

**Sol LeWitt**  
**Born:** September 9, 1928, Hartford, CT  
**Died:** April 8, 2007, New York, NY

*"I wasn't really that interested in objects. I was interested in ideas."*

*SOL LEWITT*

## SYNOPSIS

Sol LeWitt earned a place in the history of art for his leading role in the Conceptual movement. His belief in the artist as a generator of ideas was instrumental in the transition from the modern to the postmodern era. Conceptual art, expounded by LeWitt as an intellectual, pragmatic act, added a new dimension to the artist's role that was distinctly separate from the romantic nature of **Abstract Expressionism**. LeWitt believed *the idea* itself could be the work of art, and maintained that, like an architect who creates a blueprint for a building and then turns the project over to a construction crew, an artist should be able to conceive of a work and then either delegate its actual production to others or perhaps even never make it at all. LeWitt's work ranged from sculpture, painting, and drawing to almost exclusively conceptual pieces that existed only as ideas or elements of the artistic process itself.

## KEY IDEAS

- LeWitt's refined vocabulary of visual art consisted of lines, basic colors and simplified shapes. He applied them according to formulae of his own invention, which hinted at mathematical equations and architectural specifications, but were neither predictable nor necessarily logical. For LeWitt, the directions for producing a work of art became the work itself; a work was no longer required to have an actual material presence in order to be considered art.
- LeWitt's conceptual pieces often did take on at least basic material form, although not necessarily at his own hands. In the spirit of the medieval workshop in which the master conceives of a work and apprentices carry out his instructions based on preliminary drawings, LeWitt would provide an assistant or a group of assistants with directions for producing a work of art. Instructions for these works, whether large-scale wall drawings or outdoor sculptures, were deliberately vague so that the end result was not completely controlled by the artist that conceived the work. In this way, LeWitt challenged some very fundamental beliefs about art, including the authority of the artist in the production of a work. His emphasis is most often on process and materials (or the lack thereof in the case of the latter) rather than on imbuing a work with a specific message or narrative. Art, for LeWitt, could exist for its own sake. Meaning was not a requirement.
- Whereas many **Minimalist** artists turned to industrial materials, LeWitt simplified even further, still employing traditional materials - wood, canvas, paint, for instance - but focusing instead on concepts and systems. While the use of industrial materials implied a certain expectation of permanence with regard to a work of art, in direct contrast, LeWitt appreciated the ephemeral character and impermanence of Conceptual Art. In short, he let the traditional materials speak for themselves, to demonstrate their own vulnerability to decay, destruction, or obsolescence.

## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

### Childhood

Solomon "Sol" LeWitt was the only child of Russian Jewish parents. His family lived in Hartford, Connecticut until his father, a doctor, died when Sol was six years old. Thereafter, LeWitt and his mother, a nurse, lived with his aunt in New Britain, Connecticut.

Although LeWitt dismissed art-making as something that "most of us kids do like," as a young boy he displayed a real proclivity for art and, in particular, for creating "humorous" drawings. While still living in Hartford, his mother took him to art classes at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in which participants made art while listening to music. LeWitt recalled that, during one of the classes, his mother had made a spontaneous, black circle and had encouraged him to do the same.

### Early training

Reluctant to fall into an industrial job like many workers in New Britain, LeWitt decided to pursue art as an act of rebellion. However, his mother wanted him to obtain a college degree; he ultimately attended Syracuse University as a compromise. Initially, LeWitt had difficulty adapting to the formal academic setting and found the curriculum to be overly rigid. During his later years of attendance, however, an infusion of new instructors gave the school a more flexible atmosphere. It was during that later period in his college career that LeWitt was introduced to printmaking. He won a \$1000 award for his work in lithography from the Tiffany Foundation, which enabled him to spend time in Europe studying the work of the old masters.



In 1951, LeWitt was drafted for the Korean War and was assigned to the Special Services; his duties included making posters. While serving he visited shrines, temples and gardens in Korea and Japan. After being discharged, LeWitt moved to New York and balanced classes at the Cartoonists and Illustrators School (now known as the School of Visual Arts) with a design internship at *Seventeen* magazine. He joined the architectural office of I. M. Pei in 1955 as a graphic designer. What he learned from the architectural process convinced him to consider art as much an idea or a procedural blueprint that could be executed by others as a proprietary object of one person's making. LeWitt once said, "An architect doesn't go off with a shovel and dig his foundation and lay every brick. He's still an artist."

LeWitt continued to paint, but his lack of direction became a source of frustration to him. Leaving his job to devote his time entirely to art, LeWitt moved into a loft in SoHo and enrolled in drawing classes. He experimented with a wide range of subject matter, including the human figure, still life, interiors, and sketched copies of old master paintings. Inspiration came when he took a night position at The Museum of Modern Art. He met other artists, including **Dan Flavin**, **Robert Mangold**, and **Robert Ryman**, who were also searching for ideas beyond the pervasive yet, in their view, increasingly stale ideology of **Abstract Expressionism**. These artists, each in their own way, were seeking to disengage art from outmoded sentiments relating to gesture

and personal expression. Viewing the *Sixteen Americans* exhibition at MoMA was a turning point for LeWitt, who conceived of a way to resolve the flatness of painting in the three-dimensional techniques and vibrant coloring of the new contemporary works.

## Mature period



Strongly influenced by the work of Jasper Johns and Eadweard Muybridge LeWitt began to incorporate relief elements and series of moving figures into his painting as with *Run* from 1961. *Wall Structure, Blue* (1962) marks the artist's first move toward more simplified form, relying on color, shape and texture to make a bold statement. Combining the new pared-down compositions with an interest in three-dimensionality, LeWitt's work developed over the next few years into his first "open" structures, modular structures in black or white wood, or metal that repeated according to predetermined variations or mathematical permutations. These skeletal variations of the basic square or rectangle were the literal building blocks LeWitt used throughout his career. At his first solo exhibition at John Daniels Gallery in 1965, he exhibited a series of more complex open structures, which explored the manipulation of space with angled walls and irregular shapes.

Dissatisfied with the results of such visual experiments, LeWitt eventually returned to what he considered to be the fundamentals: he began to build measured structures according to an arbitrarily chosen ratio of 1:8:5. Using an accumulation of these structures, LeWitt completed *Serial Project #1 (ABCD)* in 1966, a large-format combination of cubes and rectangles that resumes the serial nature of

his work inspired by Muybridge's photography. 1969 signaled LeWitt's foray into art theory; he wrote "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," (1969) and "Sentences on Conceptual Art," (1969), essays that fully articulated his intentions and perspective, also firmly situating him as the forerunner of a new movement: Conceptual Art. At the same time, he had begun the process of distancing himself from Minimalism.



The first wall drawings originated with LeWitt's participation in the "Xerox Book" project curated by Seth Siegelaub. With this project, the conditions of artistic production were standardized and the artists were given a series of "requirements" they were asked to follow. LeWitt's entry consisted of 24 variations of a line drawing, two of which were shown at Paula Cooper Gallery in 1968 as large-scale reproductions in pencil. LeWitt effectively freed line from its traditional roles and functions of describing contour, constructing space (as an orthogonal), and acting as the expressive signature of an artist's intention or "genius." Representing a critical development in his work, the wall pieces focused on the overall concept and the rules of execution rather than the work itself, which would inevitably be painted over. These qualities, arguably the absolute "basics," are also evident in another notorious work of the same year, *Buried Cube Containing an Object of Importance but Little Value*, documented only in impersonal photographs. LeWitt later used photography to supplement a number of

other projects including his autobiography, a collection of 124 photographs published in book form. LeWitt himself is rarely featured in these pictures; he most often refused to submit pictures of himself for publications, insisting that the focus should be on his work and not himself.

### Late Period and Death

Although conservative critics tended to view LeWitt's work with derision and contempt, many underwent a conversion after viewing the 1978 retrospective held at The Museum of Modern Art. This well-curated exhibition led LeWitt himself to reconsider his work and explore new techniques. As a consequence, other shapes began to figure more prominently in his wall drawings, which also started to incorporate elements of **Optical, or Op, Art**. There were major changes in his personal life at this time as well, including his marriage to Carol Androgio in 1982 and their relocation to Italy.

In response to the heightened demand for public sculpture in the 1980s, LeWitt produced commissioned works using cinder blocks. These structures revisited the basic form of the cube subjected to different arrangements. The designs of his wall drawings became freer and more playful as LeWitt experimented with curving lines and blobs, as in the *Squiggly Brushstrokes* and *Wavy Lines* series. At the time of his death from complications of cancer in 2007, LeWitt was still at the height of his career.

## LEGACY

Sol LeWitt earned a place in the history of art for his leading role in the **Conceptual** movement. His belief in the artist as a generator of ideas was instrumental in the transition from the modern to the postmodern era. Conceptual art, expounded by LeWitt as an intellectual, pragmatic act, added a new dimension to the artist's role that was distinctly separate from the romantic nature of **Abstract Expressionism**. His **Minimalist** approach, which emphasized simplicity and clarity, was embraced by artists like **Eva Hesse** and **Frank Stella**. Even Hesse's own work, with its emphasis on intimacy and the human touch, pays its regards to LeWitt's work, which, in its small imperfections, eschews mechanical precision for handcraft. LeWitt was an ardent

champion of the artistic community. His willingness to exchange his own work with nearly anyone, whether amateur or well-established artist, encouraged a kind of support network in the visual arts. It also enabled him to amass a large collection from local and international artists. He was a founder of Printed Matter, a nonprofit organization that promotes the book arts and now maintains an exhibition space in Chelsea. The establishment of the Sol LeWitt Fund for Artists Work, made possible by a generous donation from the artist, continues to support the creation and exhibition of public art in New York City. His cinder block sculptures are still exhibited in public spaces across the United States, and the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art will have a comprehensive retrospective of his work on display until 2033.

*Original content written by **The Art Story Contributors***

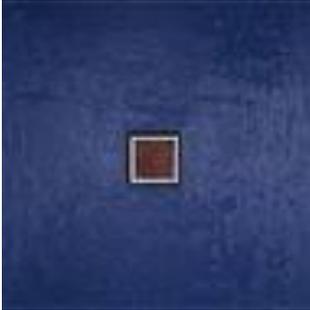
## **ARTIST QUOTES**

"Conceptual Artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach."

"When words such as painting and sculpture are used, they connote a whole tradition and imply a consequent acceptance of this tradition, thus placing limitations on the artist who would be reluctant to make art that goes beyond the limitations."

"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."

### **Major Works:**

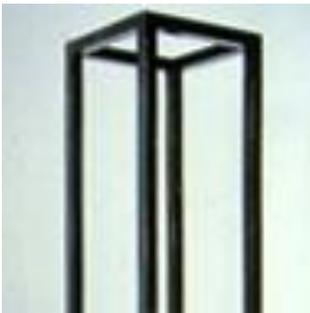


**Title:** Wall Structure Blue (1962)

**Materials:** Oil on canvas and painted wood

**Collection:** LeWitt Collection

**Description:** LeWitt used traditional materials-oil and pigment on wood-when he produced *Wall Structure Blue*. The format, a colorful square within the framework of a larger square, imitates traditional painting with the red bulls-eye in the center calling attention to an imagined narrative and to the symmetry imposed by convention. The simple, yet striking square set in the middle of the canvas is reminiscent of Jasper Johns' handling of the target pieces, which LeWitt had seen at an exhibition at MoMA around the time he produced *Wall Structure Blue*. This Minimalist painting marks a definitive break with LeWitt's earlier body of work, which still made use of language and form-from the human figure to simplified, abstract objects.



**Title:** Standing Open Structure Black (1964)

**Materials:** Painted wood

**Collection:** LeWitt Collection

**Description:** Derived from the spare, iconic forms that began with such paintings as *Wall Structure Blue*, this work stands as their most elemental component. Although the shape is abstract, the relatable, human-like proportions (it stands 96 inches high) recall a skeleton, with all of its solemn dignity and shock value. As one of the first open structures, *Standing Open Structure Black* can be seen as the standard building block for much of LeWitt's later work. As with his Minimalist painting, LeWitt's simplified sculptures of this period challenge the notion of completeness and suggest that any additions to the basic elements of a work of art are excessive.



**Title:** Serial Project #1 (ABCD) (1966)

**Materials:** Baked enamel on aluminum

**Collection:** Museum of Modern Art, New York

**Description:** This accumulation of open structures signifies a revival of seriality in LeWitt's work, inspired by the serial photographs of Eadweard Muybridge, whose work LeWitt discovered in an abandoned book a previous tenant had left in his apartment. The network of cubes allowed LeWitt to study the juxtaposition of different sizes and shapes, arranged according to certain preset rules and ideas. Looking at *Serial Project #1* as a whole, it appears to be nothing so much as a city, revealing LeWitt's architectural roots. It also imposes itself as a kind of framework for a finished work or series of works, imitating the preparatory sketches that precede blueprints and completed structures. Once again, LeWitt challenges the conventional methods of artistic production; in this instance, he halts the additive process of sculpting and allows the viewer to observe what would only have existed beneath other materials.



**Title:** Buried Cube Containing an Object of Importance but Little Value (1968)

**Materials:** Black and white photographs mounted on paper

**Collection:** LeWitt Collection

**Description:** The burial of the cube reportedly took place in a local garden, but these photographs, referring again to the notion of the series or process, are the only proof that LeWitt's actions actually took place. Without seeing the event taking place, or knowing what is held within the cube, *Buried Cube* relies on the idea, as opposed to a finished object. A conceptual piece, this work was produced shortly following the publication of LeWitt's 1968 manifesto describing the new Conceptual art movement. In the manifesto, he declares, "The execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art." Likewise, by emptying this "burial"-like an actual interment, an extremely important, emotional, and personal affair-of content, value, gesture and expression, LeWitt disengages himself from the work and takes a strong "death of the author" stance. In his own words: "Once it is out of his hand the artist has no control over the way a viewer will perceive the work. Different people will understand the same thing in a different way."



**Title:** Wall Drawing #16 (detail) (1969)

**Materials:** Pencil

**Collection:** Collection Michalke

**Description:** Similar to LeWitt's first wall drawings shown at Paula Cooper Gallery in 1968, *Wall Drawing #16* consists of a network of penciled lines, regulated by an internal logic imposed by the artist. In this instance, the specifications LeWitt conceived of before making the drawing determined that the bands of gray lines are 12 inches wide and should be drawn horizontally, vertically and diagonally to the right, and also should intersect. Generally arbitrary rules such as these are typical of the detailed instructions that the artist produced for each work. Subsequently, one or more assistants would carry out the plans, producing the drawings based on their individual interpretations of the instructions. These loosely predetermined schemes functioned as a means of emphasizing the concept over the execution, decentralizing the artist from the material realization of the finished work.



**Title:** Wall Drawing #439 (1985)

**Materials:** Color ink wash

**Collection:** Cuomo Collection

**Description:** *Wall Drawing #439*, like many of LeWitt's later works, makes use of a wider variety of forms and colors. Perhaps influenced by his move to Italy, the colored washes lend #439 a frescoed effect. LeWitt's skillful use of the rich, variegated colors arranged in a fan-like cluster of cascading triangles provides the illusion of three-dimensionality. In a sense, LeWitt returned to the point in the development of artistic production when the artist's (and viewer's) eye was the only tool required to promote the illusion of depth and wholeness on a flat plane.