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Conceptual artist Lawrence's Weiner's text-based project at Toronto's Power Plant gallery.

Brilliantly maddening word sculptures

BY GARY MICHAEL DAULT

The title of Lawrence Weiner's exhibition at Toronto's The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, *The Other Side of a Cul-de-Sac*, encompasses the same kind of bracingly elastic, maddeningly liberating ambiguity found in all of his best work.

Weiner was born in 1942 in the Bronx, and for the past 45 years has been a major player in the high-stakes world of cutting-edge contemporary art. His retrospective exhibition *As Far As the Eye Can See* was at the Whitney Museum last year. He came to prominence in the seventies as an authoritative shaper of what was generally known as conceptual art (as

early as 1968, he was producing pieces such as his *ONE QUART EXTERIOR GREEN INDUSTRIAL ENAMEL THROWN ON A BRICK WALL*).

"I really believe the subject matter of my art is - art," he proclaimed at the time - a statement that, among other things, neatly recognized the degree to which hurling a bucket of paint at a wall is tantamount to painting a painting.

Weiner took a giant step toward the dematerialization of the art object in his oft-quoted *Statements* from 1968 (typed sheets of paper that were to serve as a manual for making sculpture): "1) the artist may construct the work, 2) The work may be fabricated, 3) The

work need not be built ..." And it was more or less at this point that Weiner began to have recourse to language - and only to language - as the medium with which he would build his art.

From 1972 onward, Weiner has seen himself as a sculptor, with words as his means. These words and phrases he causes to adhere to walls, emblazons on the exteriors of buildings (the words *MORE THAN ENOUGH* are now animating The Power Plant's smokestack), records as sound, consigns to books or, in New York in 2000, has cast as 19 manhole covers. They are not, for Weiner, texts, but sculptures, pure and simple.

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Lawrence Weiner's installation *The Other Side of a Cul-de-Sac: Don't go looking for metaphors.*

As Lynne Cooke, curator of New York's Dia Art Foundation, puts it in a recent essay about Weiner, "Clear, concise, lapidary and affectless, such sculpture in the guise of statements is designed, in the artist's words, to offer 'a universal common possibility of availability.'"

But language is a tricky thing. For even though Weiner's words are irreducibly and indisputably what they are, every word also, inevitably, denotes something. In *The Power Plant* exhibition – as part of a huge, gallery-filling work called *More Than Enough* from 1998 – Weiner covers a vast white wall with black letters reading MORE SILVER THAN GOLD and then, further on, with the black letters now resting amidst red brackets, ENOUGH GOLD TO MAKE IT SHINE.

"Eschewing the literary or poetic," writes Cooke, "this former philosophy student concentrates on empirically observable properties, materials, states, conditions..." Okay, fine, but as Weiner and I walk through the exhibition, I confess to a weakness: As soon as I read "more silver than gold," I give up seeing the words just as things and actually start to get various sil-

ver-and-gold pictures in my mind – gold and silver bars, smelting operations, metallurgy, for goodness sake!

"That's okay," beams the 66-year-old artist, through the billowing beard that makes him look like a sage from a mountain top or a member of the band ZZ Top. "Metallurgy is great. This can all be about metallurgy!"

Indeed, Weiner's work seems to be profoundly about joyful, subtle, fecund, generative contradiction. For example, while his projects are, in Cooke's phrase, "seldom site-specific ... they can be tellingly site-related, that is, strategically conceived or adapted to the venue and the circumstances..." Such is the case with the brilliantly maddening *Cul-de-Sac* (2009), commissioned by The Power Plant.

Here, high on the 12-metre walls of the central clerestory corridor running down through the gallery, Weiner has imposed a sequence of bold black letters spelling out – on one side – BUILT TO MAINTAIN THE INNER EDGE OF A CUL-DE-SAC. Directly opposite, on the other wall, at the same height, are companion words: BUILT TO REPLACE THE OUTER EDGE OF A CUL-DE-SAC.

The phrase's literal French meaning is "the bottom of the bag." But if a cul-de-sac is, as the phrase is normally used, a street without egress (though The Power Plant's corridor is scarcely that, given that it leads directly to a view of Lake Ontario), then, as Power Plant director and curator of the exhibition Gregory Burke points out in his catalogue essay, "in the language of the realtor that plots land according to value, the cul-de-sac is "a blind alley." Weiner eschews such limitations by imagining both sides of the cul-de-sac ... and more." One longs to hear Burke explain what he means by more.

Weiner and I go outside so he can roll a cigarette and smoke it. "So how does anybody stick with seeing your works as verbal facts, and not get entangled with image and metaphor?" I ask him. He takes a big drag. "If I make a work free of metaphor," he laughs, "others will make a metaphor of it!" We talk about whether language actually means anything at all. "Language does mean something," Weiner contends gaily, "but not what you thought it meant." There's the other side of a cul-de-sac for you.

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