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Lawrence Weiner's Material Actions

Lawrence Weiner repeatedly emphasized the importance of materials in his practice. At the beginning of 1969, when asked what constituted the object of his work, he replied, "Materials"—even though his main concern lay not with them, but with art.[1] He articulated a distinct position in the field of conceptual art during the late 1960s by explicitly referring again and again to materials and material-based processes in his work, which he carried out himself as well. Yet he also conceived of material execution not just as a distinct and secondary step in the realization of a work, but as a strictly optional possibility. Thus, Weiner's practice at the end of the 1960s presents a remarkable, seemingly paradoxical example in the context of the present volume: while working with materials remained an important aspect of his practice, he dramatically relativized the status of (material) execution, albeit without going so far as to advocate for a "dematerialization" of art.[2]

Having determined that his works were already fully realized in their linguistic form, Weiner systematized his approach at the end of 1968. In a crucial step, Weiner laid down the foundation for his future practice, which would continue until his death in December 2021, in two key publications: the artist's book *Statements*, published in December 1968 with the gallery owner and exhibition organizer Seth Siegelaub, and his "Statement of Intent" (sometimes also referred to as "Declaration of Intent"), produced at about the same time and published shortly thereafter in the catalogue of the exhibition *January 5–31, 1969*, likewise organized by Siegelaub.

As will be demonstrated below, the linguistic actions in *Statements* and *January 5–31, 1969* each decidedly refer to materials. Weiner thus developed a practice based on two apparent contradictions: First, although many of his works were strongly anchored in materiality, they can be fully realized without the use and manipulation of materials. Instead, they may exist in the form of language alone, the materiality of which cannot be reduced to the material dimension of linguistic signs or to the reference to concrete materials, but encompasses the possibilities and effects of its use in different social contexts.[3] Second, not only did the artist derive his underlying understanding of art from this definition, but he also declared this to be a distinctly political choice. Yet no direct political legibility or "message" emerges from one's

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reading of the corresponding processes; the actions appear commonplace, almost banal, and they do not suggest any obvious political agenda. Hence, at least two paradoxes emerge: The artist, especially in his early work, continually referred to materials and their treatment, but at the same time increasingly reduced the material manifestation of his work exclusively to the realm of language. In doing so, he continually defined his actions in explicitly political terms, while refusing to make any direct political statement through his works.

This essay explores these tensions. First, it takes up the significance of Weiner's apparent renunciation of material and goes on to consider the concrete material dimension of Weiner's practice. It then analyzes his shift to an increasingly general concept of material and object before assessing the political potential of this approach as well as its limits.

1. *Statements*

Statements (fig. 1) presents a series of linguistically condensed descriptions of relatively simple actions in uniform typography, without other elements, such as sketches or illustrations. The small-format, sixty-four-page paperback was published in an edition of 1,000 copies.[4] Its monochrome, gray cover presents the title in all caps, with the name of the artist in standard capitalization below it. The lower-right corner displays the price of $1.95. Inside, the single-sided pages contain a total of twenty-four descriptions of actions, each involving fairly everyday materials, such as "One sheet of plywood secured to the floor or wall" or "One sheet of clear plexiglass of arbitrary size and thickness secured at the four corners and exact center by screws to the floor." The short texts are each placed in the center of the page, with uniform typography and a consistent column width. If line breaks occur within individual words, they are wrapped directly from line to line, without a hyphen, as in the following example:

> A removal of an amount of earth from
> the ground
> The intrusion into this hole of a st
> andard processed material

Another one reads:

> One hole in the ground approximately
> one foot by one foot by one foot
> One gallon water base white paint po
> ured into this hole

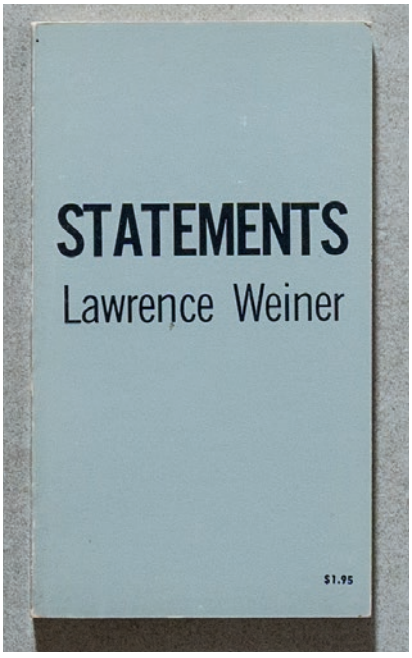
Statements is divided into "general" and "specific" statements. Due to the similarity of the described actions, the strict separation into two categories seems surprising at first. For

instance, the pairs of examples cited above each include a "general" statement followed by a more "specific" one. Overall, the "specific" statements provide slightly more precise specifications relating to quantities or dimensions. Moreover, by the time of the book's publication, some of the "specific" statements had already been sold or given away.[5]

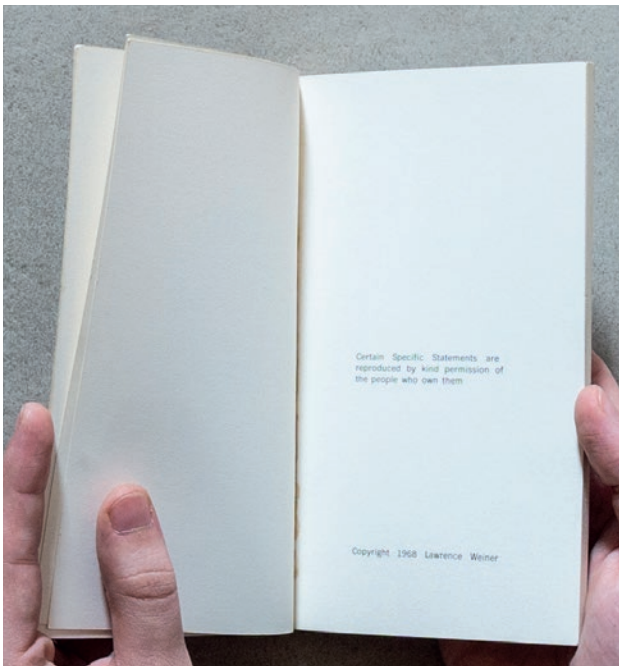
Certain "statements," a few of them with slight variations, may also be found in the *January 5–31, 1969* catalogue. In this pivotal exhibition, with its straightforward title relaying the opening and closing dates, Siegelaub presented works by Weiner, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, and Joseph Kosuth in a rented office space in Manhattan. Crucially, Siegelaub conceived of the catalogue as a platform of equal importance to the exhibition in the gallery space. He assigned a total of four pages to each artist that covered the following categories: a list of exhibitions; two pages of images; and a statement. Weiner published his programmatic "Statement of Intent" here for the first time. As reproduced there, it reads:

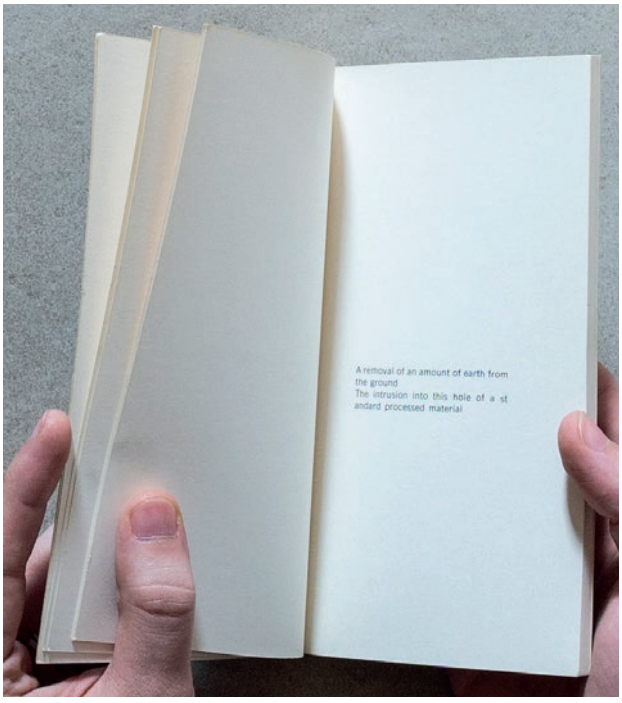
1. The artist may construct the piece
2. The piece may be fabricated
3. The piece need not be built

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[6]



1 a Lawrence Weiner, *Statements*, 1968. Front cover





1 b—c Lawrence Weiner, *Statements*, 1968. Two double-page spreads

A central aspect of Weiner's practice, then, is that the actions described in his "statements"—he used the term in its accounting sense as a "receipt of goods or services"[7]—do not necessarily have to be performed. Once the artist has set them down in language, all further decisions are delegated to the "receiver." This can be a person who purchased the work, a curator who presents it in an exhibition, or even a member of "the public" more generally.[8] Here, Weiner radicalizes the fundamental "clou" of conceptual art, that is, the separation between work and execution, not by merely declaring the latter as secondary, but by systematically conceiving it as one of several possibilities from which the recipients may choose.[9] Significantly, Weiner delegates the broadest possible decision-making authority to the recipients while radically withdrawing any importance from the act of execution itself. In fact, it no longer has to take place as such.

This raises questions on various levels about the potential implications for the figure of the artist, the understanding of materials, and the artist's conception of the recipient and the public. Whereas the artist holds primary importance in conventional thought, Weiner placed equal emphasis on the materials and the recipients, both of which are traditionally seen as passive receivers of artistic acts.[10]

Weiner himself continually referred to the political dimension of these issues. He resolutely refused to give any instructions as to how his work should be executed, condemning such stipulations as "aesthetic fascism."[11] Thus, the precise linguistic composition of the statements was of great importance to him. In each of them, he refers to the treatment of materials without specifying an actor. Verbs take the past participle (e. g., "An amount of paint poured directly onto the floor and allowed to dry") or are replaced by nouns (e. g., "A removal to the lathing or support wall of plaster or wall board from a wall"). The statements are, in Weiner's own phrasing, simply "stated facts."[12] Because the timeline is open, they can refer to a past as well as a present or a future event, so that the actions may be realized continually in different contexts.[13] It is precisely this combination of openness and the potential for concrete realization that characterizes Weiner's practice. For him, this is also what defines its political dimension.

Since Weiner understood language as a fully valid manifestation of his work, he did not need to document the actions performed or include further information—a process that could make it difficult to delineate the work and its documentation in other conceptualist practices. Weiner was averse to the clandestine return of the conventional art object in the form of photographs, notes, and certificates.[14] However, this was but one reason for his steadfast rejection of documentation. Even more importantly, he consistently refused to define or privilege a particular form of execution—whether by the artist himself or the individual recipients. For Weiner, who also explicitly refused to proscribe meaning to his statements, this rejection of (photographic) documentation held a political significance, because it allowed the recipients to repeatedly invest his statements with new meanings.

The significance of concrete materials and the methods by which they are handled or manipulated emerges most clearly in the early works, such as those included in *Statements*.

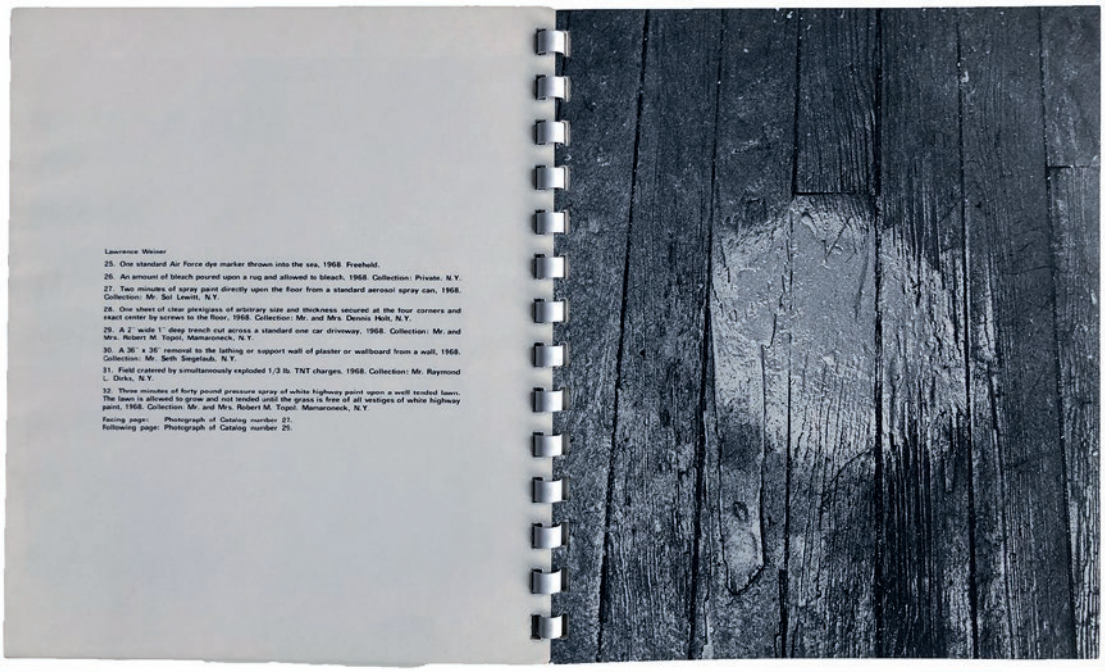
The actions described are reminiscent of contemporary postminimalist, process-oriented practices, such as that of Richard Serra.[15] While Weiner relativized such observations by emphasizing the abstract, language-based character of his work, he also revealed that he was quite conscious of such phenomena:

> With *STATEMENTS* I attempted to pull together a body of work that concerned itself with traditional 1960s art processes and materials. It was not anti-minimal sculpture; I was trying to take non-heroic materials—just pieces of plywood (nobody thinks about plywood), industrial sanders (everybody has one)—trying to take everyday materials, and give them their place within my world of art, with the same strength and the same vigor, but without the heroics. These works are decidedly non-macho, but they turn out to be the tough guy in the bar. I wanted people to accept the value of these sculptures because they were functioning as sculptures, not because they were associated with the factory, the foundry, the quarry, the man-things that in those days deemed to mean something.[16]

Weiner explained his actions here in terms of their everyday nature and the deliberately ordinary character of the materials. At the same time, he situated them in the artistic context of his time to ensure the legibility of his practice while also marking a certain distance from it. In addition, he turned against the bold assertion of masculinity in practices where large masses of material were manipulated by industrial means. Distancing himself from these "man things," he defined for himself a different artistic self-consciousness while demonstrating his sensitivity to the gendered connotations of artistic action.

Importantly, the quoted passage also reveals a cultural familiarity with the things used, that is, the ordinariness of materials such as plywood or tools such as a sanding machine. This motif came into play in Weiner's practice in various ways. In his exhibitions, for example, he always referred to materials that were known and available in their respective contexts.[17] The everyday nature of these materials meant that there was no need for a demonstration of the stated processes. This is important, because if the artist had chosen materials and processes that were unfamiliar to their respective audiences, he would either have to perform such a demonstration on site or provide some form of documentation—both options that Weiner steadfastly rejected as a regression to the traditional art object or an unwelcome determination of the work's precise material manifestation.

Overall, he attempted to safeguard himself against a relapse into traditional principles of art making, which he deemed as particularly problematic from a political perspective, by several means: first, by delegating the decision-making about how to execute the work (as opposed to the mere execution itself); second, by dispensing with supplementary documentation; third, by selecting materials that were familiar at their respective destinations; and fourth, through the type of actions to be performed with the materials—as will be discussed in the next section.

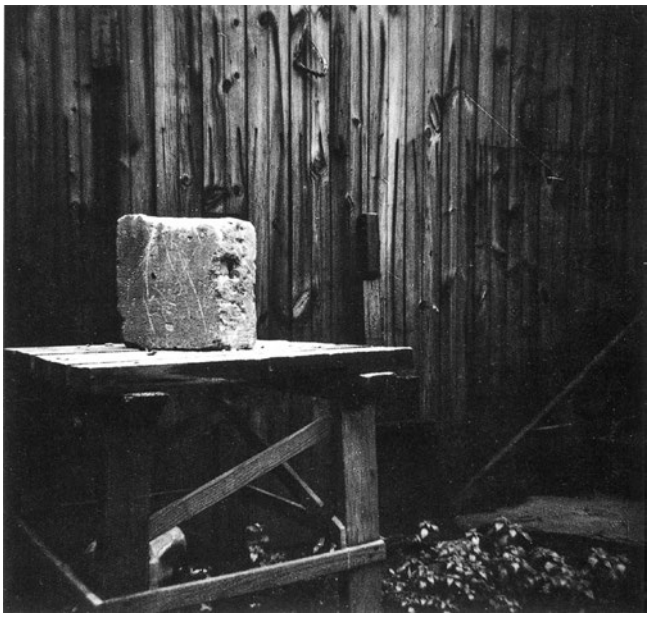


2 Lawrence Weiner, *Two Minutes of Spray Paint Directly upon the Floor from a Standard Aerosol Spray Can*, 1968

2. A Studio Artist

It was crucial that the specified actions aligned with the way they were carried out in everyday, nonart contexts. Weiner's *Two Minutes of Spray Paint Directly upon the Floor from a Standard Aerosol Spray Can* (1968, fig. 2), a work included in *January 5–31, 1969* with an illustration, is based on the principle of applying spray paint from a conventional commercial spray can onto the floor for two minutes.[18] In an interview that he gave in spring 1969 to the artist Patricia Norvell, Weiner cited this example to explain how materials should be used in his works. Never, for instance, would spray paint be directed at a wall:

> See, I would never, when I was doing the spray pieces, spray paint on a wall, because it's an unnatural act. . . . It becomes a contrivance. It becomes man over material again. But if you've ever watched a car stripper, they spray on the floor constantly. That's how you clean out your nozzle; that's how you check the color and everything else. It's always sprayed down, so that was fine.[19]



3 Lawrence Weiner, *What Is Set upon the Table Sits upon the Table (The Stone on the Table)*, ca. 1962–63. In the backyard of Weiner's Bleecker Street studio, New York, 1963

In this fascinating early statement, Weiner directly addresses the problem of human intellectual dominance over the material. Striving to follow the logic of materials' "natural" use, he turned to their application in everyday contexts—particularly in processes of work as labor. This focus on *labor*, rather than *work* in general or *craft*, defines one of the sociopolitical dimensions of his practice.

In the same vein, it would be a fundamental misunderstanding to equate Weiner's deliberately general reference to materials with a lack of interest in them. His preference for language as a form of expression was by no means motivated by an attempt to distance himself from the materials. Thus, while he did depart from traditional concepts of the artwork and from the object-bound conventions of its making, he consciously rejected the modernist logic of concentration and reduction in the sense of a radical intellectualization. Instead, as Benjamin Buchloh has convincingly argued, Weiner's model of art is based on maintaining tensions, on dialectics instead of tautology, on contextual connectivity instead of purity.[20] One way these processes of negotiation played out was through engagement with materials. This is also why the artist repeatedly affirmed the need to get to know a material intimately and revealed the pleasure he took in familiarizing himself with materials in the studio:

> When I find myself with materials I don't quite understand, I go out and schlepp a lot of it to the studio. I'm still basically a studio artist. I play with materials, I'll build a piece, I'll schlepp in a stone, I'll make ice, I'll do the whole thing. I see that as research.[21]

By describing himself as a "studio artist," Weiner deliberately placed himself in the tradition of sculpture.[22] In contrast to his previously cited statement about how to use a spray can, here he understands *work* in an individual as opposed to a societal sense, as *craft* instead of *labor*. These considerations, which emphasize the need to gain familiarity with a material, echo Richard Sennett's notion of a "material consciousness." In *The Craftsman,* he introduces it as "a continual dialogue with materials" that overcomes the divide between understanding and doing, observing and making.[23] This assertion closely echoes Weiner's emphasis on the crucial importance that the "conversation with the material" held for him.[24]

At the same time, he abandoned an approach traditionally associated with artistic "creation," a rather lofty term that has often been replaced by the more sober "work" in recent discourses around art.[25] Weiner himself referred to this transformation of materials according to one's own imagination as "expressionist."[26] Here again, his guiding principle was the ethically and politically grounded refusal to dictate aesthetic decisions to the recipients—for him, this would be tantamount to "authoritarian art."[27] It follows that presenting raw or standard processed materials emerged as the only plausible solution, as in *What Is Set upon the Table Sits upon the Table (The Stone on the Table)* (ca. 1962–63, fig. 3), an early work to which Weiner frequently referred. In this case, after some consideration, he decided to present a block of limestone in its "raw" state on a wooden table instead of giving form to the material and thereby subjecting it to his imagination, in accordance with the logic of Aristotelian hylomorphism:

> Aristotelian logic no longer existed. But all our heroes used Aristotelian logic. What was I supposed to do? So the stone was a way to deal with it. Something that had its own presence. In the end, putting it on the table and leaving it like that was the solution.[28]

Weiner's statement echoes notions of truth to material, which emphasizes working with the inherent qualities of materials. The artist later expanded upon this notion: artists took it upon themselves to pay attention to materials and defy expectations, since all materials have the potential to behave in new, unanticipated ways.[29] In the words of artist and critic David Batchelor, Weiner's works collectively imply "an ethical relationship with a material world . . . not intrusive, not exploitative, not self-aggrandizing; respectful, restrained, informal and often reversible; generally provisional or temporary; always curious."[30]

Weiner's own authorial self-restraint encompassed the materials as well as the recipients. It also related to the world as a whole, which he believed should not be burdened with even more unnecessary human products. In 1969, he resolutely declared to the critic and artist Ursula Meyer, an important early chronicler of conceptual art, that

> [i]ndustrial and socioeconomic machinery pollutes the environment and the day the artist feels obligated to muck it up further art should cease being made. If you can't make art without making a permanent imprint on the physical aspects of the world, then maybe art

> is not worth making. In this sense, any permanent damage to ecological factors in nature not necessary for the furtherance of human existence, but only necessary for the illustration of an art concept, is a crime against humanity . . . . Big egocentric expensive works become very imposing. You can't put twenty-four tons of steel in the closet.[31]

These considerations should not be equated with today's ecologically motivated artistic approaches. While Weiner's statement points to important—and surprising—similarities, other factors stand in the way of such an anachronistic parallelization. For instance, between 1967 and 1977, Weiner developed proposals for explosions and the use of firearms, or for pouring a liter of heavy motor oil into the Gulf Stream.[32] Although a single bottle of motor oil would cause limited ecological damage in the Gulf Stream, such proposals mark a clear distance from ecologically motivated practices of the time, such as those of Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison or Alan Sonfist.[33] Given this, it is all the more remarkable that Weiner echoed ecological considerations and an expanded notion of "ecology" that extends beyond the preservation of nature.[34]

3. Everything Is an Object

Looking back on his early work, Weiner later emphasized that he had increasingly favored the "general idea of a material" over its specific manifestation. In a guest lecture in March 1972 at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) in Halifax, he explained this transition as almost didactically motivated, further illustrating the breadth of his understanding of material:

> The major point probably would be that all languages are transfers. It all refers back to a material, whatever that material is, so there is no basic difference between the formats of "an object tossed from one country to another" and "to the sea by the sea" or just "turn red as well as black"—there is not a basic difference in structure itself. It's just that in the beginning, when I was attempting to explain publicly what this constituted as making art, I felt it was better, the first year or so, to only let the language refer to specific objects that people could see, could understand completely. After that enters the culture, you're a little bit freer to deal with the idea of an *idea* being a material as well, or a phenomenon being a material without being phenomenological.[35]

Weiner thus emphasized the recipients' own responsibility, not only by delegating to them the question of execution, but also through the deliberate underdetermination of the linguistic specification as an "incomplete relationship" of language to objects.[36] He was convinced that the use of language left his works "more open for the user."[37] It would ensure both a certain "shelf life" when taken up by later generations as well as a degree of flexibility through its connectivity to different cultural settings.[38] This would also reduce the historical and local lim-

itations of his works, since they can be realized anew in different contexts. In his conversation with Meyer in 1969, he explained how the respective contemporary form of the materials used would, to a certain extent, also change the dating of his works:

> If art has a general aspect to it and if someone receives a work in 1968 and chooses to have it built, then either tires of looking at it or needs the space for a new television set, he can erase it. If—in 1975—he chooses to have it built again—he has a piece of 1975 art. As materials change, the person who may think about the art, as well as the person who has it built, approach the material itself in a contemporary sense and help to negate the preciousness of 1968 materials.[39]

The possibility of creating works that can be updated repeatedly, which is afforded through a particular use of language, is, therefore, essential to Weiner's practice. He addressed this possibility both in terms of the materials' historicity as well as cultural attitudes toward them. In the above statement, he upholds the promise of linguistic transparency and a confidence in its stable referential character.[40] Simultaneously, however, he accepts the very instability of this referential function, which results from language's abstract character and its iterability. Viewed in this light, his preference for the general over the specific is wholly consistent—after all, abstraction increases the potential for a statement to take on different meanings in different contexts.[41]

When referring to materials and objects, Weiner not only reflected on their scientific properties but also their integration into cultural and economic value systems. In addition, he differentiated between "object" and "material": whereas an object is already conceptualized, materials are intended for, and exclusively find their purpose through, use.[42] Over time, the category of the object became increasingly important for him, and it tended to replace that of the material. By the 1970s, he declared his art to be fundamentally concerned with "the relationships of people to objects and of objects to objects in relation to people."[43] New scientific ways of looking at the world also seem to have stimulated Weiner's more open approach to categories such as "material" or "object." As he explained in 1969 in conversation with Patricia Norvell:

> You have to change a little bit your idea of what a physical object is. Everything is a physical object. We're living in a time when now they know . . . if you're thinking of tying your shoelace, that sends off a certain amount of electrical power. It sets up something in space; it occupies space for a given time. . . . Therefore it's an object. [Pause] So everything is an object. It's just the idea of realizing and accepting the fact that one object is not necessarily better than another.[44]

In a later conversation with the critic Sabine Vogel, Weiner also drew on the concept of energy, using it in a rather broad sense. In this context, he referred to the transformation of

worldviews that had occurred as a result of recent findings in the natural sciences: "We know that all ideas are energy, and even thoughts are energy. The question about whether it is an object like our parents know it or like we know it is not really the question."[45]

In 1969, Weiner had already declared that he could use entire countries as material for his art—in fact, he argued, everything could become an art material, with the important exception of people.[46] Later, he stated that "everything" was an object, including sentences.[47] In doing so, he drew criticism for using these categories loosely and metaphorically, an approach to which important proponents of conceptual art, including the members of Art & Language, strongly objected.[48] Conversely, other contemporary voices, such as the critic Amy Goldin and her coauthor Robert Kushner, promoted this openness. They challenged fundamental tenets of analytic conceptual art, which was exemplified by the early work of Art & Language in Britain and by Joseph Kosuth in the United States, when they wrote:

> But to examine the nature of art in terms of physical materials versus intellectual concepts is fatal. Those categories repeat the old body/soul bag which leaves important aspects of artistic experience unacknowledged. If you disregard the social dimensions of meaning you are forced to puerilities like "man's spiritual needs." . . . Moreover, the "problem" of materiality is a false one. We can take intellectual stimulus or satisfaction from physical objects or make physical responses to "intellectual objects."[49]

With his very open definition of the object and his focus on social contexts, Weiner circumvented the dangers of such a purely self-referential, analytic conceptual art. His recourse to materials in their found state is first and foremost a turn against the privileging of the intellectual, a materialism that regards matter as such and thereby valorizes it, instead of relegating it to a preliminary stage in a process that involves its transformation and the creation of meaning. This attitude is also susceptible to a political reading. A statement made by Carl Andre in characterizing his own practice, but which also seems applicable to Weiner and others, invites such an interpretation. In conversation with the critic Jeanne Siegel, Andre said that his art did not necessarily convey political content, but was political nonetheless. For, as he continued: "Matter as matter rather than matter as symbol is a conscious political position I think, essentially Marxist."[50] This statement could be read either as a conflation or as a confusion of different understandings of materialism—a Marxist historical materialism on the one hand and a more general antonym to idealism on the other. At the same time, it indicates how the endorsement of materials could operate as a political statement in its own right—not as a clear manifestation of a historical materialist standpoint, but as an expression of sympathy for it.[51] Weiner's own self-designation as a "materialist" needs to be situated in this context as well.[52]

Nevertheless, the problem of an enduring adherence to the ideal of artistic autonomy also arises in Weiner's work, albeit in a modified way. As Gregor Stemmrich has rightly observed, Weiner's stipulation that his statements operate independently from their cultural context also restricts the possibilities of their effectiveness. According to Stemmrich, the attempt to "escape

an ideological overdetermination caused by the cultural context" entails the danger of limiting one's art to pure self-referentiality. By contrast, the very acceptance of one's own ideological entanglements is what brings about social effectiveness.[53]

4. The Artist and Politics

Weiner's insistence on the direct referential character of language seems essential to his practice: only in this way can a work be fully realized in its linguistic version, as set forth in his "Statement of Intent." Consequently, Weiner characterized language in a later published statement as follows:

> IT (LANGUAGE) SEEMS TO BE THE LEAST IMPOSITIONAL MEANS OF TRANSFERRING INFORMATION CONCERNING THE RELATIONSHIPS OF HUMAN BEINGS WITH MATERIALS FROM ONE TO ANOTHER (SOURCE)

At the same time, he emphasized its own material character and concluded:

> BEING ITSELF (LANGUAGE) A MATERIAL ONE IS THEN ABLE TO WORK GENERALLY WITH RATHER SPECIFIC MATERIALS[54]

It was from this identification between language and object that he derived his self-image as a "realist artist."[55] Julia Bryan-Wilson has pointed to the modernist traits inherent in this identification as a "realist" as well as the notion that materials can operate free from any symbolic reference, albeit with regard to Andre, whose artistic self-conception was similar.[56] Weiner avoided the latter problem by continually emphasizing that the execution of his works was dependent upon the context. He did not, however, explicitly state how to determine the social efficacy of his practice. By attempting to withdraw his statements from associations or entanglements with specific cultural contexts, he limited their effectiveness and ultimately confined them to the realm of art. This does not, however, diminish the political nature of his work—especially if, in line with Weiner's views, art itself is understood as a system within society. While consistently refusing to communicate political subject matter or opinions, he constantly negotiated the political implications of artistic activity and pursued a highly specific politics of authorship, which manifested itself in the conception and the precise phrasing of his works.

Weiner repeatedly emphasized the political accountability of his practice without advocating for an explicitly political art.[57] He explained his principles in a feature published in *Artforum* in September 1970 under the heading "The Artist and Politics," which presents multiple views on what forms of political action artists should take in light of the "deepening political crisis in the United States." It is striking that so many of the artists were skeptical about art

that directly expresses political attitudes or content, even as they underscored the political implications of their own practice, or of artistic practice in general.[58] Although Weiner's response generally aligns with the others, it stands out in its emphases. First, he rejected the possibility of any normative statement, writing that he could only comment on how artists *could*, rather than *should*, act, because anything else would constitute "fascism."[59] Ultimately, he continued, all art is political from the moment it becomes known; but if it becomes "useful, even to the extent of entering the culture," then it becomes "history." Directly political art, on the other hand, was nothing but "sociological propaganda." The character of art as art, rather than as a historical relic or "propaganda," would only be preserved if it resisted any form of definition. But even as he stressed art's special role, Weiner rejected the notion of any privileged position for artists, who were "but one vocational unit in a sociological system."[60] With statements such as these, he strongly emphasized the social foundation of his art, which remained central to his artistic approach. Particularly in his early work, he turned to the artistic treatment of materials and their use in society in order to negotiate these questions. Subsequently, he derived his ethically and politically grounded sense of artistic responsibility, which characterizes his practice and has allowed it to remain relevant and relatable to others to this day. Weiner's politics of art emerges as a politics of artistic practice that turns against outdated conceptions of the artist with their authoritarian and sexist connotations. By radically changing the understanding of artistic work, Weiner challenged these problematic notions and paved the way for new forms of practice that could build on and expand from the model he developed.

Notes

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1 Arthur R. Rose, "Four Interviews with Barry, Huebler, Kosuth, Weiner," *Arts Magazine* 43, no. 4 (February 1969): 23.

2 The influential notion of a "dematerialization" of art was introduced by the critics Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler in 1968, and later restated in Lippard's pivotal anthology *Six Years*. See Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," *Art International* 12, no. 2 (February 1968): 31–36; Lucy R. Lippard, ed., *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972: A Cross-Reference Book of Information on Esthetic Boundaries: Consisting of a Bibliography in Which Are Inserted a Fragmented Text, Art Works, Documents, Interviews, and Symposia, Arranged Chronologically and Focused on So-Called Conceptual or Information or Idea Art with Mention on Such Vaguely Designated Areas as Minimal, Anti-Form, Systems, Earth, or Process Art Occurring Now in the Americas, Europe, England, Australia and Asia (with Occasional Political*

Overtones), Edited and Annotated by Lucy R. Lippard (New York: Praeger, 1973). For a discussion and contextualization, see Christian Berger, "Wholly Obsolete or Always a Possibility? Past and Present Trajectories of a 'Dematerialization' of Art," in *Conceptualism and Materiality: Matters of Art and Politics*, ed. Christian Berger (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

3 Jacob Stewart-Halevy points out a transformation within conceptualist practices from a purely abstract understanding of language to one that emphasizes the social contexts of its usage, that is, the material dimensions of language *practices* (but does not include Weiner in his examples). Jacob Stewart-Halevy, "Ian Wilson, Conceptual Art, and the Materialization of Language," in *Conceptualism and Materiality*. Similarly, Trevor Stark analyzes Weiner's work as an "aesthetic proposition working through the social objectivity of language" and argues that the artist's "linguistic materialism depended neither on the objecthood of the referent nor on the materiality of the signifier." Trevor Stark, "Lawrence Weiner's Materialism," *October* 180 (2022): 106. Sabeth Buchmann demonstrates how Weiner's work transcends conventional material–object paradigms through their potential for constant actualization or rematerialization, afforded by the artist's particular use of language "as a form of production." Sabeth Buchmann, "Language Is a Change in Material: On Lawrence Weiner's Ellipses," in *Conceptualism and Materiality*, p. 171. Dominic Rahtz argues that the "ethical and political meaning" of Weiner's work "depends on the possibility that language consists in action as well as statement, that language is capable of acting in and on the world as well as referring to it, and that it is itself material and real." Dominic Rahtz, *Metaphorical Materialism: Art in New York in the Late 1960s* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), p. 141. See also Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

4 Lawrence Weiner, *Statements* (New York: Seth Siegelaub, 1968). See Weiner's book for the examples cited below.

5 Weiner, n. p.: "Certain Specific Statements are reproduced by kind permission of the people who own them." On the issue of quantities and measures, see Gregor Stemmrich, "Lawrence Weiner—Material and Methodology," in *Having Been Said: Writings & Interviews of Lawrence Weiner 1968–2003*, ed. Gerti Fietzek and Gregor Stemmrich (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), p. 435. Dominic Rahtz questions this distinction and instead refers to the connection with preexisting ownership in the "Specific Statements." Rahtz, *Metaphorical Materialism*, pp. 141–43. See also Anne Rorimer, "Lawrence Weiner: 'Displacement,'" in *Robert Lehman Lectures on Contemporary Art*, ed. Lynne Cooke and Karen Kelly (New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 1996), p. 24: "[T]he statements are more or less specific depending on the variable number of singular details that they contain, but general statements can become specific by means of particular historical, cultural, and contextual inscriptions."

6 Seth Siegelaub, ed., *January 5–31, 1969*, exh. cat. (New York, 1969), n. p.

7 Stemmrich, "Lawrence Weiner—Material and Methodology," p. 435. See also Lawrence Weiner, "Interview by Phyllis Rosenzweig [1990]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 237 (addition original): "The word 'statements' in my first book [*STATEMENTS*] was not even about utterances but referred to what you get at the end of the month, after used services. When you get your American Express bill, it says 'statement enclosed.' . . . That's all *STATEMENTS* ever was. It told you how many pieces of stone were moved and where." According to Peter Osborne, the "Statement of Intent" results in an ontological division of the work into several possible outcomes, some of which will never be realized. Peter Osborne, "Survey," in *Conceptual Art*, ed. Peter Osborne (London: Phaidon, 2002), p. 31.

8 Weiner defined a certain proportion of his work as "public freehold" that cannot be sold, a move that he justified as his attempt to stay true to his political convictions and "stay pure." Lawrence

Weiner, "Early Work: Interview by Lynn Gumpert [1982]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 127. In the same vein, he explained his motivation to put work on posters and other ephemera that were published in a comparatively large print run. See Patricia Norvell, "Lawrence Weiner, June 3, 1969," in *Recording Conceptual Art: Early Interviews with Barry, Huebler, Kaltenbach, LeWitt, Morris, Oppenheim, Siegelaub, Smithson, Weiner by Patricia Norvell*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Patricia Norvell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 104; Lawrence Weiner, "Interview by Ann Temkin and John Ravenal [1994]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 322.

9 Sabeth Buchmann, "Conceptual Art," in *Begriffslexikon zur zeitgenössischen Kunst*, ed. Hubertus Butin (Cologne: Snoeck, 2014), p. 53.

10 Norvell, "Lawrence Weiner, June 3, 1969," p. 105: "I don't approve of art that you cannot supposedly experience unless you do prescribed things, because that's choreography and, to me, really and truly is aesthetic fascism." Here, Maria Marschall detects an "inflationary use of the term 'fascism'" ("inflationäre Verwendung des Begriffs 'Faschismus'") on the part of the left during this period, referring to Gerd Koenen, *Das rote Jahrzehnt: Unsere kleine deutsche Kulturrevolution, 1967–1977* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2002), p. 113. Maria Marschall, "Lawrence Weiner: Terminal Boundaries—Aspekte der Grenzthematik in der künstlerischen Konzeption und den Spracharbeiten 1968–2002," (PhD diss., Universität der Künste Berlin, 2006), p. 52, n. 132, https://opus4.kobv.de/opus4-udk/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/21/file/marschall_maria.pdf. Mike Sperlinger nevertheless identifies certain implicit instructions in Weiner's works, such as the request to consider them as art or to understand the function of the linguistically framed statements with regard to the work. Mike Sperlinger, "Orders! Conceptual Art's Imperatives," in *Afterthought: New Writing on Conceptual Art*, ed. Mike Sperlinger (London: Rachmaninoff's, 2005), pp. 14–15.

11 Norvell, "Lawrence Weiner, June 3, 1969," p. 105.

12 Ibid.: "All of the pieces, if you read carefully, are stated facts." On the importance of "fact"-based ways of thought within the period, see Joshua Shannon, *The Recording Machine: Art and Fact During the Cold War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017).

13 Gerti Fietzek, "Lawrence Weiner," in *Künstler: Kritisches Lexikon der Gegenwartskunst*, ed. Lothar Romain and Detlef Bluemler (Munich: Weltkunst Bruckmann, 1991), pp. 7–8. According to Liz Kotz, Weiner's practice reflects a general tendency in the art of the 1960s, according to which a template or idea may be realized several times; her use of the terms "specific" and "general" is reminiscent of the corresponding distinction in Weiner's *Statements*. Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At*, p. 175; on Weiner in particular, see ibid., pp. 198–212. Sabeth Buchmann here identifies parallels to poststructuralist understandings of language, especially in the writings of Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida. See Sabeth Buchmann, *Denken gegen das Denken: Produktion, Technologie, Subjektivität bei Sol LeWitt, Yvonne Rainer und Hélio Oiticica* (Berlin: b_books, 2007), pp. 84–85. In a recent article, Trevor Stark convincingly traces Weiner's "materialism" to the capacity of language to bind itself ever anew to phenomena or processes. On Weiner, he writes: "His work's materialism lies in language's capacity to bind itself to the world in an unforeseeable multiplicity of ways." Stark, "Lawrence Weiner's Materialism," p. 113. See also Rahtz, *Metaphorical Materialism*, p. 162: "For Weiner, it was the general nature of reference in language and the universality of grammar that meant that it was not subject to the ideological determinations that a specificity of reference would entail."

14 Compare the following quotes: "When artists . . . present large sheafs of papers, photos, objects, all signed, sealed, delivered, insured, they haven't dematerialized anything, they've just substituted six reams of papers and six reams of photos for a large stone sculpture." Lawrence Weiner, "Lawrence

Weiner at Amsterdam: Interview by Willoughby Sharp [1972]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 48. Also see ibid., p. 53, as criticism directed at the term "conceptual art": "[T]he majority of those who consider themselves 'conceptualists' are the ones who inundate you with tons upon tons of documents, documentation, clocks, photographs, drawings, tables." On the phenomenon and understanding of documentation in this context more generally, see Christian Berger, "Douglas Huebler and the Photographic Document," *Visual Resources* 32, nos. 3–4 (December 2016): 210–29.

15 See for example Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At*, p. 209. She elaborates on this observation by including Richard Serra's *Verb List* (1967–68) in the discussion.

16 Lawrence Weiner, "A Conversation with Benjamin H. D. Buchloh [1998]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 374.

17 Lawrence Weiner, "I Don't Converse with Heaven: Interview by Jean-Marc Poinsot [1989]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 182: "The materials I use, which I refer to, are ordinary materials that people are familiar with. . . . It's possible that a material that to me seems very ordinary, very commonplace doesn't exist in a particular small town, here or in another country, but that would be my mistake."

18 In *Statements*, the work appears as *One Aerosol Can of Enamel Sprayed to Conclusion Directly upon the Floor.* Weiner, *Statements*, n. p.

19 Norvell, "Lawrence Weiner, June 3, 1969," p. 106. See also Weiner, "A Conversation with Benjamin H. D. Buchloh [1998]," p. 374: "The spray can is an object that contains a whole range of chemical and physical compounds and vernacular and daily usages. It was the looked-down upon-thing, it is about the not-skilled."

20 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "The Posters of Lawrence Weiner," in *Lawrence Weiner: Posters*, exh. cat. (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1986), p. 173.

21 Weiner, "Early Work: Interview by Lynn Gumpert [1982]," p. 124. See also Weiner, "Interview by Phyllis Rosenzweig [1990]," p. 236: "I become interested in some material. It could be limestone, it could be the idea of blue light or something, and I start to accumulate 'information' about whatever it is. In the studio, I move that material around, and when it comes to a configuration that makes some sense and I begin to understand why I was interested in it, I translate that. It's language, from what I see."

22 See also Weiner, "I Don't Converse with Heaven: Interview by Jean-Marc Poinsot [1989]," p. 182: "What interests me when I make a piece is finding a material and working with it. My work is truly materialistic, just like that of historical sculpture. That's why I am a studio artist. Then I translate the material into language."

23 Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 125.

24 See Julian Heynen, Stefanie Jansen, and Peter Schüller, eds., *Lawrence Weiner: As Far as the Eye Can See*, exh. cat. (Düsseldorf: Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2008), p. 9: "It was a kind of conversation with the material. I was desperate to find out what my relationship to these materials was." ("Es war eine Art Gespräch mit dem Material. Ich war verzweifelt darum bemüht, herauszufinden, wie meine Beziehung zu diesen Materialien war.") The statement refers to the work *What Is Set upon the Table Sits upon the Table (The Stone on the Table)*, as discussed below.

25 See Friederike Sigler, "Introduction," in *Work*, ed. Friederike Sigler (London and Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Art Gallery and MIT Press, 2017), pp. 16–17.

26 See Lawrence Weiner, "Red as Well as Green as Well as Yellow as Well as Blue: Interview by Irmelin Lebeer [1973]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 72: "What makes Rauschenberg so interesting—the combines—is that he never attempted to transform the material. He attempted to use the material in a sense of notation, not in a sense of a found object. He used it to construct a parable. And that

is what makes the work interesting, as opposed to an expressionist work." On Weiners "vehement anti-expressionism," see also Stemmrich, "Lawrence Weiner—Material and Methodology," p. 430.

27 Weiner, "Early Work: Interview by Lynn Gumpert [1982]," p. 121.

28 Heynen, Jansen, and Schüller, *Lawrence Weiner*, p. 9. On the Aristotelian understanding of matter, see Manfred Stöckler, "Materie," in *Neues Handbuch philosophischer Grundbegriffe*, ed. Hermann Krings et al., vol. 2 (Freiburg: Alber, 2011), p. 1502.

29 Heynen, Jansen, and Schüller, *Lawrence Weiner*, p. 29.

30 David Batchelor, "Many Colored Objects Placed Side by Side to Form a Row of Many Colored Objects," in *Lawrence Weiner* (London: Phaidon, 1998), p. 76.

31 Ursula Meyer, "Lawrence Weiner, October 12, 1969," in *Conceptual Art*, ed. Ursula Meyer (New York: Dutton, 1972), p. 217.

32 See, e. g., Lawrence Weiner, *Works* (Hamburg: Anatol AV und Filmproduktion, 1977), no. 044: *One Quart Heavy Grade Motor Oil Poured Into the Gulf Stream* (044); *A Field Cratered by Structured Simultaneous TNT Explosions* (030); *A Rural Stone Wall Breached by Detonated High Explosives* (069); *A Wall Shattered by a Single Pistol Shot* (060); *A Tree Bored by a Rifle Shot* (072). In interviews, Weiner repeatedly referred to a field of craters that he had created in 1960 near Mill Valley outside San Francisco by means of explosions. See e. g., Lawrence Weiner, "From an Interview by Jack Burnham [1970]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 34; Weiner, "Lawrence Weiner at Amsterdam: Interview by Willoughby Sharp [1972]," p. 44.

33 On the relationship between ecology and Land art, see James Nisbet, *Ecologies, Environments, and Energy Systems in Art of the 1960s and 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014); Alan C. Braddock and Karl Kusserow, "The Big Picture: American Art and Planetary Ecology," in *Nature's Nation: American Art and Environment*, ed. Alan C. Braddock and Karl Kusserow, exh. cat. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; Princeton University Art Museum, 2018). Also see Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *The Time of the Force Majeure: After 45 Years, Counterforce Is on the Horizon*, ed. Petra Kruse and Kai Reschke (Munich: Prestel, 2016); Alan Sonfist, ed., *Art in the Land: A Critical Anthology of Environmental Art* (New York: Dutton, 1983).

34 For the important distinction between "ecology" and "environmental care" in this context, see Nisbet, *Ecologies, Environments, and Energy Systems*, p. 68.

35 Included in Peggy Gale, ed., *Artists Talk: 1969–1977* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2004), p. 74. See also Weiner, "Early Work: Interview by Lynn Gumpert [1982]," p. 121: "I realized I wanted to spend the rest of my existence dealing with the general idea of materials rather than the specific." See also Meyer, "Lawrence Weiner, October 12, 1969," p. 218: "I personally am more interested in the *idea* of the material than in the material itself."

36 Lawrence Weiner, "Gordon Matta-Clark: From an Interview by Joan Simon [1984]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 156. As Birgit Pelzer notes, this is further accentuated by the strongest possible linguistic density. Birgit Pelzer, "Dissociated Objects: The Statements/Sculptures of Lawrence Weiner," *October* 90 (1999): 87.

37 Weiner, "Interview by Phyllis Rosenzweig [1990]," p. 235.

38 Ibid. Weiner drew on everyday examples here that relate to specific works and possibly his experiences in their realization. For example, people in Germany and the United States would associate differing ideas with the word "rubber ball," and white paint in France would differ fundamentally in production and appearance from white paint in Germany. Norvell, "Lawrence Weiner, June 3, 1969," p. 107. On Weiner's strategy of displacement as a way to overcome minimalist site-specificity, see Birgit Eusterschulte, *Robert Barry: Materialität und Konzeptkunst* (Paderborn: Brill, 2021),

pp. 104–06. The term also formed the title of an important exhibition by Weiner at the Dia Center for the Arts in New York in 1991 and the accompanying artist's book: Lawrence Weiner, *Displacement* (New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 1991).

39 Meyer, "Lawrence Weiner, October 12, 1969," pp. 217–18.

40 See also Dieter Schwarz, "The Metaphor Problem, Again and Again: Books and Other Things by Lawrence Weiner," in *Lawrence Weiner: As Far as the Eye Can See*, ed. Ann Goldstein and Donna M. De Salvo, exh. cat. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), p. 170: "If Weiner locates the difference between literature and art in the fact that literature is subjective while art is objective, he implies that language as object disappears, allowing total permeability with respect to material reality."

41 Dieter Schwarz, "Moved Pictures: Film & Videos of Lawrence Weiner," in *Show (&) Tell: The Films & Videos of Lawrence Weiner: A Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Bartomeu Marí and Alice Weiner (Gent: Imschoot, 1992), p. 96.

42 Gregor Stemmrich, "Lawrence Weiner: Material, Language, Tic-Tac-Toe," in *Lawrence Weiner*, ed. Goldstein and Salvo, p. 221. See also Monika Wagner, "Material," in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, ed. Karlheinz Barck, vol. 3 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2010), p. 867. She highlights that, in contrast to "matter," the term "material" refers exclusively to substances designated for further processing.

43 See Weiner, "Section 2," *Artforum* 20, no. 9 (May 1982): 65: "Art is and must be an empirical reality concerned with the relationships of human beings to objects and objects to objects in relation to human beings."

44 Norvell, "Lawrence Weiner, June 3, 1969," p. 109 (ellipses original).

45 Weiner, "From an Interview by Sabine B. Vogel [1990]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 234.

46 Norvell, "Lawrence Weiner, June 3, 1969," p. 107.

47 Weiner, "Early Work: Interview by Lynn Gumpert [1982]," p. 127.

48 See Terry Atkinson, "From an Art & Language Point of View," *Art-Language* 1, no. 2 (February 1970): 36–40. He directed this criticism at Robert Barry in particular. See Christian Berger, "A World of Things Can Be Done with This Incredible Material: Robert Barrys Arbeit mit ungreifbaren Materialien und Energieformen," in *Kunst und Material: Konzepte, Prozesse, Arbeitsteilungen*, ed. Roger Fayet and Regula Krähenbühl (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2022), p. 74.

49 Amy Goldin and Robert Kushner, "Conceptual Art as Opera," *Art News* 69, no. 2 (March 1970): 40. The phrase "man's spiritual needs" is a quote from Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy," *Studio International* 178, no. 915 (October 1969): 137.

50 Jeanne Siegel, "Carl Andre: Art Worker," *Studio International* 180, no. 927 (November 1970): 179.

51 See Rahtz, *Metaphorical Materialism*, p. 2.

52 "I am still basically a materialist because I consider everything we use to be material." Weiner, "Lawrence Weiner at Amsterdam: Interview by Willoughby Sharp [1972]," p. 48.

53 Gregor Stemmrich, "Das Konzept der 'Literalness' in der amerikanischen Kunst," *Texte zur Kunst* 7 (October 1992): 112: "Der Widerspruch, der hier aus der Perspektive des 'social historian of art' auftauchen kann, besteht darin, daß die Kunst in ihrem Bestreben, einer ideologischen Überdetermination durch ihren kulturellen Kontext zu entgehen, eine Praxis der Repräsentation nur in bezug auf sich selbst begründet und sich damit denjenigen Zwängen entzieht, die sie zu akzeptieren hätte, wenn sie sich ihrer kulturellen Wirkungsmöglichkeit und Verantwortung nicht selbst berauben will."

54 Lawrence Weiner, "Regarding the (a) Use of Language within the Context of Art [1978]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 84.

55 See Weiner, "Interview by Hilde van Pelt [1982]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 138: "Language is not the subject. The subject is indicated by language, whereas the work thus becomes a total object. This is what makes me a realist artist."

56 Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 80.

57 Rahtz, *Metaphorical Materialism*, pp. 162–65. In interviews, Weiner repeatedly referred to himself as an "(American) socialist." See the numerous mentions of these terms in the index of Fietzek and Stemmrich, eds., *Having Been Said*.

58 Carl Andre et al., "The Artist and Politics: A Symposium," *Artforum* 9, no. 1 (September 1970): 35–39. Similar questions were raised by Lippard's benefit exhibitions for initiatives against the Vietnam War, some of which featured the same artists, such as Jo Baer, Robert Barry, Donald Judd, and Sol LeWitt. See Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, pp. 140–48.

59 On the distinction between "could" and "should," see Rahtz, *Metaphorical Materialism*, p. 165.

60 Andre et al., "The Artist and Politics," p. 39. See Helen Molesworth, "Work Ethic," in *Work Ethic*, exh. cat., (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press; Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 2003), pp. 25–51. She characterized the self-image of artists at that time "not as artists producing (in) a dreamworld but as workers in capitalist America" (ibid., p. 27). See also Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, p. 4.

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