

**[Statement of Intent]**

- 1. The artist may construct the piece**
- 2. The piece may be fabricated**
- 3. The piece need not be built**

**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**

THE ARTIST IS ENGAGED IN THE RELATIONSHIPS OF HUMAN BEINGS TO  
OBJECTS & OBJECTS TO OBJECTS IN RELATION TO HUMAN BEINGS

WHEN THE CONFIGURATION PRESENTED BY THE SOCIETY DOES NOT IN  
FACT FUNCTION THE ARTIST PRESENTS THE SAME EXISTING MATERIALS  
WITHIN ANOTHER (OFTEN NOT NOTICED) CONFIGURATION TO BRING  
ABOUT ANOTHER PERCEPTION OF THE RELATIONSHIPS OF HUMAN BEINGS  
TO OBJECTS TO BRING ABOUT A CHANGE IN FUNCTION

THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST & ART IS TO *PRESENT* THIS CONFIGURATION  
WITHOUT USING HISTORY IMPOSE

AFTER A WORK OF ART HAS BEEN PRESENTED IT IS AS WELL THE HISTORY  
OF A SOCIETY

N.Y.C. 94

AS LANGUAGE IS UNDERSTOOD. AS THE RELATIONSHIPS PRESENTED BETWEEN  
HUMAN BEINGS & OBJECTS ENTER INTO OUR AWARENESS WE HEAR WHAT WE ARE  
THINKING. THE SOUND OF THE MATERIAL RELATIONSHIPS AT THE TIME OF  
PRESENTATION IS WHAT WE HEAR.



[Regarding a Personal Point in the Time...]

**...REGARDING A PERSONAL POINT IN THE TIME (1960----)**

**1. AN ARTIST MAY CONSTRUCT A WORK 2. A WORK MAY BE FABRICATED 3. A WORK NEED NOT TO BE BUILT**

A reasonable assumption is that each being equal and consistent with the intent of an artist the decision as to condition rests with the needs of the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.

**AND RESOLVING ITSELF IN WHAT SEEMS THE TIME (1980----)**

**REQUIRES THAT ART IS NOT A METAPHOR UPON THE RELATIONSHIPS OF HUMAN BEINGS TO OBJECTS AND OBJECTS TO OBJECTS IN RELATION TO HUMAN BEINGS BUT A REPRESENTATION OF AN EMPIRICAL EXISTING FACT IT DOES NOT TELL THE POTENTIAL AND CAPABILITIES OF AN OBJECT (MATERIAL) BUT PRESENTS A REALITY CONCERNING THAT RELATIONSHIP**

NYC 1981

## Early Work

### Interview by Lynn Gumpert

**LG:** The earliest work you acknowledge are the crater pieces in Mill Valley. How did those come about?

**LW:** By virtue of generation, I was attempting to make Abstract Expressionist paintings in New York. I found myself not at all satisfied by the needs that I had in relation to material, but totally overwhelmed by the presence of painters who were in my eyes "successful" artists, I don't mean successful in monetary terms, but who were making real art. So I went to California and there was overwhelmed again, coming from New York City, by the landscape, and began to try to make work within the landscape. I had an idea that each crater constituted a specific piece of sculpture. For four or five years I thought that each individual act itself was what constituted the making of art. The craters came about as a way to make sculpture by the removal of something rather than by the normal intrusion of things.

**LG:** Did you make any other environmental works while in California?

**LW:** Large-scale environmental paintings, of which, happily, none seem to survive.

**LG:** How long were you there?

**LW:** In '59 and '60 I traveled a lot to New York and Denver. It was the time when people were going back and forth between the coasts and it was considered quite normal.

**LG:** Did you find the atmosphere much different than New York?

**LW:** Much, much more American. I had been raised in an extremely cosmopolitan, intellectual atmosphere in New York and upon reaching California found myself dealing with more Americana: poets from Kentucky, artists from other places, which at that time was not the case in New York. Most of the artists had come from somewhere else and had totally developed a cosmopolitan presence. The influence was more from Europe than it was from the basic

art thing in the U.S.; it was a good experience for me and provided an enormous amount of freedom.

**LG:** After the Bay Area, you went back to New York and started making paintings again.



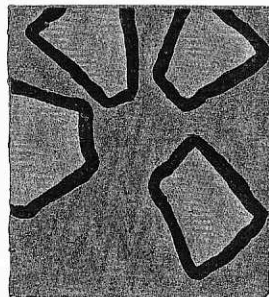
Poster for exhibition at Seth Siegelau, New York, 1965.

**LW:** I returned to New York a little disillusioned with the situation of the art world. I guess it's normal to be nineteen or twenty and to be very disillusioned with what is happening. Every time you made something, you were involved in commercial aspects. I went through a period—I lived on Duane Street at that time—of just making paintings for children and refusing to participate in a "High Art" context. For a

1-25 Lynda Benglis, Joan Brown, Luis Jimenez, Gary Stephan, Lawrence Weiner: *Early Work*, exh. cat., New York: The New Museum, 1982.



period of a year and a half, I just accumulated things. I went to Provincetown, lost the studio to the Fire Department, and returned to California for a brief visit. I decided that there was a basic mistake in the fact that each crater I had made there in 1960 was specific, but I didn't know what the mistake was. Coming back to New York, I more or less succeeded in making paintings. I was quite content with them and they serve a use for other people. Eventually those paintings were shown around in these little galleries that opened—it wasn't the Lower East Side at the time—in the Village. Then Seth Siegelau had a gallery on 56th Street and



*Propeller Painting*, 1963. Oil on board, 6 1/2 x 6" (16.5 x 15 cm). Collection Seth Siegelau.

they were shown initially in 1964, then again in 1965. This series of paintings were multimedia, using whatever material was at hand. They were priced about the same, regardless of size and materials.

**LG:** So that was also a direct comment on the commercial aspects—

**LW:** It was a relationship with it. I was perplexed with how art was consumed within the society, and at the same time trying to make art myself.

**LG:** Was it at that time that you did the big propeller series?

**LW:** Yes. I was living on the Lower East Side—I moved to Bleeker Street by 1960—and somebody had given me an old television set. The only time it got any decent reception was in the middle of the night! I became totally involved with the test pattern—I think there were four or five other painters living in this area who were involved with test patterns as well. It became "We will just make paintings about this *thing* that we watch all the time." I don't think I watched test patterns all as much as I convinced myself I did. It was a device, and I was impressed that [Jasper] Johns had utilized the American flag as a means of breaking out of the

device, so I tried the pattern of the test pattern, and they became the propeller paintings. The propellers themselves led to the problem that I was still just painting. I began to discuss it with other artists and other people and found that it was more propitious at that to talk to people about painting and to decide upon a format. The format then was to take the rectangle—again this was nothing terribly radical, other people were doing it—and begin, in a sense, to fuck it over. To decide then to remove one rectangle from another rectangle was a sufficient gesture. Then to discuss color with people was a sufficient gesture, then to decide about paint application. At that point, I had gotten rather good at applying paint and was afraid of any kind of virtuosity. I would ask them how intense they wanted this color and would hook up a compressor and spray it for a certain period of time. Then the other thing you could do to a painting, which was from the propeller paintings, was to stripe a line on the top and the bottom, and that line would have varying angles and the angles were based on how you felt at a particular moment. If the person was happy with the painting, they accepted it. If not, I would strip it off the stretcher and start all over again.

**LG:** Were these in varying sizes?

**LW:** Yes. They ran from quite tiny, a couple of inches, made on metal—spray enamels from automobiles—to reasonably large, ten to twelve feet. The size was determined by the parameters of the studio they were built in.

**LG:** Were these prices also the same?

**LW:** Same price for whatever painting. Again, it's a moot point. Most of the paintings were traded with other artists and were done for other artists, but the price was always the same when they were put up commercially.

**LG:** When did you first begin to turn to words as a medium or as a means of conveying your ideas?

**LW:** Well, it became necessary with the advent of the paintings. I come from a sort of literary background; in school I studied a lot of literature and philosophy, so the use of language wasn't a difficulty. When the paintings themselves were sent out of the context I was normally used to, which was an art world context where the people around me knew what the paintings were about since they were involved in their building, it became necessary to have titles for them. I began to realize the paintings were not telling the story, so the titles began to refer totally to the work itself. They began as "A Painting with a Piece Removed, etc., for So-and-so," "A Painting Done in California for So-and-so," which explained why it existed, or at least I thought

it did. Then I began to realize that much of the work I was interested in sculpturally was not capable of being built. I don't like imaginary things, futurist sort of ideas, where the impossible then becomes the



*Removal Painting*, 1968. Spray emulsion on canvas, 94 1/2 x 29 1/2 x 2 3/8" (240 x 75 x 6 cm). Collection Nell and Jack Wendler, London.

aesthetic. That becomes ideology, which is not sufficient. So the titles became more and more specific and the work became more and more impractical to build. I began to build pieces within a studio atmosphere which, when removed, were not conveying the same information because the studio was

another space. It became the picture's plane, and concurrent with the paintings I began to present work in its language state. It was quite easy to get people to accept the fact that language was constituting the sculpture. And/or painting, because I always saw painting as a sculptural thing. Logically I could never accept painting as a picture plane that began at one end and ended at the other because the convention was not necessary. I had conversations with people like [Ad] Reinhardt which really influenced me. I have great admiration for him as an artist still accepting the fact that the picture plane is a convention that you must accept. I rejected it and began to say that the sides of the canvas were as important as the rest; where it hung on the wall became also important. I didn't want to get involved with authoritarian art, and couldn't bear the idea of making a painting, as some of my colleagues were doing at the time, and telling people how it should be hung, where it should be hung, where they should stand. I didn't think that was the function of art because again, all of that is dependent on your height. I realized I wanted to spend the rest of my existence dealing with the general idea of materials rather than the specific. That is why the first book that I published with Siegelau was broken up into specific and general.\* I still find I'm much more interested in the general pieces today, rather than the specific.

**LG:** You've worked in a fairly wide variety of media—film and audio works as well as painting and sculpture. Did you have any formal art training at all?

**LW:** No. On purpose. I grew up in New York City and was quite lucky, got a very good education in the city. I come from the South Bronx and they had a thing called "Special Progress." By the time I was sixteen I was going to college. I'd gone through Stuyvesant High, reached college, and had very good teachers. I spoke with them and said I wanted to be an artist but I didn't know quite where to go or what to do. They said, "Go to Hunter uptown." It was after Korea at that time and they were letting men in. They also had a very good philosophy department. In conversations with teachers, and my own intuition (I'll give myself some credit), I realized I was not going to spend four or five years in school expressing myself, since the schools were still run by leftover Abstract Expressionists, and at sixteen, I didn't have anything to express. At Hunter I studied philosophy and literature. It was a conscious decision, helped a lot by very well-meaning and, it turns

\* Lawrence Weiner, *STATEMENTS*, New York: The Louis Kellner Foundation / Seth Siegelau, 1968.



out, absolutely correct teachers who took an interest. I was very involved in wanting to be the "Great American Artist." That's what somebody at sixteen and seventeen wants to be. I can also give credit to New York City for that, too. As a kid, I would take the subway or trolley and go to the Metropolitan and the Frick. The only thing that interested me was the attempt to deal with the presentation of information by use of materials—paint, canvas, steel, stone, etc.—which had nothing to do with the presentation of information. With the opening of the Museum of Modern Art—I knew this was it, this was what I wanted to do. I wanted to make *this stuff* and the first couple of years I made a bit of the stuff like everybody else made.

**LG:** When did you first realize that words themselves were sufficient?

**LW:** Around '66 was the time I was committed to trying to figure out a way to use language instead of trying to build things. I must admit I'm not convinced that it supersedes anything else. I consider painting and sculpture in its physical sense the same kind of language as I do verbal language, it's just that it suits me better to work generally with materials. I never saw it as a radical change. By '67 we were flogging the works to try to sell them to people, and I think that Seth had even sold some to Raymond Dirks in '67. I still made paintings, but mostly only for artists or an occasion like the Bradford show with Robert Barry and Carl Andre. I made two very large paintings for that show. One is in London with Jack Wendler and one is with Seth Siegelau. The Windham show was after that. Chuck Ginnever, the sculptor, had come to the symposium at Bradford and had found things in the conversation of Robert Barry, myself and Seth Siegelau interesting. He invited Barry, Andre and myself to build three pieces using materials easily accessible to the school since they had no budget. We made this show with another symposium which attracted quite a few people.\* That's the classic turning point—at least it fits historically. I built my piece, which consisted of stakes and twine in the form of a rectangle with another rectangle removed, where the jocks practiced their touch football [see ill. pp. 17, 19]. It's very hard to play touch football with those stakes and twine, so they cut it. At this time, the last vestiges of heavy metal macho sculpturehood still existed and that led to some sort of vigilante posse getting ready to undo the philistine's damage. When I got

there and looked at it, it didn't seem as if the philistines had done the work any particular harm. And that was it. From that moment it was an emotional decision, whereas it had been intellectual. There was this emotional transition right then and there when I realized it didn't matter. And it certainly didn't constitute a reason to go out and beat somebody up.

**LG:** Had you been exhibiting the words at that time?

**LW:** Yes, within catalog structures and things, and by that time I had published this book where the work was presented within that context. I had talked to other artists about participating within this group with Seth Siegelau and other artists, and by that time it was already a normal thing.

**LG:** But at this point you hadn't yet used words on the wall.

**LW:** Words on the wall is something else. I had always had them typed on a sheet of paper or in a book or notebook. A collector in Italy, Panza [Giuseppe Panza di Biumo], had been collecting quite a bit of work of mine from the early stages. I finally met him after he had acquired a lot of work, and I asked the obvious question: how did he show this to other people? He said, "Well, I wanted to talk to you about it and I've tried this and that, I've tried having it typeset, etc." Finally I made a deal with him that since we had had such good conversations, whatever way he wanted to present it was fine with me. He found an architect who put it on the wall. I arrived in his house to look at the collection, and there was a work of mine either painted or presstype, I never figured it out, on the wall. I think I was a little distressed, walked around Milano for a while, and realized that that was just about as good as anything else. It wasn't anything I figured out, it was something that just came about by someone who was using the work. I think I was also tired of carrying these wrinkled typewritten papers.

**LG:** In this show, we've included an untitled sculpture consisting of a table and a block of limestone.\*\* How did that particular work come about?

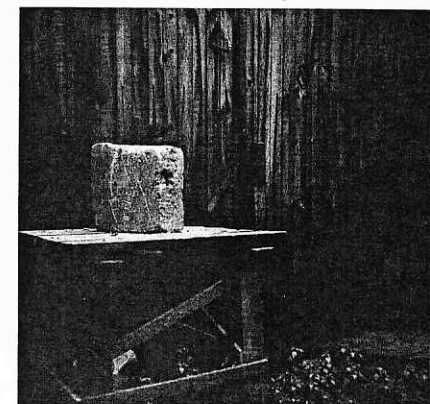
**LW:** I was dealing with this idea of specific and non-specific materials that one had access to in the streets. I remember buying a full set of stonecutting tools and teaching myself how to cut stone. I still couldn't figure out what that had to do with making art. I became very involved with it, enjoyed getting up at six a.m., going out to construction sites, stealing limestone, marble, and bringing them back to

the studio. I built a table, put my goggles on, and cut stone month after month. I learned a lot about stone. And I didn't make one piece of sculpture that I wanted to show anybody. People would come to the studio and I would throw quilting over whatever I was working on. I took this piece into the backyard here, set it up, and started to cut the final piece of limestone. I began to move the limestone around the table and it became an activity. Every day I would go outdoors and move this piece of limestone from one corner of the table to the other, occasionally hitting it with a hammer, occasionally getting sort of angry at it, and literally bouncing it until it looked in the right position to be cut into this unnamed sculpture. After a couple of weeks I realized that that's what it's all about, and literally just placed it on the table, paying absolutely no attention to how I placed it. I think I went out for a drink and told people that I had finally solved my problem about how to make a limestone sculpture. I invited a lot of artists back and, with flashlights and candles, presented my piece of sculpture. Surprisingly enough, not only did it satisfy my needs at the moment, it satisfied theirs. I realized sculpture was about "Put in Place," volume or mass put in place. It's a matter of transportation; you move it from one place to the other, which was a rejection of the Duchampian ethic. I still find myself engaged in rejecting the idea that changing the context of a material constitutes an aesthetic gesture. I think that all materials normally change their context and it's not necessarily an aesthetic gesture. There is nothing that's not out of context.

**LG:** Can you explain further your interest in materials?

**LW:** Sure. I honestly cannot explain it in the terms that I would have explained it in the sixties because I don't remember them. For me, it seems to be now that art essentially is the relationship of human beings to objects and objects to objects in relation to human beings. The way that human beings understand their relationships to materials always relates back to a human being's use of it. If that's our activity as artists, then there is no other need for justification. It took a long time to get that straight. Art is not a metaphor, although it can function as metaphor in the culture sometimes. It also functions as illustration in the culture. But just because something functions as something within a culture does not mean that that's inherently what it is. Human beings function as soldiers and as rapists, but that

is not the definition of human being. Sometimes I used material as metaphor. The nice thing about using language is that you don't have to subjugate your own personality to make an objective piece of work. The work itself is objective in its relationship of one material to another, but you know what things stand for. A reasonable example is *RED AS WELL AS GREEN AS WELL AS BLUE*, a book I did in '72, where for the purpose of building the sculpture, I completely ignore the context of what red, green, and blue mean politically.\* When the book



Untitled, 1960–62. Limestone and wood, dimensions unknown.

was finished, it had two different meanings; the work on the wall has two different meanings. We made a videotape with Kathryn Bigelow doing a commentary on it, called *RED AS WELL AS GREEN AS WELL AS BLUE*, where we discussed the fact that we know red means "left," blue is invariably a working-class color, and green is a fascist color.\*\* We accepted that, so one can use that to talk about their feelings about politics at the time—and it was a very heavy time because of Vietnam. But the work itself was out of this immediate political context. When it was recently reshowed in London in 1981, it was sold to a Belgian collector who bought it on the assumption that the work itself stood for the relationship of red to green to blue, not its political connotations, which are now becoming old-fashioned. They don't work any longer. We know it is historical because we know the thirties, the fifties. But that's about as close as it gets.

\* For the two symposiums see pp. 13–20 in the present volume.

\*\* Gumpert is referring to the exhibition *Lynda Benglis, Joan Brown, Luis Jimenez, Gary Stephan, Lawrence Weiner: Early Work* (The New Museum, New York, 3 April–3 June 1982) in which a reconstruction of the work mentioned was shown.

\* Lawrence Weiner, *GREEN AS WELL AS BLUE AS WELL AS RED*, London: Jack Wendler, 1972.

\*\* Lawrence Weiner, *GREEN AS WELL AS BLUE AS WELL AS RED*, produced by Moved Pictures, New York, 1975–76; see pp. 77–79 in the present volume.



**LG:** Are you conscious of how your attitudes toward your work have changed?

**LW:** As far as I can imagine, I'm conscious of it, but we all have this problem, we might be deluding ourselves that we're always aware of what we're doing.

**LG:** Looking back, do you see certain work as being more successful?

**LW:** Yes.

**LG:** How do you determine that?

**LW:** By its use to me as an artist today. When I rummage through papers, drawings, or an old notebook and start to work off of that, it is almost as a practice session, the way a musician would sit down and practice. There are still areas within that perception or insight that are useful today in relationship to materials, and as you grow older you learn more about the materials you use every day. I'd say the most successful works were the ones that allow themselves to be reused or reworked. Not because of their historical placement, but because of their content. I still believe that the content, not the context, is the reason for artists making art.

**LG:** "Put in Place" then has its relevance in both terms of the sculpture and the statement that was first published in 1978 [1977].

**LW:** Yes it does. In Geneva I wanted to make a piece that was complex, yet totally understandable to the public. What I did was make a sound tape involved with "Put in Place" and devise a game in which I was able to take what I had learned from the limestone and place it within the context of a new work. I rather like to do that sometimes. It's a good way as well for checking out work that you are sentimentally attached to. You never know whether or not it's any good unless you try to reuse it.

**LG:** When you're working in the studio, do you always construct the pieces? Or is it sufficient to know that the pieces can be constructed?

**LW:** All of the work that's been presented publicly in language has the possibility of being built. It might sound a little simplistic, but it's really important that the artist can build a piece. A piece can be fabricated or it can just be presented in its language form. I wouldn't say I did anything regularly. When I find myself with materials I don't quite understand, I go out and schlepp a lot of it to the studio. I'm

still basically a studio artist. I play with materials, I'll build a piece, I'll schlepp in stone, I'll make ice, I'll do the whole thing. I see that as research. For example, if you're not sure what the modular flexibility of a piece of plywood is, and you're working on a piece about a piece of plywood, you set up vises and a measuring device. You bend the plywood and build up your modules—I'm in the middle of doing that right now for a piece on glaciers.\*\* But the central thing is basic research between the relation of human beings to objects.

**LG:** One thing that comes out in the early paintings as well is the importance of the receiver in determining whether or not the work may be constructed, its size, color, etc.

**LW:** I think that honestly and truly has been an obsession of mine since I was a teenager. When you deal with things as philosophical relationships to society, you begin to realize that the content is the most essential thing. It's not the context, but the content of what you're presenting. When one makes art, it



COMING AND GOING REMAINING WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF PUT AND PLACE (i.e. as a means of transport), Cat. #448 (1977). Installation, Centre d'art contemporain, Salle Patino, Geneva, 21 September–20 October 1977.

is always for other people. It sounds very pretentious and very humanist, and I'm not a humanist, but you make art essentially to communicate your perceptions of the relationship of human beings to objects to other people. In other words, if I was stranded on a desert island, would I make art? If I didn't think that there was any chance that I'd be found, I would say I wouldn't make art. There'd be no need to make art. When I present something in public, I'm convinced that I know what it's about. If

I know what it's about, I'm literally translating my own perceptions so that I can communicate with other people. To not accept a receiver, meaning the people who are consuming your product, becomes ivory tower art and I don't believe in ivory tower art. I see art as an extremely social aspect of society. The artist is distanced in a certain way from society by choice, and with that distance it becomes obvious that there's a chance I will know more about the relationship of red to yellow than a person who drives a truck all day, because that's what I do all day. But when I'm going to present this to somebody who drives a truck all day, I have to translate that so it's still within the context of art, and understandable *within that context* if one takes the trouble to learn the basics of the language. That's the same with any other language; if you take the trouble to learn Italian, you can read Dante.

**LG:** It also seems to go along with your idea that there should be an active relationship between the receiver and the object.

**LW:** There has to be.

**LG:** It necessitates that by putting a certain amount of responsibility on the receiver, you are, in a sense, initiating a dialog.

**LW:** The responsibility comes in only when somebody chooses to deal with art. I don't think art should ever be impositional. Art is essentially presentational, and we do have situations in the world that are called art museums and galleries. Artists, at least in New York, are free to put things out on the street, but you are not free to force somebody to pay attention to something that doesn't have any interest for them. If they claim to have an interest in aesthetic research, then you can demand from them what you demand from yourself. If they want it, they must support it. They must learn to speak the language. It's not your responsibility with each piece of art to teach somebody what has already become part of art history, i.e., the relationships of human beings to objects. I don't like all this amateur art.

Abstract Expressionism was a celebration of the new world at the end of the war, and of the beginning of an international culture. When I began to make art we were already in the critical phase of culture; that culture had already presented itself as a means where art itself became a comment, non-metaphorical but quite direct, on the fact that society was not working. One of the reasons it was not working was that the relationship of human beings to objects was perverse. The Academy immediately took on a lot of the work done in the sixties and you began to get this thing that they called "conceptual

art." It didn't have very much to do with anybody working at that time. People started becoming amateur sociologists, anthropologists, physicists, and the last thing this society needed was amateur anything—they needed professional artists. A society that doesn't have professional artists invariably runs into dilettantism. I found there were things I couldn't explain in my art to a public without essentially removing the art itself. I had a facility as a director, and set about trying to find out as much as I could about media. I began to make videotapes and films; I don't consider film art, but *an* art. That meant I could come to film as a director and work with other people. It's also a real turn-on for a studio artist who gets pretty good to find people who have exactly the same competence level as you. Better. Since you can't make a film yourself, you work with them. It's like a gift from all of these people to me, every time we make a movie. The purpose usually is the content. There's a central agreement on the content and something comes out of it.

**LG:** A process of collaboration as well, an exchange of ideas—

**LW:** Making movies is a studio process for me. I know what point I want to get across. I know a bit about the medium, but I'm beholden to people who know more about the medium, or who have a different attitude about it. Since you can't force people to do things when you're not paying them terribly much money, you almost have to convince them. That's super, because if you can't convince them, maybe the idea isn't that worthwhile. If a collector or museum comes to you and says, "We really support your work, we show it a lot," that's one thing. But essentially they are not supporting the work unless they make an absolute move. You give your time and life towards the building of it, they use their time and life towards the acquisition of funds. Without that kind of transaction, I think it's pretty hollow support. It sounds mercantile, but it's true. If somebody supports the work, they buy it. If somebody really finds the films interesting, they work on them.

**LG:** You spent a lot of time working in Europe. Has this had an effect on your work?

**LW:** I would imagine so. During these periods of trying to get it together I spent a lot of time in the Canadian Arctic, and I traveled around in Mexico and Yucatan. Because I'm working class, I found myself having jobs in places and staying an extra three weeks because the job was paying well, then moving on to some other place. I had this illusion when I was younger that I would move through my life going from place to place, work and then the

\* "COMING & GOING" (1977) on Weiner's audio cassette, *THE PERFORMANCE TAPES*, New York: Moved Pictures, [1984]. See also Weiner's book *COMING AND GOING/VENANT ET PARTANT*, Geneva: Centre d'art contemporain / Ecart Publications, 1977.

\*\* A MASS OF SUFFICIENT QUANTITY MOVED A SUFFICIENT DISTANCE TO LEAVE HUMPS AND BOSSES IN THE WAKE OF PROGRESS (ROCHES MOUTONNÉES) and PRESSURE SUFFICIENT TO FORM AN ICE OF MASS ENOUGH TO CARRY UPON WITHIN AND BENEATH ITSELF SOME OF THAT WITHIN THE VECTOR OF MOTION, Cat. #489 and #490 (1982). Both works were first shown in 1983 at David Bellman Gallery, Toronto.





THE RESIDUE OF A FLARE IGNITED UPON A BOUNDARY, Cat. #029 (1968). Construction of the work on the city boundary of Amsterdam, for *Op Losse Schroeven* (also known as *Square Pegs in Round Holes*), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 15 March–27 April 1969.

old "Let's leave it by the side of the road." The craters lent themselves well to this. When I found myself in Oregon or Oklahoma, I could legitimately go out, make art, and leave it behind to the society that was not interested in it. In Europe it was a different sort of situation. I first went to Europe in '63, had a Eurail Pass, did the whole number. I wasn't terribly impressed by the activities, so I came back to the U.S. and stayed in New York until I went to Europe for the *Attitudes* show [see ill. p. 72]. The first people who were interested in what I was doing, besides Seth Siegelaub and a few individuals here and there, were people from Europe. When I went to the *Attitudes* show in Bern and to the *Square Pegs in Round Holes* show in Amsterdam, I found myself around people who had been following what I had been doing for the last two or three years. I began to work there a lot. I came back and did a show in Halifax.\* Then my daughter was born, and I began to notice that a lot of people were having enormous difficulties with this problem of New World and Old World. I was also having difficulty with it and didn't want my daughter to grow up with those problems. We went to Holland, since I felt it was the closest to a cosmopolitan situation. By chance, and through the help of people, I fell into staying in Amsterdam part of the year and raising a child in Europe and the U.S. It was quite exciting for someone who had lived in New York for so many years, knowing twenty to twenty-five people really well, and going to another culture and working.

\* See pp. 23–25 in the present volume.

**LG:** Living in Europe would also seem to be related to an idea of transportation.

**LW:** I must say that I don't start with a preconception. I don't start to prove that a piece of wood in Germany functions the same way as a piece of wood functions in the U.S. I start off accepting all the divergencies of that piece of wood, and see where it leads. I genuinely don't mind overthrowing all my preconceptions from research, or I wouldn't bother doing it. The support has been a lot more concrete in Europe for my generation of artists than it has been in the U.S. In the U.S. you *show* a lot, you have a lot of opportunity to talk about what you're trying to do. But in Europe there was a different tradition, where people supported what they were using. It became economically necessary to work in Europe as well.

**LG:** Have you found that other aspects of your life enter directly into your art?

**LW:** I can't imagine that it wouldn't. We claim that we're artists or that we're involved in the art world, and that means that the amount of alienation necessary to get through each day is minimized. If that occurs, then of course your daily existence will have some interaction with your work. I try not to let the personal aspects of my existence interfere with the making of art, but one of the loopholes I have is making movies. And I can expunge obsessions in the movies or at least make them public to the extent that it becomes a forum where other people talk about it. With sound tapes and radio programs, you can also use things that you can't use in your art.

**LG:** Earlier you were talking about problems with the term "conceptual art." Why haven't you ever used documentation in an exhibition?

**LW:** Because it seemed rather silly to me. I still consider it as a great fault, these people running around day after day screaming that they're not interested in "objects," and we all know that even a sentence is an object. Everything's an object. Then when you go to their exhibitions, you're confronted with the most incredible amount of documentation which are again objects, framed, signed, dated, numbered, all addressing the fact that they're not objects and they're against objects. I don't understand the term "conceptual art," there is nothing that human beings do that is not essentially conceived of first. It's an attempt to explain the art people were making that didn't look right in the context of art history as we know it. They attempted to elevate it into some sort of radical position. The strength of the majority of the art of that time made that unnecessary. The art did carry itself. It has, in a sense, carried itself to the point that it has entered into art history to be reacted against. Art becomes a useful thing for its time and must develop in its own times. But "conceptual art" is like the old joke about the person who has the most children is the best conceptual artist. It's a silly term. Some artists use it in a rather ironic sense, and they use it so consistently that it's theirs and they can have it. I truly don't understand it. I make art. If you want to call it anything else, it's very realist art, since it deals with real materials and real relationships of human beings to those materials.

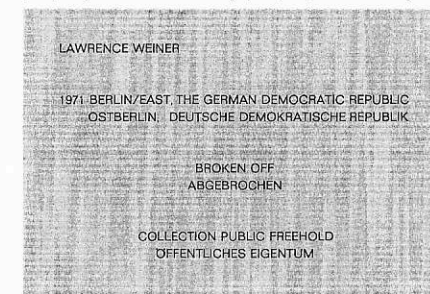
**LG:** Can you explain the term "Collection Public Freehold"?

**LW:** That started off as a rather crude attempt to justify in my own eyes my existence within society. I was making art that wasn't being readily accepted. I am a socialist politically, and I believe that the needs of the populace should be taken care of by the production of the populace. I began to feel, strangely, that here I was working every day, fully participating in my culture, yet everything I was making could be owned by anyone who read it. It was not necessary to buy it. But I still felt there had to be some sort of gesture and that gesture was to not sell a certain percentage of the work, approximately half. It was my own attempt to stay pure. Just because a piece was in the Guggenheim doesn't mean it should be more expensive than a piece that wasn't. It made more and more sense to me, and I still do "Public Freehold" work. They enter into the body of work the same as any other piece of work, and when we worked together putting on

the show, I didn't let it influence me whether the work is for sale or whether it's in a collection—it's the *work*. It seemed much easier, instead of later saying, "Well I choose not to sell that particular work," to say right at the beginning, "That one is not for sale." I designate those works as "Public Freehold." When most people see things exhibited that way, they have no idea what it means.

**LG:** How did you come up with that term?

**LW:** It's a contradiction of terms. In places like Britain which are autocratic, people can't own property; they can only lease it from the state. Common property that's owned by people, a lease say for



BROKEN OFF, Cat. #251 (1971). Postcard, mailed from East Berlin, organized by Galerie Folker Skulima, West Berlin, 1971.

ninety-nine years, become public freeholds. It's a comment on the fact that art is essentially authoritarian in the sense that if you want to own it you have to buy it and there is no "art for the people."

**LG:** You date your work from the time it's first publicly exhibited. Besides exhibitions, how else does it enter the culture?

**LW:** That's the nice thing about using language to present art, it can enter the culture on the radio, in a book, an exhibition, within the context of a movie or videotape. Once it has publicly been presented as a piece of art, that's its state. I've had exhibitions, as every artist has had, where only twenty-five people came for the duration of the exhibition. But it is still entering the public. I try to have the work itself on the invitation card. Another aspect of the professional activity of being an artist is to present the work with as many accoutrements as possible to help people understand it. When you put the work itself in language on the invitation card and send it off, you then transcend the gallery without rejecting it. There's nothing more silly than an artist who says they don't like the standard gallery situation where work is presented for sale. I personally like galleries more than museums, they're less



authoritarian. People can come in off the street, see work on the wall, laugh if they don't find it interesting, scoff, do anything they want, walk out, and they don't have any guilt about it. When you go into a museum, and you walk out, you still have a funny feeling because the culture has already put its stamp on it. Also, there has to be a place to sell the product, but I don't like the way galleries are normally run. To transcend the gallery structure, you make sure that a majority of work is also quite public. People don't have to go to the gallery to find out what you did in Düsseldorf.

**LG:** If you go out to the Bowery and make some of your works there, and there are ten or fifteen people who listen to you, would that also enter the public context? Or is that not an art context?

**LW:** That's rather complicated. I'd say yes, that constitutes a public presence, but I wouldn't want to impose it on the people unless there was a response and it became obvious what it was being used for. I have an anecdote that is relevant to this. In the harbor in Holland where I lived, there were no other artists. One day I went to buy a pack of cigarettes in a local bar in the harbor. I walked in; people were always polite, they'd say hello, goodbye; that's it. Finally one of them grabbed me and said, "Okay, what the fuck do you do for a living?" Meanwhile, the other constituents of the harbor were either medical students, smugglers, retired sailors, or purveyors of forbidden merchandise. And they were getting a little nervous that we were surviving so long, but not too well. I had a choice. I could explain to them what I did, or give some sort of answer that I knew would fit into that kind of working-class mentality since I come from it. I decided to tell the truth, and in imperfect Dutch, spent about three hours explaining the relationship of human beings to objects and using language as a means of presenting the work, etc. It was not the friendliest atmosphere I've ever seen in my life. They pointed to a calendar on the wall and said, "That's the kind of art we like." By that time I figured I'd blown it anyhow, there was no reason for any conciliatory gesture; I paid for my cigarettes and considered myself quite lucky not to have gotten involved in fisticuffs! I went back to the boat, and didn't go back to that bar for a couple of weeks. I ran out of cigarettes again in the middle of the night, went into the bar, and the same cronies were sitting around. They came over to me and said, "We've discussed this." And they pulled out a newspaper article from a couple of weeks or months before, of an exhibition I had made some place in Holland. And they pulled out a book of mine that one of them had bought

from an alternative bookshop, and said, "My daughter said that she had heard of you and we bought this, and you know something? It makes sense! But it's not art!" That was it.

In another instance, we did a radio program where we got a comedian to say that there's this artist (no names, no gallery, no nothing) who says that—and read work of mine—is art. About five years later, I met somebody who was now an art historian whose parents were butchers, and they had heard this comedian on the radio. They laughed and laughed and laughed, and they repeated it to her. She later realized that I was the artist. She said it really influenced her because it made sense. It wasn't the kind of art that she was interested in, but it made sense. That's all you can do as an artist. You provide a methodology for the relationship of human beings to objects and that methodology, in its rejection or acceptance, becomes an applied part of the way people learn how to deal with their world. And that's all you want from art. As long as it's not authoritarian, if it gives somebody a methodology to survive, I think that's entering the public context. I don't think we have to justify it any further. That's the "Archie Bunker" principle on the television. If you can present something that you can identify with enough to reject it, you've succeeded. I don't know why we can't apply to visual arts what we've learned from Brecht and from Lautréamont.

**LG:** Does it have to do with not imposing something on somebody? Rather by presenting it...

**LW:** Presenting it so completely it shatters their illusions about their previous relationships. Of course they will either accept it or they will rebuild their own perceptions to the point that it can argue with your presentation. You don't want converts, you want people to essentially counter with formal arguments.

**LG:** That seems related to what you have said about an artist having a dialectic with society.

**LW:** What is an art historian, what is a curator? Someone who has a dialectic with the products of society. We got caught up in middle-class Marxism in the U.S. where certain words became radical or romantic, but they are still decent words. You attempt to understand what something's all about. Artists, however, are not supposed to be responsible, but artists are responsible. There are butchers out there. There are people who make the acceptance of material and the understanding of material impossible by obfuscation and by a Jesuit sort of thinking, e.g., "I know, and if you work hard, you'll get to the point where you'll know as much as I know." It's not true. If you know, you should be ca-

pable of telling or else you shouldn't be an artist. I think artists should prove everything they say. If the artist does that, you can carry it further by not being alienated from what you do, by virtue of not saying, "If you don't understand, you're just not on the same level I am." Artists have a certain freedom in society as well. They are allowed to pursue their research. You don't get out of bed unless there's a commitment, unless there's an ideology in it. Catalonia is the basis of our existence. Without some sort of rational relationship to what's happening with the world, you just don't function. I've been an artist a little too long to talk about what it must be like not to be an artist, that's why I can only give anecdotes about so-called people who are not artists reacting to art. My father recently died and I realized I'm a middle-aged person who has maintained contact with my parents through most of my life. I've maintained contact, but my father died without having any idea of what I did for a living. None whatsoever. And it was not due to lack of explaining; there just was no conceivable way that he could conceive that art had a function. And I guess there is a percentage of the population art has no function for. My mother still speaks to my daughter and asks if I've gotten a job yet. There must be a percentage of the population that's that way. Do you like cigars? I like cigars a lot. I've been ill—it's really odd, I've been in good spirits, I think we covered it.



## Interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist

[...]

**HUO:** Well, let's start with collaboration since it has already come up. You have been influential in this area, not only through your collaborations with musicians, but in so many other areas. Could you tell me about the history of collaboration in your practice?

**LW:** Okay, but I have to personalize it. My own praxis is based on my relationship to materials. It's a studio practice. The studio might be the North Sea, but it's still a studio praxis. There's no difference between a landscape painter carrying their easel out into the landscape or staying inside and looking at a photo—it's the same for me. It's very good for contemporary artists when you are trying to have a conversation with the world as it is—not as it was—to work with other people. You can't make music, you can't make film—you can't even make a book without working with other people who have skills that are on the same level as yours. And I like that. It takes you out of the ivory tower. I'm also in the position where I have a reasonably good life, but I don't have a lot of extra money, so if somebody is working with me on a project, they're not going to be making a lot of money. I have to entice them. I have to make it worthwhile for them to take their skill and put it with my content, or else they're not going to do it. By the time you walk away, you walk away with a book. When you open it up, all the credits are there. When you see a DVD you know who handled the computer, and every one of those things determines how that project is done. It's no longer a matter of the artist being the Hollywood auteur. It doesn't work. You have to accept that there is a division of labor. One of the things that you do in that division of labor is accede to another person's concept of context, because if your work cannot exist within their context, then it cannot exist as a universal that you claim it can when it goes into another world. I see context and content as inherently different. I used to believe that

aesthetics were ethics, but the more I've worked, the more I've realized that this is the reason for a lot of the political malaise that we have. In fact, aesthetics are not ethics; aesthetics are aesthetics. Ethics seem to be something that can cross aesthetic lines, and I'd like to have an aesthetic that can cross ethical lines.

**HUO:** That is something that has been present in your work since the very beginning.

**LW:** That was the reason for making it, and my reason for becoming an artist. You've seen my biography, so you know that I was educated in the New York City public school system, but through my own devices and through the generosity of a lot of other people, I am reasonably well educated. But I had a choice as to my real involvement at a certain time, which was an attempt to set up situations that were more amenable than civil rights and labor organizations, and the making of art. I made the decision that art was what I was going to do: it was not a vocation from heaven; it was an intellectual decision. Of course, Benjamin [Buchloh] had the same problem, he just didn't understand that the systems he believed in as a youth did not fail him—they got worn out, and that's no failure. It's a funny thing; you can't personalize that. You can't say, "I wasted my time thinking that." All those people that were caught up in the Structuralist rage, they didn't waste any time, but if they spend any more time trying to defend a theory that didn't work, then I think it's fair to say that they've wasted time. But having gone through a legitimate, sincere analysis of the society that they lived in—that is not a waste of time. And I don't think that any of my endeavors are designed to succeed or to fail. I don't really know. I don't like being responsible for other people. [...]

[...]

**HUO:** Another issue I'd like to discuss with you is the fact that you describe yourself as a studio artist.

**LW:** I have always been a studio artist. I am a materialist, and I am not a Conceptual artist. The people whose work has continued to have value and use within our structure are all materialists, from Robert Ryman to Daniel Buren—he is involved in the material of history. But his reference is always to history. I like to have a practice that doesn't have to refer to history. That's the difference.

**HUO:** What about context and site-specificity?

**LW:** No, I don't see it. Site-specificity. I don't understand it. If someone says to me "Lawrence, we have a city and we'd like you to deal with it," then that's a context. So I'll say, "Look, this is what I am working on at the moment; this is what I can do best right now, because it's the thing that is closest at hand, so I'll place it within your context. Let's go for it." And I try to do the best job that I can. I try to find out all I can about drainage, city planning, and things like that, for that site, and I'll put the work in, but I'm not going to change the work for them. There's no reason why I should, and I don't think people expect it, although they like to think it's special for them. No, it's special after it's made. Then it becomes something else. But it's not site-specific: it comes out of a studio practice.

[...]

**HUO:** In an interview with Buchloh, you rejected the studio as a metaphor for the outside world [see p. 373].

**LW:** Nor is the academy a metaphor for anything—it's the academy. That's why my relationship to when people are teaching becomes a rather hatred situation. I don't see the museum and the gallery as a metaphor. I see it as a reality, and as a reality it will have facets that are viable and facets that are false, as a metaphor it can have nothing except your hatred. Your hatred is worth shit; my hatred is worth shit. The only thing is—because of the privileges that artists and intellectuals have of being able to talk to larger groups of people than the average person in the supermarket—is that that anger can inform you. But it cannot be a reason for existence. It's not enough; you really better be able to say, "The emperor has no clothes on." You can't say that if you are part of the academy because you're part of the emperor.

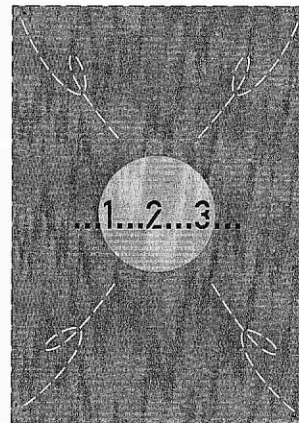
**HUO:** This is something you often repeated in public talks and conferences.

**LW:** You know in conferences, when somebody asks you a question and you don't know the answer?

You don't say, "I don't know the answer"—you say, "Wittgenstein!" You know what I'm talking about, don't you! The ones that say, "John Cage!" "Duchamp!" I have no fucking idea what kind of an answer that's supposed to be. Say there's a hole where you're asking me to put my foot: "Wittgenstein!" (Laughs)

**HUO:** (Laughs)

**LW:** I'm sorry if I'm sounding silly, but it's the truth! I'm so fed up with this; they've taken these people who were dignified people and turned them into idiots! I must say that most of the people I know who teach sure as hell earn their money. I'm not saying this is a rip-off, I'm saying that nobody has questioned the academy to such an extent without using silly words like "free" and "open." I don't think that it's a scam. I just don't see it as a functioning



Poster for the "Utopia Station" Poster Project, 2003.

entity. I don't want to join the establishment. I feel very much like Groucho Marx. "What would I think of a club that would have me as a member?" It's a joke, but it's not much of a joke. I think the same thing. My job is really to be a pain in the ass.

[...]

**HUO:** Would you say that the fact that we proposed that everyone do a poster has acted like a trigger?\*

**LW:** It was an attempt to take what I thought was my skill and do something with the grace of a "Lawrence Weiner" but that didn't look like a "Lawrence Weiner," that's not a work. I wanted to make posters that anybody could fly their flag under, and it seems



to have worked. I like it. I like what happened. I was a little nervous about sending it off, but it's true: What is Utopia? This is Utopia, one, two, three. Right now. Utopia now.

**HUO:** Here and now.

**LW:** Here and now. Not in the future. I'm so oppressed with what I don't believe in. I don't believe in footnotes and I don't believe in stealing. And I don't believe in building your whole case on somebody else's quote.

**HUO:** And you're against appropriation?

**LW:** I don't approve. To this day, I'm really sorry, I don't believe in appropriation. I think appropriation is theft. If it's good enough to be appropriated, then it's good enough to be used as it is. A copy of a Walker Evans is just telling me that it's a reproduction of a Walker Evans. I'll give credit if the person does a good reproduction, but I can't say it's their work. But at the same time, if the Walker Evans is still inherent in your work, it's because you can't think of anything else to do. Making a replica of something else doesn't work. In fact, if people knew a little bit more about this art history that they adore so much, but that they know shit about, all of these fantastic artists have been abused and misused by people making copies of them. That's appropriation. The artist has a right to the profit and maybe they have the right to not having their work recreated. Reproduction is something very different. I've said it too many times, and it sounds silly, but if you work on the factory floor and you steal, you go to jail. If you run the factory and you steal, you go to jail. If you steal someone's ideas, you're a thief. But if you're the bourgeois managerial class and you steal, they reward you because if they don't they're afraid that you'll do something even worse. Only an asshole steals when it would be just as easy to use. Coming back to Rauschenberg, I think it was a gesture but it wasn't a necessary gesture. He took a de Kooning drawing that he said he was going to erase [*Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953]. This was not something that he did as a vicious act, and that is not appropriation.

**HUO:** It was a subtraction.

**LW:** It was something else, and he got his permission.

**HUO:** One of the things that you have done which inspires many young artists is that you constantly work without hierarchy.

**LW:** I can't accept the hierarchies. I don't believe in them. Money is the only reason for the hierarchies. I'd like to figure out a way to have the financial rewards without having to go against my usefulness in what I am representing. A poster is a poster, a book is a book, and a piece of sculpture is a piece

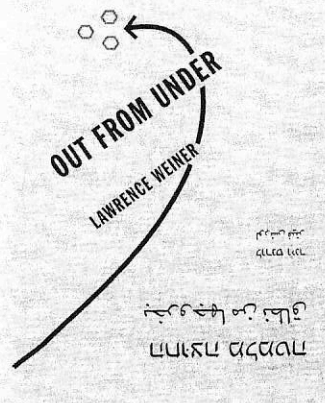
of sculpture. Where is the hierarchy? The market has given these things a financial hierarchy, but they are all necessary. You were turned on by Lautrec posters before you were turned on by Lautrec's paintings. If he hadn't paid attention to those posters, he wouldn't have been able to communicate with you what he was trying to communicate. I mean, what is the big deal? I really don't get it. [...] **HUO:** The idea of appropriation was prominent in the eighties and then in the nineties there was much more talk about infiltration, which is something you have pioneered a lot.

**LW:** Yes, but I don't think it is a good word. If you're infiltrating, what you're doing is taking the trouble to place something within contexts. But then again, we're talking about financial things that might not really repay the effort, but once it goes in, if it really functions, it will be accepted and adapted by people because most people are not particularly prejudiced against things that artists make. Often they have no idea that it is the work of an artist. When I say I'm doing social service, I'm doing a show for a small Kunstverein, say, where I have to put in three months' work, I design and do everything—there are no financial rewards, but I think the cultural situation could use it. That's social service. When I make a poster or do a show for the Wrong Gallery [in New York], that's not social service. That's not a structure; that's just placing something out for people to be able to see or to use. Again, I prefer to make shows in commercial galleries rather than in museum structures most of the time, because people can come in, look at it, laugh, and go home. In a museum, they think they missed something. I don't want people to feel that they missed anything. If they didn't get it, they didn't get it and it has no use for them. Coming back to the "Utopia Station," I'd like to see what happens with my colleagues. We're going to be in Venice, within a context, and that context has to prove itself not as exotic, but as a context that is not mistaken for the Biennale context, but at the same time, doesn't say it's not art. I don't know if we can do it. It's very complex and it's a real challenge. But if it weren't complex, why would everybody get so much work? You have the same problem as most artists—you have to have three or four jobs just to pay for your passions! [...]

**HUO:** What do you think of the instructions of John Cage, which referred to the "open score"?

**LW:** Cage was in a different situation. With the *mise-en-scène*, the camera can go outside of the *mise-en-scène*. Cage was involved much more in a moral sense—very much like Charles Ives—of how to get

through life and notice what's going on whilst still getting to where you're going. That's interesting. I discovered whilst working on the book for Tel Aviv—it was in Arabic, English, and Hebrew—that in Arabic it's almost impossible to talk about some-



Cover of *OUT FROM UNDER*, Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2000.

thing that didn't previously exist. In Hebrew it's difficult, but possible. We have surmounted many of those problems to try to present ways of dealing with objects that didn't previously exist in a place. We used drawings with the text, which were presented in such a way that you can always see the other language upside down. This all comes out of one of the cartoons, which asserts that the world takes it for granted that all people understand the significance of certain things, whereas in fact, the great majority in the world does not understand straight lines. Many people grow up not knowing any straight lines. And we think that straight lines are the idea of Modernism. [...]

[...]

**HUO:** Could you tell me about how you work with translators?

**LW:** If they have an idea of what the sculpture looks like, that's good enough for me. I'm careful, but as long as it gives the general idea, that's fine. Objects do have a destiny and you can change it. Uranium has a destiny. Everything has a use and you change the use, and form cannot follow function because that's saying that you know all the functions of every object that is put before you. Look at this lighter. There's a piece of stone in there. Twenty

years ago, the thought was fantasy. You can't get blood from a stone? Maybe you can if you can get electricity from a stone. Artists are supposed to look at the material world with wonder each day. That's what they get paid for. That's what scientists get paid for. If they don't look at it with wonder, then they're not doing their job. What happened to [*Lucio*] Fontana and all these other people? They're not looking at the canvas with wonderment every day, but someone like Robert Ryman transcends that because every day he looks at the canvas with wonder. Truly, that's what I said about having respect for Rirkrit [Tiravanija] at the conference when he refused to give up his wonderment.\* Fuck them, why should he? So he can look like he should be a professor? If you want to be a professor, make your own school. [...]

\* Utopia Station gathering at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, mid-February 2003.