, Not Straight, and Not Touching," only using a brush instead of a fine point. But when the first proofs were done he remarked they looked too much like the work of another artist, Keith Haring, and proceeded to add more marks and more colors. The printers helped him to make adjustments until he was satisfied with each of the images. Even though he had a plan to start with, he made many adjustments. And he abandoned one image, saying he didn't think it was very good.

There is a very big misunderstanding among art writers and critics about something LeWitt said years ago that seemed to imply that he "doesn't care what his work looks like" as our local critic once

Lines Not Long, Not Straight, and Not Touching, 1971. Hard ground etching. Paper size: 14½ x 14½"; image size: 10 x 10". Printed by Kathan Brown. Published by Parasol Press, New York.

wrote. (He even generalized this to all conceptual artists.) But it cannot be true: by definition all visual artists must care what their work looks like. What LeWitt actually said is "what the work looks like isn't too important," and that's shocking enough. Everyone who has written about him has felt it necessary to talk about this sentence, to try to explain it away—including myself. Now I think it was just a mistake, something that occurred to him in 1967 but has long since been shelved.

There's just one part of that long quote left, and it is also quite dated. Don't forget this was written thirty years ago. "It is the objective of the artist who is concerned with conceptual art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator, and therefore usually he would want it to become emotionally dry. There is no reason to suppose, however, that the conceptual artist is out to bore the viewer. It is only the expectation of an emotional kick, to which one conditioned to expressionist art is accustomed, that would deter the viewer from perceiving this art." This is dated because it actually describes minimal art more than conceptual art. Minimal art was the tiny first shoot of a great unruly flowering bush that became conceptual art. And minimal art, which was clean, cool, and usually fabricated, was emotionally dry, probably mostly because abstract expressionism was so emotionally charged. Take a look at these new prints of LeWitt's. To me they are full of joyful emotion. What they lack is not emotion, but angst. Other conceptual artists, Bruce Nauman for instance, are emotional and not joyful—but still not full of the artist's struggle, as was abstract expressionism. In general, conceptual artists take a cool approach even if the work looks hot.

Conceptual art is a mature movement, and its early practitioners like LeWitt have no need now to follow the letter of rules they made for themselves long ago. Willem de Kooning said that a lot of artists, as they get older, develop a "feeling of being on the other side of nature." It's not just artists who do that. If we age gracefully, we begin to simplify things, become less fussy, more inclined to go with the flow. But nature is different for us than for those who preceded us. Contemporary philosophers (and I think also scientists) say nature is sprawling and limitless, changing all the time, with logical portions appearing, then giving way to things not fixed and not

Curvy Brushstrokes/Color, 1997. Color sugar lift aquatint. Paper size: 40½ x 50"; image size: 29¾ x 39¾". Edition 15. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

Curvy Brushstrokes I, 1997. Color sugar lift aquatint.
Paper size: 52½ x 26" image size: 39¾ x 14¾". Edition 25.
Printed by Daria Sywulak.

Curvy Brushstrokes II, 1997. Color sugar lift aquatint.
Paper size: 52½ x 26"; image size: 39¾ x 14¾". Edition 25.
Printed by Daria Sywulak.

definable in their relationships. LeWitt's work taps into some places in this flow and gives us a road map to use for a small part of our journey. The aim of the artist, LeWitt says, "is not to instruct the viewer but to give him information. Whether the viewer understands this information is incidental to the artist."

This puts the burden of content mostly on the viewer. Different people select different art works and see different things in them. Everything can't matter to everyone, and you're not a dummy if you don't get it. In fact, LeWitt says, "the artist may not necessarily understand his own art. His perception is neither better nor worse than that of others." In other words, the artist kicks up a little chunk of the world of ideas, and though some people will not respond to it, others will understand and do something with it, and still others will misunderstand and still do something with it. Take a good look. What do you think?

—Kathan Brown

Sol LeWitt's first one person exhibition in New York was in 1965. He has had major exhibitions at many of the world's museums, including the Tate Gallery, London; the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; and the Westfalisches Landesmuseum, Munster, Germany. The Museum of Modern Art in New York has given him a retrospective, in 1978, with a major catalog, and—in 1996—a print retrospective. A large exhibition is planned for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in the year 2000.

June 8 - August 31 - The **National Gallery**, Washington D.C., will exhibit ***Thirty-Five Years at Crown Point Press***, curated by Ruth Fine of the National Gallery and Karin Breuer and Steven Nash of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. In 1996, the National Gallery acquired our collection of o.k. to print impressions, one of each print we have published since 1977. This exhibition in Washington will include about 125 prints, a sampling of our work since 1962. The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco acquired our archive of about 1,600 editioned prints and more than 2,000 working proofs in 1991. On **October 4**, the **California Palace of the Legion of Honor** will open a larger exhibit than the National's version, with 200 prints exhibited. These exhibits are the first to be held of Crown Point's archive.
The exhibition catalog, titled ***Thirty-Five Years at Crown Point Press: Making Prints, Doing Art***, with essays by the three curators and color illustrations of every exhibited work, will be available at the exhibition and in bookstores. It is published by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco in association with the University of California Press.

Notes

In the San Francisco Gallery

April 22 - May 31

Sol LeWitt at Crown Point Press (1971-1997)

In New York: Karen McCready, Crown Point Press East Coast representative, will be showing ***Systematic***, with work by **Jennifer Bartlett**, **Chuck Close**, **Joel Fisher**, **Mary Heilmann**, and **Alfred Jensen**, with new editions by **Sol LeWitt** and **Anne Appleby**, May 24 - August 1. McCready will have a booth at ***Printfest***, at the Drake Hotel, Chicago, May 9 - 11. **Karen McCready Fine Art** now has public hours, Wednesday through Saturday, 12-5pm. The gallery is located at 425 W. 13th Street, 5th floor, New York, NY, 10013, and can be viewed by appointment as well. Please call (212) 243-0439.

New paintings by **Anne Appleby**, will be shown at Littlejohn Contemporary Art, New York, May 6 - June 6. There will be a reception May 17, 4 - 6pm.

A permanent wall drawing by **Sol LeWitt** is at Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago. The artist's traveling exhibition, ***Sol LeWitt: Prints 1970 - 1995*** will be at The Detroit Institute of Arts, June 14 - September 7.

Pomona and Flora, by **Robert Kushner**, is on view at DC Moore Gallery, New York, April 3 - May 3.

John Baldessari will be exhibiting new work at Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles, April 17 - May 24.

Pace Wildenstein, Los Angeles, shows ***Zone Painting***, by **Robert Mangold**, through April 26.

Works by **Sylvia Plimack Mangold** will show at Anne Marie Verna Galerie, Zurich, Switzerland, April 29 - June 28.

Wavy Brushstrokes (Small), 1997. Color sugar lift aquatint. Paper size: 22½ x 15"; image size: 11⅞ x 6". Edition 40. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

Curvy Brushstrokes (Small), 1997. Color sugar lift aquatint. Paper size: 22½ x 15"; image size: 11⅞ x 6". Edition 40. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

Short, Vertical Brushstrokes, 1997. Color sugar lift aquatint. Paper size: 22½ x 15"; image size: 11⅞ x 6". Edition 40. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

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