

# Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal)

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## Short Notes

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## That Some of Sol Lewitt's Later Wall Drawings Aren't Wall Drawings

*P.D. Magnus*

Sol LeWitt is probably most famous for wall drawings. They are an extension of work he had done in sculpture and on paper, in which a simple rule specifies permutations and variations of elements. With wall drawings, the rule is given for marks to be made on a wall.

In the earliest wall drawings, the marks are made with pencil on a white wall that has no special preparation. For example, *Wall Drawing 11* (1969) calls for horizontal, vertical, diagonal right, and diagonal left lines, following this rule: "A wall divided horizontally and vertically into four equal parts. Within each part, three of the four kinds of lines are superimposed." A particular inscription of *Wall Drawing 11* is erased or painted over after an exhibition is complete, but this does not destroy the work. It can be drawn elsewhere. Provided that the rule is followed, the new inscription is as much *Wall Drawing 11* as the earlier one was.

Although LeWitt wrote of wall drawings as conceptual art, it is important to note that the work is not *merely* the idea or the instruction. It is importantly different than a single-instance mural, but it is nevertheless something realized on actual walls. Contrast, for example, Yoko Ono's *Closet Piece II*— an instruction piece which has this rule: "Put one memory into one half of your head. Shut it off and forget it. Let the other half of the brain long for it" (*Grapefruit: A book of instructions and drawings by Yoko Ono*, 1970). Jesse Prinz (*Artbouillon*, July 11 2013) claims that this and other works in Ono's book *Grapefruit* perfectly exemplify Sol Lewitt's precept that artworks are ideas, and that it doesn't matter whether they are (or can be) physically instantiated. LeWitt's own works never realized that vision as well as Ono's. Prinz paraphrases LeWitt's claim (in the journal *Art-Language*, 1969) that "Ideas can be works of art" and that "ideas need not be made physical." But there is a difference between something that *need not* be realized and something that *cannot* be realized. *Closet Piece II* does not specify an act that you could actually carry out, and moreover it is unclear what you would even do if you were to try. Ono's piece is more like a poem with the grammatical form of an instruction than it is an actual instruction.

Regarding conceptual art (in the article quoted above) LeWitt writes, "The concept of a work of art may involve the matter of the piece or the process in which it is made. ... Once the idea of the piece is established in the artist's mind and the final form is decided, the process is carried out blindly. There are many side effects that the artist cannot imagine." When others implement the artist's work, the implementation may produce results which the artist did not intend or foresee. This would be impossible if the idea were one that could not possibly be instantiated. So defining a process that might actually be executed is crucial for the instructions to constitute a wall drawing. The specified procedure for marking up a wall does not depend on being realized on this or that wall, but the instructions are not just an evocative piece of prose. They present a rule which might be followed on some wall or every wall.

In short, a wall drawing is an algorithm for generating a mural. I mean *algorithm* here in the literal sense of "a specific set of instructions for carrying out a procedure" (Eric Weisstein, *Mathworld*).

Lewitt made lots of wall drawings over the years. Over time, he moved beyond just pencil on rectangular white walls. In the catalog of the 2000 LeWitt retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Brenda Richardson notes several turning points: reference in the instructions to architectural features of the wall (1970), ground colors other than white (1975), shapes rather than merely lines (also 1975), india ink rather than pencils or crayons (1981), color ink washes (1983), and acrylic paint (in the 1990s). In the same publication, Gary Garrels highlights the shift from lines to bands, shapes, and blobs, as well as the introduction of "purer, sassier, and electric" color. Importantly, these changes are aesthetic rather than conceptual. An algorithm may refer to corners on the wall, it may specify shapes, and it may specify colors. Although the resulting wall drawings realize different ideas, the fundamental core of what it is to be a wall drawing remains. What this list of changes overlooks is that some of the later wall drawings deviated from the original, fundamental innovation. *Wall Drawing 793B* (1996) consists of irregular wavy bands of color that are not laid down according to some rule, but instead are specified in a drawing which LeWitt provided. In realizing it at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in 2008, draftsmen proceeded by projecting LeWitt's original drawing onto the wall and tracing it. This is not an algorithm but instead is a familiar, old-school way for a mural to be painted: The master painter does preparatory sketches, and assistants help realize those sketches on a wall.

LeWitt's revolutionary invention was that a mural could be the realization

of an algorithm for marking a wall rather than just a marked wall. Critics like Richardson and Garrels, so quick to remark on the introduction of sassy color, miss that this gets left behind in later work like *Wall Drawing 793B*.

To sum up, impossible-to-implement instruction works (such as Ono's *Closet Piece II*), algorithmic works (such as LeWitt's *Wall Drawing 11*), and works realized by following preparatory sketches (such as LeWitt's *Wall Drawing 793B*) are different in kind. Taking the core feature of a wall drawing to be that it is algorithmic, a later LeWitt like *793B* is a wall drawing in name only.

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## Art and Trauma: Yet Another Arthur Danto Zombie

Tania Love Abramson & Paul R. Abramson

### Is it Art?

Andy Warhol's 1964 exhibit of Brillo soap boxes at the Stable Gallery in New York City signaled, at least according to Arthur Danto, the demise of a historical narrative of art. Danto codified this transition in 1984 as *The End of Art* (Danto, 1998). Though art was still obviously being produced and exhibited, Danto asserted that art had become obsolete because art and philosophy were rendered autonomous. Similar fatal edicts, Danto noted, were proclaimed for poetry and music by John Keats and John Stuart Mill, respectively.

Danto's comments are problematic for many reasons, the rigid boundaries and exclusions foremost (e.g. the Western canon, the nomothetic fallacy as applied to art, the normative constraints of art history, etc.) but perhaps more fundamental is the taxonomic conceit that a purely descriptive agreement among experts in art history or the philosophy of aesthetics is a stable foundation for the description of art. Designation is not synonymous with causation. Danto's perspective is more aligned with the construction of a field guide. If an artistic representation has certain characteristics, as in identifying a bird, for example, it is art. Ignoring, of course, the morphological and evolutionary basis for characterizing genus and species, a field guide approach to art is especially vulnerable to the prejudices and commercial incentives of critics, institutions, philosophers and historians.

An essentialist perspective to art is no less problematic because the writing of art history is itself often in flux. Finding a definition of art that is putatively inclusive (this is art), but has clear boundaries (what isn't art) is a reasonable, but invariably elusive, goal.

### Is art a thing or is art a process?

Although consciousness is fundamental to human thought, William James believed that it is a process, something that emerges from the intersection of the brain, the body, and the environment. Contemporary perspectives continue to suggest that consciousness is a process, the interplay of signals from the environment, the body, and the brain, with each integrated core state succeeded by yet another differentiated neural state. If consciousness itself is a process that is experienced as a dynamic equilibrium, a tangible steady-state so to speak, why not consider art to be a process that emerges from the intersection of the artist, the viewer, and the socio-cultural world? Using severe trauma as prototypical input, it seems reasonable to consider the impact of severe trauma on how an artist conceptualizes and depicts his or her art, how a viewer might interpret these representations (particularly if they are aware of the biographical details), and how a culture perceives the severity of that traumatic event: AIDS, child sexual abuse, slavery, or war, for instance.

In this regard it's interesting to note, despite Danto's dismal proclamation, the emergence of a fully articulated pedagogic discourse on art and trauma as a late twentieth and early twenty-first century phenomenon whereby countless authors (both academic and artistic (e.g. David Wojnarowicz), performance artists (e.g. Karen Finley), and curators (e.g. The Imperial War Museum in London (*Artists' Responses to the Holocaust*)), the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam (*Vincent van Gogh: myths, madness, and a new way of painting*), etc.) have collectively heralded the inception of Art and Trauma as a means of furthering our understanding of the multiplicity of factors that underlie the creation and perception of art. These writings are of course by no means anomalous, but parallel similar developments in other art forms, such as criticism, memoir, music, and poetry, where the sequelae of trauma are fully acknowledged and carefully scrutinized.



Tania Love Abramson, *In Case of Shame* (2017), 36"x12"x6", custom fabricated red enameled safety cabinet, sledgehammer, broken glass, warning labels.

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## The Catholic Imagination

Mary Bittner Wiseman

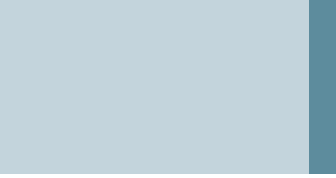
In *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (Silver Hollow Press, 2018), critic Eleanor Heartney has used the under-recognized carnal dimension of Catholicism to write a book about art and the body that performs the welcome task of undermining the split between mind and body that still haunts much philosophy and religion. The title of the first chapter, "Body and Soul: The Workings of the Incarnational Consciousness," tells the book's tale, which is that there is the set of doctrines that comprise the religion *qua* religion, on the one hand, and there is the imagination formed by exposure to the expressions of these doctrines in the art, music, cathedrals, rituals like the Passion of Christ and the May celebrations of Mary, in which little girls dress in white and wear white veils, on the other.

The incarnation of Christ that is the crux of Christianity and in the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ that is the heart of the Catholic Mass are examples of the centrality of the body to the 'incarnational consciousness' that is a legacy of those who were brought up under the influence of the Catholic church. Subsequent chapters show how many artists who were raised as Catholics, express the carnal imagination in their art. Their work was often excoriated by the conservative government in the 1990s when it launched the first culture war against the new focus of liberals on racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities that they saw as threatening the hegemony of the white Western male heterosexual world. Under this aegis arms were taken against works of art like Andre Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987) for disrespecting and undercutting the power of the still majority Christian world and *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* (1989) for its homoeroticism. Heartney shows how some artists were inviting the official religion to acknowledge the centrality of the body in Catholicism and others were claiming dignity for something the Church condemned out of hand.

Art was a target because it had power, a power that has now been ceded to the media, the new scapegoat of the conservative right. Heartney proposes that art expressive of the view encapsulated in the Catholic imagination that we are bodies and that the bodies suffer, endure, decay, desire, and are a source of knowledge can effect social change. And it can do this by reminding us that the religion that infused our early life is also part of our identities because religion goes "all the way down" and does not consist only in the embrace of a set of doctrines. The doctrines, protected by the First Amendment, have been used to condemn abortion, gay marriage, rights of the sexually different, and free speech itself. Were religion taken out of its protected doctrinal home and brought down to earth it could do good. First, by stopping the liberal left from reflexively rejecting religion because of its often being used as a bludgeon against a so-called elite. Second, by showing the conservative right that Christianity does not condemn the body with its needs for sustenance (food, housing, jobs) and expression (sexual freedom).

This second edition of the 2004 *Post Modern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* was motivated by the deepening of the division between the conservative and religious South and the liberal and permissive North, where each side has uncannily adopted tactics of the other. The liberals are using tactics common to fundamentalists when they refuse to allow speakers who don't agree with them to be heard in their schools, and when they want to tear down statues of historic figures who sanctioned slavery and supported the secession of the South in the Civil War. Conservatives now cry for affirmative action for the white working class victimized by the globalization that has taken their jobs. This is the globalization that has further reduced art to the plaything of the market, stripping it of some of its power and causing conservatives to rail instead against the media as what is undermining their program. Heartney's idea is that recognizing the incarnational nature of the Catholic imagination in the work of many artists raised as Catholic shows the influence of religion to go far beyond the embrace of certain doctrines and therefore ought neither be used to condemn certain actions nor be rejected as irrelevant to those who do not endorse its doctrines. Just as art in the Middle Ages taught the unlettered the stories from the New Testament, so now artists with a Catholic imagination can start to blur the boundaries between the set of doctrines that include Incarnation and the complex everyday reality of the embodied life.

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