

Sol LeWitt: Randomness, Seriality and Systems as a Visualization Process in Abstract Thinking

John Hogan

“A Million Random Digits with 100,000 Normal Deviates”¹ is a physical visualization of the concept of a million random digits in book form. Published in 1955 by the Free Press as a source of random digits and normal deviates, the work is routinely used by statisticians, physicists, polltakers, market analysts, lottery administrators, and quality control engineers.

As a physical example of highly theoretical concepts, this book was my mental path to a deeper understanding of Sol LeWitt’s work. I was first introduced to the book in the early 1970s by a physicist and filmmaker from the Fermi Lab in Illinois. He used the book to illustrate an idea: that abstract math, theoretical physics, and art had a great deal in common. They all embrace a search for explanation, categorization, and above all the description of previously unknowable events. These often winding explorations of the undefined parts of the universe are not far from LeWitt’s belief that all artists are mystics,² a facet of his work that is frequently left untouched. Ultimately, his practice used Wall Drawings and Structural works to offer a determined and often unflinching look at the unstated subtle mysteries of the world.

LeWitt’s work as a Conceptual artist is the visualization of ideas and systems of exploration, with stated parameters he decided would define each of the Wall Drawings. Often embracing, and formed from within, implied chaos, they are derivatives of random, evolving patterns and serial structure. Each begins as a document that is the Art Work waiting to be realized visually. Each structure creates an eloquent reality that can be easily repeated³ and provides a consistent essence of the solution, determined by the variables of location.

Wall Drawing # 118 “50 Random points all connected by straight lines”, included in the exhibition, (*Image of #118 if possible*) embraces the construct of random: No two installations are the same but present a visual proof of the instruction and the empirical realities of Random. In the case of **Wall Drawing #110** “Yellow arcs from the midpoints of four sides of the wall” a constant as an instruction, yet the patterning that evolves from this system approach depends entirely on the wall dimensions as part of the visual equation.

LeWitt stated ideas were Art.⁴ Within all of life and the passage of time we search for meaning and form. LeWitt suggested all things existed in a basic concept of thought and to explore these ideas was a

search for what Art might be. He embraced the notion of how humanity interceded in execution and became an aspect of the equation, no matter how pure the science was, how determined to obtain its goal.

Much of Art is a document of beliefs, emotions, desires and political moment. LeWitt's work is often perceived as having turned its back on what had been this physical reality as norm and having leapt over the standing practices by stating that the Idea was the first impulse of the Artist and inherent truth; what followed was to bring the Idea to life. The hand of the individual Artist so often seen as integral in many artistic practices for its rarity, skill and deftness was seen by LeWitt as an obstruction to his process in providing a visual manifestation to the content of each work. LeWitt's position was that there should not be perceived value to one realization over another; that would be contrary to the Concept. Each installation's value, it's own reality, whether executed in 1969 or 200 years in the future, is a response to the Concept proposed for a Wall Drawing, accurate if the Concept was understood, respected in definition and not exploited by the individual draftsman.

LeWitt chose to work in a manner that could always be in the moment, not locked in a place in time: LeWitt as the Mystic. Years after his death, the Wall Drawings renew his Art, with each contemporary installation responding to the current variables and functioning with in the precepts of Deep Time.⁵

My desire with some of these choices is to offer a doorway into LeWitt's thought process and an

aesthetic experience that is not defined but rather arrived at. All human thought and gesture are capable of emerging as a universal that communicates. LeWitt chose to do this with Concepts common to all places and experience.

It has been a great honor to work with Benjamin Weil and Fundacion Botin who had the initial idea for the Exhibition and made the invitation to Yale University Art Gallery and myself to work with him.

¹ Rand Corporation, *A Million Random Digits with 100,000 Normal Deviates*. Free press publishers, 1955 – re-issued in 2001 with ISBN/EAN: 0-8330-3047-7.

² Sol LeWitt, "Sentences on Conceptual Art", *Art and Language* vol 1 #1. May 1969 – republished here page X.

³ **Reproducibility** is the ability of an entire experiment or study to be reproduced, either by the researcher or by someone else working independently. It is one of the main principles of the scientific method and relies on *ceteris paribus* (other things being equal). The result values of distinct experimental trials are said to be *commensurate* if they are obtained according to the same reproducible experimental description and procedure.

Reproducibility also refers to the degree of agreement between measurements or observations conducted on replicate specimens in different locations by different people, as part of the precision of a test method. See Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey (1985) ISBN 0691024324

⁴ Sol LeWitt, "Sentences on Conceptual Art", *Art and Language* vol 1 #1. May 1969 – republished here page X.

⁵ Gregory Benford, *Deep Time: How Humanity Communicates Across Millennia*. Harper Perennial (November 2000) ISBN-13: 978-0380793464