

OFF THE WALL

BY MEISHA ROSENBERG

SOL LEWITT: A WALL DRAWING RETROSPECTIVE

MASS MOCA, THROUGH 2033

THIS IS A MIND-BOGGLINGLY VAST exhibition on three floors of a massive brick industrial building (Building No. 7, which was renovated for the purpose) consuming almost an acre of space. Its installation was a feat requiring the collaboration of three art institutions (Yale University Art Gallery, Williams College Museum of Art, and MASS MoCA) plus the sweat labor of 65 artists and students who drew and painted Sol LeWitt's minimal conceptualist designs over a period of six months in 2008. The project, dreamed up by Jock Reynolds, Yale Gallery director, in consultation with the artist, required who-knows-how-many hundreds of gallons of paint, boxes of pencils and miles of tape, not to mention more than ten million dollars.

The result is that one can now wander for what seems like forever in a two-dimensional forest of designs by LeWitt, who died in 2007. Whether the aesthetic experience is a good or poor one is beside the point: It is a monument. Like it or not, it's going to stay up for 25 years; a generation will grow up in the shadow of LeWitt's lines and squares, marveling at (or rebelling against) his mathematical formulas.

The 105 drawings here, organized

mostly chronologically by floor, amount to a standing tribute to conceptualism—art-as-idea, the seed of the brain. LeWitt came up with geometric schemes and mathematical patterns of primary colors (or primary colors blended with grey) and then had other people execute his designs. His directions can be maddeningly simple yet oracular: "A wall divided horizontally by a curvy line. The top is flat black; the bottom is glossy black," describes *Wall Drawing 822* (1997). LeWitt wrote, in 1967 in *ArtForum*: "The idea becomes the machine that makes the art." This factory-like vision is perfectly situated to MASS MoCA's former mill building—a space designed for mass production.

But LeWitt, who also stated, "conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists" is best experienced in retrospective style with multiple works rubbing elbows like this (*Wall Drawing #260*, currently at the Museum of Modern Art, by itself is pretty blah), and designs are best in person (as opposed to in a book). Designs are set up on parallel and perpendicular walls per LeWitt's specifications; this positioning creates long hallways of pattern and provocative juxtapositions of isometric forms and

colors. For an example of the experientiality of LeWitt's work, walk slowly into the corner of *Wall Drawing 462* (1986)—stripey arcs in black and white—and you'll feel that you are getting smaller and smaller, like Alice in Wonderland.

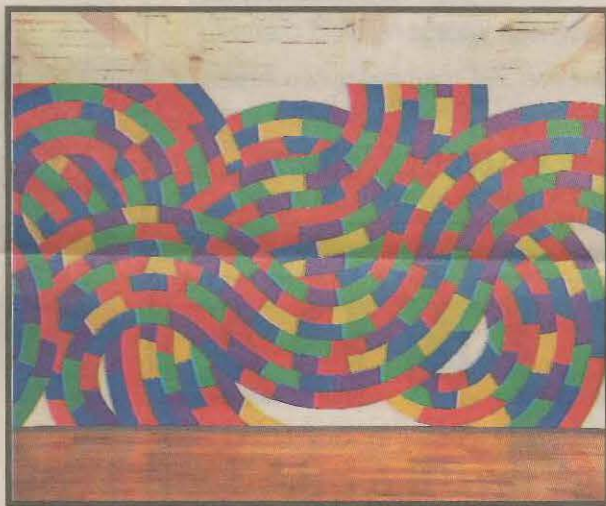
Migraine-inducing kaleidoscopic patterns from his later period (such as *Wall Drawing 880—Loopy Doopy (orange and green)* (1998), stand in contrast to earlier designs, such as the quieter *Wall Drawing 86*, in graphite (1971), whose description reads: "Ten-Thousand lines, about ten inches long, covering the wall evenly." With these Zen-like directives it was good that he usually provided diagrams. The scheme for *Wall Drawing 335* reads like a word problem: "On four black walls, white vertical parallel lines, and in the center of the walls, eight geometric figures (including cross, X) within which are white horizontal parallel

lines. The vertical lines do not enter the figures." He intended to make his ideas accessible, so formulas are part of some drawings, as with *Wall Drawing 1211: Drawing Series—Part I-IV #1-24, A + B* (2006) where a color-by-numbers map is in the actual drawing.

LeWitt's art has been likened to a composer's score: meant to be replayed by others in time, it's impermanent but ever-recurring. His friend Mel Bochner described his obsessively repeated forms (squares within squares, triangles, loops) as "the serial attitude." LeWitt's seriality and his love of pure, massed shapes can be read as influences on any number of artists working today (think of Olafur Eliasson or Rachel Whiteread—or for that matter, Ikea).

There are some ironies here: For all LeWitt's belief in art for the masses, this retrospective heralds him as a kind of brand. Downstairs in the store you can buy LeWitt dinnerware (hand-made in Italy) and T-shirts. There's even the LeWitt elevator with "Early LeWitt" "Mid-Career LeWitt" and "Late LeWitt" in raised lettering by the buttons.

Still, viewing these murals prepares the ground for discussions we need to have about art in an increasingly corporate, mass-produced world. Can art be accessible on a mass scale without becoming a consumer product? What happens when ideas are separated from physical reality? Whatever the conclusions, LeWitt's concepts are sure to be part of our conversation. ■



Alice, meet Wonderland: one of Sol LeWitt's *Wall Drawings* series.

MASS MoCA

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WORK-IN-PROGRESS

CYNTHIA HOPKINS

THE SUCCESS OF FAILURE (OR, THE FAILURE OF SUCCESS)

SATURDAY, MARCH 21, 8:00 P.M. Galleries open until 7:00 p.m.

Cynthia Hopkins, a singer and theater artist and founder of the band Gloria Deluxe, performs the final installment of her musical theater trilogy, which began with *Accidental Nostalgia* featured at MASS MoCA in 2003. This is a humorous epic folk tale cast as science fiction; the hero's only chance to save the universe is to fail to save the earth. This one-woman show features Hopkins' signature hybrid of song, text, and dollhouse videoscapes. "Hopkins pulls off the impossible: She makes postmodernism danceable." (*Time Out NY*)

Hunter Center / \$16 / \$10 Students with ID / Members 10% discount



FILM+LIVE MUSIC

DEAN & BRITTA

13 MOST BEAUTIFUL... SONGS FOR ANDY WARHOL'S SCREEN TESTS

SATURDAY, MARCH 28, 8:00 P.M. Galleries open until 7:00 p.m.

This project, commissioned by the Andy Warhol Museum, is like an archeological dig unearthing the 1960s New York art scene. Dean & Britta (Dean Wareham and Britta Phillips, formerly of the storied band Luna) have composed music to accompany Warhol's rarely seen short silent film portraits, which captured Factory superstars, celebrities, and anonymous teenagers in technically simple but mesmerizing 4-minute shots. *The Screen Tests*, as the artist called them, are newly illuminated by Dean & Britta's haunting, seductive scores.

Hunter Center / \$18 Advance / \$22 Day of show / \$15 Students / Members 10% discount

GALLERIES OPEN 11-5,
CLOSED TUESDAYS

IN THE GALLERIES:
SOL LEWITT: A WALL DRAWING
RETROSPECTIVE, SIMON STAR-
LING: THE NANJING PARTICLES,
BADLANDS: NEW HORIZONS IN
LANDSCAPE, ANSELM KIEFER