

Poetry of abstraction

New perspectives ... [Lawrence Weiner's At a Distance to the Foreground](#).
Photograph: Newlyn Gallery, Cornwall

In 1968 a young conceptual artist from the South Bronx called [Lawrence Weiner](#) sat down to write a declaration 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.

With this, he delegated the responsibility of artistic interpretation to the viewer, shifting the onus on to the audience. It was his eureka moment, as blatant a description of conceptual art as it is possible to make. He was already one of a group of artists, along with Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt and Robert Barry, who had come to the conclusion that the idea could stand as a work of art instead of the material. Weiner's manifesto went one step further, suggesting ways in which art could interact with the world, and his bold statement continues to have ramifications today.

It is unusual to meet an artist who can speak compellingly about art, but Weiner, with his long, straggly beard, gravel-toned eloquence and humorous asides, is that rare creature. Perhaps it is because his art talks, albeit obliquely. Working with fragments of conversations, poems, sayings and slogans, he isolates sentences from their original context and paints them on walls, or prints them in limited-edition books.

A consummate New Yorker the city of his birth is the first piece of information he ever offers about himself Weiner was born in 1942 into a large Jewish family and became immersed in the city's beatnik counter-culture. As a child, he played rugby possibly the only US artist to make such a claim and has subsequently made art about the gentleman's game. In the late 1960s he was picked up by the uber-dealer Leo Castelli, whose gallery was responsible for promoting many of the abstract expressionists and early pop artists of the time, including Jasper Johns and

Robert Rauschenberg.

Many of Weiner's statements conjure up physical situations, like the sexually provocative *Stretched As Tightly As Possible (Satin & Petroleum Jelly)*, from 1994. Made out of black vinyl cut-outs, it is easy to see that Weiner revels in innuendo. The sharp, minimal aesthetic of his style leads to comparisons with Russian constructivism, yet there is also the joy of dadaist absurdity and the shamanic ring of beat poetry that reveals a love of language and communication.

Why we like him:

Jail bait:

Poison pen:

Not to be mistaken for:

Lawrence Weiner can be seen at ProjectBase, Newlyn Art Gallery, Cornwall until 11 July.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/jun/17/artist-lawrence-weiner>