

In Connecticut, a Conceptualist's Nonconceptual Collection

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HARTFORD, Aug. 6 — There is surely no other art collection of a contemporary artist even remotely like Sol LeWitt's. This 63-year-old pioneer of Conceptual Art, whose open gridlike architectural-sculptures suggest anti-storage bins — that is to say, wall-less storage bins in which nothing can be stored — is in fact a great accumulator of all kinds of art, by all kinds of artists, from all over Europe and the United States.

The 160 works by around 100 artists in "Open Mind: The LeWitt Collection," at the Wadsworth Atheneum, could have been assembled only by someone of immense generosity and restlessness, someone who had lived in constant movement and yet been so sure of himself that he had remained fundamentally in one place.

It is the collection of a Hartford-born artist whose mature work was composed by him and executed by others, and who therefore has a history of expressing himself — as he does in his collection — via other hands. Mr. LeWitt's architectural-sculptures can be like coops in which birds can come and go, or like windows that will never darken or close. Few other major American artists after 1960 have a curiosity about art that so far transcends their own generation.

This exhibition of Mr. LeWitt's multifarious accumulations was selected and installed by Kimberly Davenport, an associate curator at the museum, which has been the primary repository for the collection since 1976. The exhibition is not exclusively Conceptual in focus. It includes many works that were not included in previous exhibitions of the collection. Brice Marden's "Adriatic-Grids" from 1973, in which a tight grid in one etching loosens up and becomes more light-filled in the other, is one of them. Another is Fred Sandback's line installation — made from instructions on a certificate that is itself a work in the collection — of one yellow, one blue and one black strand of yarn, suspended from the ceiling, that are by themselves enough to evoke vast space.

The exhibition includes representative works by Mr. LeWitt from

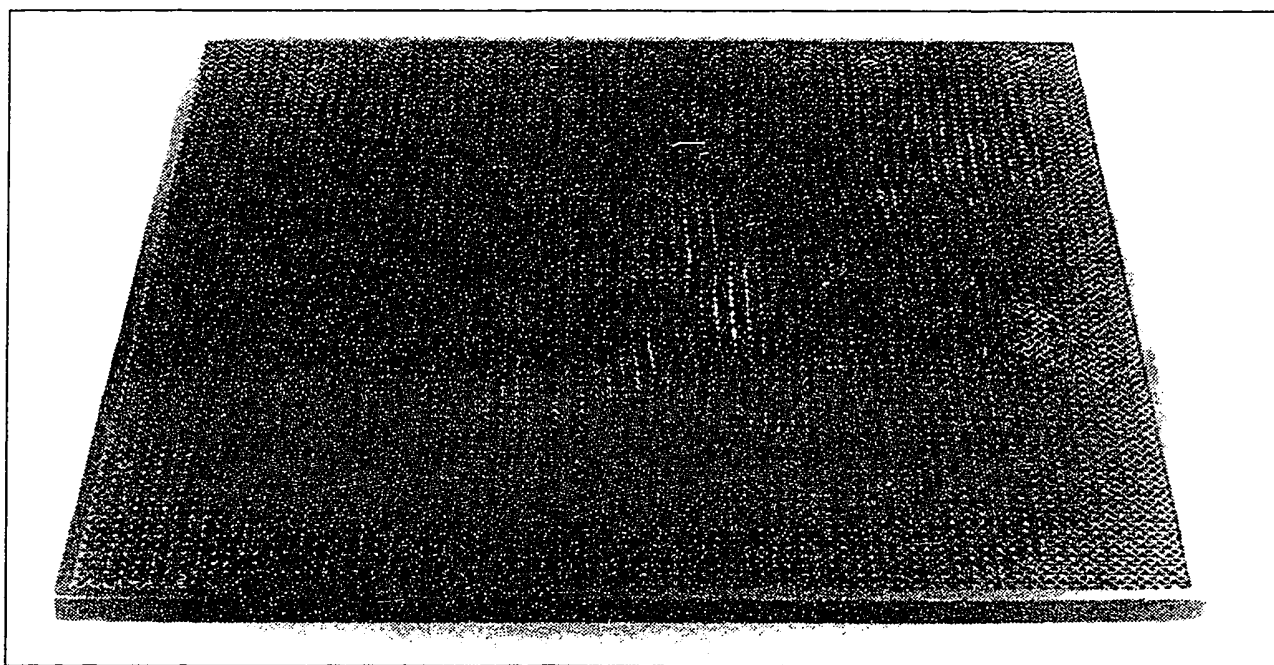
throughout his career. It begins with two early paintings, perhaps from the 1950's, in which the image of a generic running figure competes with the word "running," or "run," and also with the concept of running. It becomes hard to tell the runner from the run.

The exhibition also includes examples of Mr. LeWitt's free-standing or wall sculptures based on arrangements of cubes and squares. As clear as Mr. LeWitt's objects and wall paintings may be, their identity — like the identity of the collection — is fluid and unfixed. They exist somewhere between familiar categories of sculpture, architecture, drawing and painting.

The collection is so rich and multi-sided, and so essential to the rest of the contemporary art at the museum, that a good deal more can be done with it than is done here. By concentrating on its diversity and including so many strong works by Mr. LeWitt, Ms. Davenport has essentially organized an exhibition with its collector in the center. It could also have been organized around themes (like the changing definitions of radical art, or the many possible relationships between geometry and irrationality, impersonal form and autobiographical content, authenticity and fiction). The collection needs a catalogue with documentation and commentary on each work.

It is nevertheless clear from the show that the LeWitt collection is itself a gigantic, organic and amazingly idiosyncratic work of Conceptual art. Like Mr. LeWitt's objects, which may be imposing yet transient, and his wall drawings, which can have a mausolean gravity even when they seem so thinly painted that they could be peeled off the walls, the collection is casual yet precise, anti-ideological yet so coherent and inclusive that it seems programmatic.

The exhibition has more to say about ideas than it does about individual artists. It reveals a sustained interest in the possibilities of the triangle, the circle and the square. For example, it is a long way from the black circular rubber washers on the square base of Eva Hesse's 1967 sculpture "Washer Table" to the halos of clouds in Karen Gunderson's 1979 lithographs "CJS-North, CJS-



Eva Hesse's 1967 sculpture "Washer Table," from Sol LeWitt's collection, is at the Wadsworth Atheneum.

South, CJS-East, CJS-West," to Bernar Venet's 1988 steel sculpture "Two Arcs of 238.5 Degrees," in which two near-circles seem to have just opened their jaws, to Annette Lemieux's 1990 painting "Fifty-Fifty," in which a musical score on canvas suggests a Renaissance tondo or a Baroque dome. Each of these works defines a different use of the circle. Each reflects the belief that geometry is an effective means of both controlling and expanding meaning.

The collection is quietly yet insistently democratic. It includes examples of mail art (a postcard by On Kawara), figurative painting (by Jeffrey Isaacs), messy sculpture (by Franz West), photography (Mr. LeWitt's current collecting passion) and musical scores (by Philip Glass and Steve Reich). It includes work by stars like Claes Oldenburg, John Baldessari, Donald Judd, Joel Shapiro, Mario Merz, Francesco Clemente and Siah Armajani, as well as work

by numerous artists who will be unknown to most visitors.

What Mr. LeWitt has not collected suggests the kinds of art he most strongly defined himself against. There is no narrative art in this show, although the recent acquisition of a photograph by Carrie Mae Weems will help Mr. LeWitt collect in this direction. There is no realistic work based on sustained attention to a person, object or place. There is no modeling.

There is also almost no overt expression of violence. The aggression of Mr. LeWitt's work and of the work in his collection tends to be indirect or concealed.

Unlike the art owned by Picasso and Matisse, let's say, this collection does not reveal the artist's sources, and it has no masterpieces (although many works in this show, for example, by Alighiero e Boetti, Agnes Martin and Robert Mangold, are very good). And it has no works from

before the mid-1960's, when Mr. LeWitt began exchanging works with other artists. Like so much of the radical art that emerged in that decade, this collection insists upon its distance from the past. Its weight is overwhelmingly on the present and future.

But Mr. LeWitt does not exclude anything in principle. And there are few places to which the art he has collected does not lead. In the small chariot sculpture by Bob Law and in the charcoal drawing of a cross by Marco Tirelli, there is a clear concern with the kind of artistic life religion can now have. In Christian Boltanski's "Gymnasium Chases," a 1991 suite of photogravure etchings recalling the plight of Jews in Vienna in 1931, there is evidence of a skeptical yet deadly serious concern with memory. This is the collection of an artist who wants people to think clearly, laugh wryly, exclude as little as possible and never feel boxed in.