



Soundings at SUNY

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sonic expression of a musical composition. Examples of this include Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* and Auden's discursive poem based on Breughel's *The Fall of Icarus*. With the introduction of abstraction into visual arts, painting could return the compliment; witness the formal homages to Bach by artists as diverse as Wassily Kandinsky, Henri Nouveau, and Larry Poons.

The most radical aspect of cross- and pan-artistic activity can best be considered under the rubric "intermedia," a term originally coined by poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge around 1810 and revived in a 1965 essay by artist-theoretician Dick Higgins. Intermedia, in effect, denotes the wholly hybrid art forms that result from a seamless fusing of approaches and attitudes originating in the traditional arts. The elements in Wagner's operas—music, libretto, stage design and costumes, dance (such as there is)—can be functionally isolated from one another without complete loss of coherence or even integrity; we would otherwise not tolerate (much less acquire) recordings of the *Ring* cycle *et al.* In a happening by Allan Kaprow, however, the method and the meaning of the work would fall apart should a single medium be removed. Likewise, in the intermedium of visual poetry, there is no possible isolation of image from text, as there might be in a *livre d'artiste* or even in a William Blake manuscript; the text *is* the image, in form and in concept.

All these aspects of multi- and inter-artistic activity, at least where the formal or contextual remnants of traditional music and traditional visual art exist, have been documented in previous survey exhibitions, as have the less unusual, but no less intriguing, phenomena of artists' music (e.g. Kurt Schwitters' piano etudes, the compositions of Belgian Dada-Surrealist E. L. T. Mesens, or the electronic music of Jean Dubuffet, Asger Jorn, and Nikolas Schöffer) and musicians' visual art (the paintings of Arnold Schoenberg, for instance, or of Carl Ruggles).¹ The occurrence of such exhibitions in Europe is no great surprise, considering the fascination Europeans have long had for the transmutability of artistic theory (viz. Leonardo, Goethe, or most especially the *fin de siècle* absorption in synesthesia). But the recent mounting of several such shows in far less theoretically-minded America, although it might indicate a growing conceptual sophistication on the part of this once notoriously empirical culture, has its probable explanation in the current popularity of sound art. In its various forms, sound art is the latest—and so far most commercially successful, even mass-marketable—form of intermedia to emerge from the vast laboratory of mediumistic experimentation that the American art world has become. *Soundings* is only the most recent, and most formally museological, in a series of sound art shows of all shapes, sizes, forms, and focuses. This series is likely to continue, although future

sound art exhibitions here are likely to concentrate on specific aspects of the polymedium (sound-producing objects, say, or the visual representation of music). Even though it did not touch upon all of these possible aspects (whether deliberately or because of insufficient information), *Soundings* impressed most people as sufficiently exhaustive, especially considering the kind of effort and expense that must be invested in any such undertaking.

Soundings was imposing and exhilarating in the quality and the volume of material it did collate and in the lucid, even expansive, way in which this material was displayed. In fact, the essentially uncrowded nature of the show not only allowed each item ample space, but also gave the impression that there were even more objects of significance than there really were. Entering the Neuberger's forward space, one was greeted not with the expected barrage of visual information and sonic cacophony, but with the same clean and comfortable expanse the museum always presents. The Neuberger was neat and tidy as usual, one noted with a tinge of relief (after the acoustic and visual chaos of shows like Berlin's *Für Augen und Ohren* and *Sound* in Los Angeles and New York) and a tinge of regret, too. Was this show to be nothing but a restrained mausoleum of visually unexciting documentation and unplugged machines? Continuing into the first exhibition chamber, one's fears were dispelled by the spare but rather jaunty sounding *Sunspots I & II* by Liz Phillips, an arched copper coil and a plexiglas screen, both hanging in the middle of a room otherwise empty save for the electronic console which activated these objects and the loudspeakers broadcasting the results of that activation. The quiet gurgle usually emitted by the speakers changed to gulps, whoops, and whooshes as visitors passed under and by the coil and walked alongside the screen. *Soundings* thus literally enveloped its visitors on their first steps into its main portion.

If, however, one turned left before being engulfed by *Sunspots I & II*, one came face to face with an admirably and engrossingly thorough chronological history of sound art and, beyond that, with what was probably the best realized section of *Soundings*, the display of artists' phonograph records and audiotapes. A relatively small selection of the records and their jackets sat on view in vitrines or on the wall, just enough to impart a sense of the purely visual variety in the realm of record-artwork. The even more impressive sonic variety in this realm was sampled broadly at a low table graced with several headsets and comfortable seats. One could thus sample eleven tapes collated from the records and cassettes on view or the many more unseen ones. The multiple-audition table, complete with racks for holding programs and other information, was brilliantly designed and ought serve as a model for all subsequent audio art exhibits; it went a long way towards overcoming the all-

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The entire fall season at the Neuberger Museum of the State University of New York, College at Purchase, was occupied by a single massive exhibition: *Soundings*, a tremendously ambitious undertaking, curated by Neuberger director Suzanne Delehanty, which billed itself as "the first American survey of visual artists' use of sound, music and acoustical phenomena from 1900 to the present." There have been any number of exhibitions exploring the active engagement, conceptually or physically, of sound in the plastic arts. Most of these, however, have been in Europe, and those mounted in the United States have, indeed, not matched *Soundings* in their chronological or methodological breadth. It was all the more frustrating, therefore, to note how many gaps there were. Especially since *Soundings* provided a wealth of information in a manner highly engaging in terms of simple entertainment, it is regrettable that a few too many small errors—and way too many glaring omissions—prevented the show and its attendant catalogue from providing a truly definitive historical and contemporary overview of the sound art phenomenon.

The cross-referencing and combining of aural and visual art is part of a wide realm of cross-artistic and even pan-artistic activity which has pertained for centuries. Multi-media manifestations comprise part of this activity. Presentations that coordinate temporal and spatial arts, such as the operatic spectacles envisioned by Richard Wagner as examples of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or, more simply, presentations that superimpose one medium onto another (dance with film, for instance, or literature with visual art, as in a *livre d'artiste*) can be designated multi-media. Another aspect of the broad realm of activity in question is a yet more familiar one, wherein equivalents, systematic or intuitive, between different art forms are devised so that a poem can function as the verbal version of a painting, say, or a painting can reflect the



Fig. 1 Morgan Russell, *Cosmic Synchrony*, 1913–14, oil on canvas. Utica, N.Y., Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute.

but-insurmountable anomaly of “showing” audiotapes and records.

Beyond this was a quaint but essentially irrelevant display of six mechanical musical instruments, including an early gramophone, an early theremin (the paterfamilias of electronic instruments), and, gee Dad!, even a Wurlitzer. What pertinence this self-contained little show of industrial design had is hard to guess; although it explored aspects of the same acoustical realm, those aspects were awfully far removed from those elucidated in *Soundings* proper.²

It was back behind, and also to one side of, *Sunspots I & II* that I began to feel real dissatisfaction. “Paintings, Objects and Books that Sound or Imply Sound” was essentially the historical section of the show, where all the items predating World War II, and most predating the 1970s, were collected. These items included avant-garde books and periodicals (Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes*, for instance, and *Der Blaue Reiter Almanach*); several

pertinent manifestoes (mainly Italian Futurist); newspaper clippings documenting events such as Luigi Russolo’s premier performance with his *intonarumori*; and a number of paintings, drawings, watercolors, and prints. In the second of the two “Paintings, Objects and Books” rooms were postwar objects, ranging from collections of verbal-conceptual scores by Fluxus artist-composers to sound-producing or -containing devices. Many variants on the hybrid, including several very witty ones, were to be found here.

Unfortunately, many also weren’t to be found here. Now, decisions of exclusion and inclusion are a curator’s ultimate prerogative; the intent as well as the effect of any exhibit must be judged first by what has gone in, and only secondarily by what might have. It does little good to list the dozens of artists and works that were conspicuous by their absence—especially when one considers how many factors besides curatorial selectivity determine what appears in a show. There were some real gems in *Sound-*

ings, particularly in the “Paintings, Objects and Books” wing; that each gem may have provoked the recall of three more that were not on view testifies only to the impossibly vast scope of the theme. But the exclusions, avoidable or not, brought one’s attention back to the inclusions—and how those inclusions hung together and set the tone for the rest of *Soundings*.

The fact of the matter is that this historical section was rather unfocused and not sufficiently annotated as to the reason for each inclusion. Reasons *were* needed for the presence of items like the Braque and Picasso still lifes with musical instruments (and hints of sheet music) or the Miro painting *The Nightingale’s Song at Midnight and Morning Rain*. Such references to music and sound are very tenuous, and served only to confuse the issue after it had been clarified by the inclusion of such apposite items as Arthur Dove’s *Fog Horns* and Paul Klee’s *Kettledrum-Organ*, wherein sound, musical or not, is given convincing visual form by the rendition of colors and shapes that obviously operate analogously. A guitar amidst a still-life arrangement, no matter how rhythmically broken down or built up, does not suggest or *take on* sonic properties the way undulating bands of grayed color radiating from a black core do.

The same kind of confusion reigned in the juxtaposition of works such as several woodcuts from Kandinsky’s *Klänge* (the theoretical and poetical keystone to his work with the visual and dramatic representation of sound) and Frantisek Kupka’s *Vertical Planes (Study)*; also misleading in their incongruous coincidence were a painting (**Fig. 1**) and several drawings—including a sketch for a kinetic light machine and a fascinating diagram aligning the twelve notes of the chromatic scale with the twelve tertiary divisions of the color wheel—by Morgan Russell and a painting by Russell’s fellow Synchronist Stanton Macdonald-Wright. While the Kandinsky and Russell items bear obvious connections to sound and music, the works by their colleagues do not, despite the fact that both Kupka and Macdonald-Wright had some general connections with sound and music. Was it not possible to borrow one of Kupka’s complex attempts to give visual expression to Bachian fugal structures? And, in light of that omission, why was nothing included by Henri Nouveau, who worked for several years at the Bauhaus on paintings, sculpture, and drawings derived formally from *Die Kunst der Fuge*?

The elisions and obscurities in the historical section—of which the above were only the most glaring—was indicative of a failure to clarify certain essential distinctions. The difference between “sound” and “music” was not explained, much less emphasized. The two are not the same, after all; Edgar Varèse defined music as “organized sound,” and the adjective “organized” cannot be sufficiently stressed. Thus the optical rendition of sound *functions*

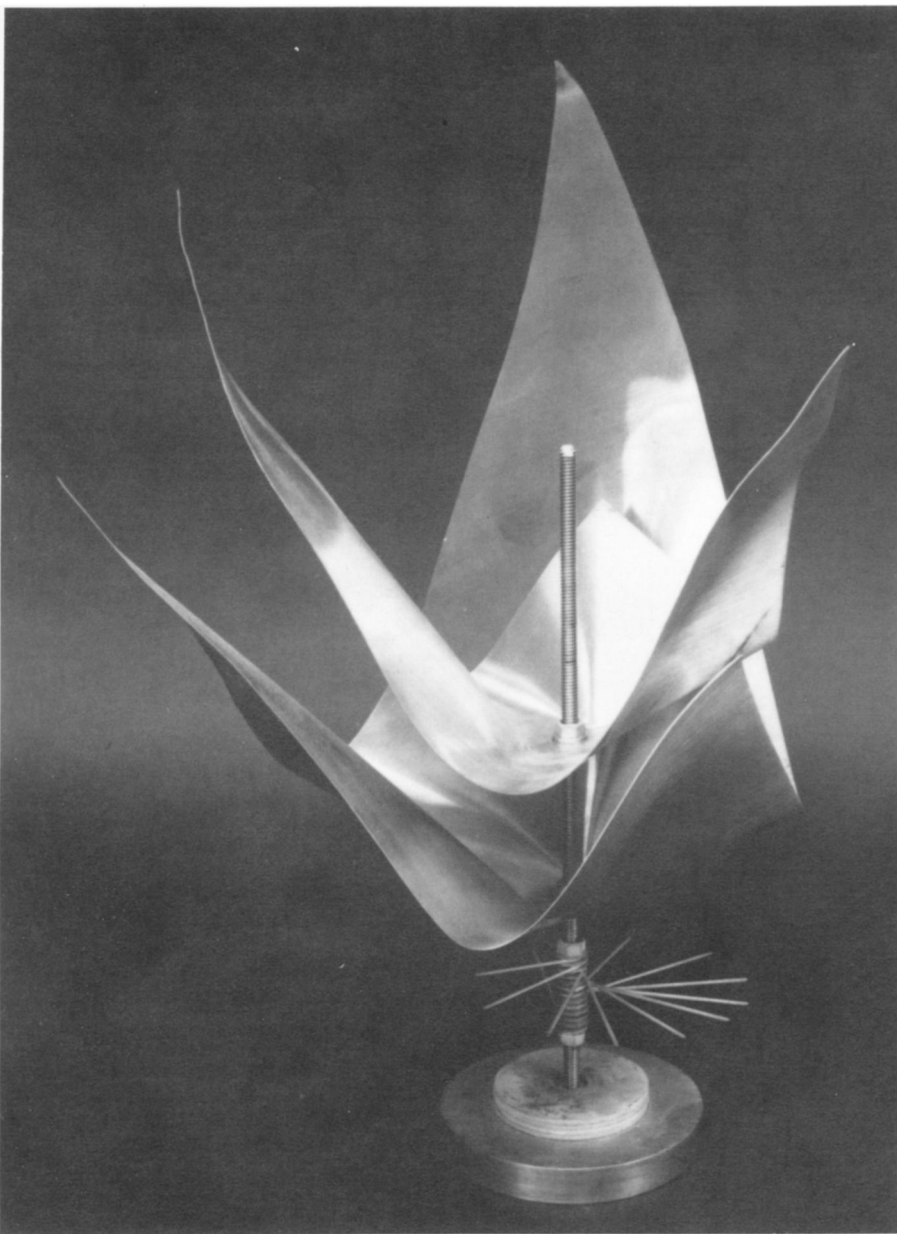


Fig. 2 François Baschet, *Sounding Structure*, 1969, *Stainless Steel*. Purchase, N.Y., Neuberger Museum.

differently than that of music, and thus *means* something different. As importantly, the emphasis on visual representation of sound in the historical section did not carry over into the subsequent, more-or-less contemporary sections. The sculptural objects “which sound or imply sound” are by generations of artists (and musicians) for the most part older than the emerging generations generously represented in the other sections. This was an understandable and even justifiable bias, one which, among other things, allowed Delehanty to emphasize the role Fluxus and Fluxus-related artists have played in this area. But there were no paintings or books (and one might also consider visual scores as books) postdating the Second World War, save a couple appended to sounding structures. Thus, composers’ graphically oriented scores, artists’ visual representations of music, theoretical analogue systems and impulses, and most other forms of pictorial sound art produced in the last several decades were

entirely absent.

In her catalogue statement Delehanty begs the question of this categorical omission.

SOUNDINGS could well have included composers’ scores and a whole section on concrete poetry in which each visual mark has an aural equivalent. The exhibition might also have presented works by composers and visual artists who share similar attitudes and convictions. SOUNDINGS concentrates, however, primarily on the work of visual artists who have consistently used sound and acoustical phenomena in their work and on the work of composers, who either alone or in collaboration with others, have created works that may be perceived with both the eyes and the ears.

That explanation would be sufficient and consistent if it had applied to the historical work as well. But it didn’t. The experience of the

prewar, entirely visual work which “implies sound” set up expectations that more such purely pictorial rendition of sound and music would be forthcoming in future sections, unless such practice had died out. It hasn’t. Although the direct heritage of the objects “which sound” was illustrated in the subsequent sections, the direct heritage of the paintings and books “which imply sound” was not.

Be that as it may, the other sections—neat and appropriate categories, in fact—succeeded in fleshing out their various aspects of the sound art phenomenon, even where the high selectivity seemed perhaps more selective than warranted. A couple of items seemed misplaced—Nam June Paik’s sound-responsive *Participation TV* and Howard Jones’s *Sonic VII*, which emits electronic tones in response to a viewer passing before it, are “objects which sound,” so their placement among “Instruments as Sculpture and Sculpture as Instruments” was an error. “Instruments/Sculpture” was an otherwise excellent demonstration of recently invented instruments (by such as Harry Partch and the *frères Baschet*) and the *performable* sound-producing qualities of recent sculpture (Harry Bertoia’s clangorous copper wands, for example, or the organ pipe-like column of Stephan von Huene).

The section documenting sound installations that could not be reconstructed proved to be livelier than documentary exhibits usually are thanks to particularly compact and readable mountings of text and photograph and, especially, to the availability of headsets amplifying most documentations with the sounds of the documented pieces.

The actually realized installations—in effect the payoff to the show as a spectacle—coexisted with the rest of the exhibition with miraculous discretion, proof of how well the installations were shielded from one another’s sound. Among the installations—nearly all reconstructions or versions of previously realized environments—that are historically significant *and* engaging in and of themselves were Laurie Anderson’s 1977 jukebox (with score-drawing-photographs on the wall), assembling the first batch of winsome and terrifically funny songs penned by this suddenly red-hot pop star; the *Acoustic Wall* installed in a narrow corridor by Bruce Nauman, a 1969 work that provides one ear (but not the other) with a respite from sound; and John Cage’s characteristically zany but lucid *33 1/3*, also from 1969, wherein a battery of phonographs and a stack of 300 randomly selected records are put at the disposal of visitors (who usually seize the opportunity to create a racket).

In the later 1960s and 1970s sections of *Soundings*, one thing proved bothersome: geography. The paucity of artists from outside New York City and environs was striking, and somewhat dismaying. One Austrian, Bernhard Leitner, who splits his time between Vienna and New York, and three internationally renowned artists



Fig. 3 Earle Brown, *Calder Piece*, November 14 and 15, 1981, performance.

based in Paris—Agam, Schöffer, and the Baschet team (**Fig. 2**)—comprised the entire European contingent, despite the widespread activity and vast amount of documentation available. California was represented by von Huene and Partch in the sculpture-instrument section and, in the installation area, by Nauman's corridor and Doug Hollis's wonderful arrangement of wind-responsive pipes, which was erected outdoors, by a pond close to the museum. Other than that, only a single circuit drawing by Michael Brewster—giving no hint of his subtle sound environments of rhythmic clicks and continuous hums—came out of the West Coast. From the Midwest came only Jones, the crude and enticing metal noisemakers of Nebraskan Reinhold Marxhausen, and documentation of Minnesotan Leif Brush's outdoor installations. Nothing at all from Canada, save a residency by Toronto's Glass Orchestra as part of the performance program. Nothing whatsoever from South America.

The point is not representation merely for the sake of representation. But when an exhibit undertakes to trace and substantiate a history, and to do so with items of the highest possible (read "available") quality, and then omits whole gobs of relevant, and arguably first-rate, activity without so much as an acknowledgment of their existence, all claims to comprehensiveness are seriously devalued. If I may indulge in second-guessing curators: Where were the am-

plified-resonance magnetic sculptures of the Graeco-French artist Takis? Where was something by the influential Dutch composer and sound-installationist Dick Raaijmakers? Where were the instrument-sculptures of Robert Bates, Ivor Darreg, Richard Dunlap, Jim Pomeroy, Tom Recchion, Robert Wilhite, or other of the many California sculpture-instrument builders? Where were Toronto sound-installationists like Reinhard Reizenstein, Ian Murray, and Michael Snow? Where was documentation of the inventive sound-performances by the Milanese Christina Kubisch and Fabrizio Plessi; or Tom Marioni of San Francisco? Even some New Yorkers were conspicuous by their absence—William Anastasi and his sculptures with live speakers in them from the mid-1960s, for instance, and the space-sound performances of Charlemagne Palestine.

The performance schedule accompanying *Soundings* was rather spare, the better to allow some individuals and groups to work in residence at the museum, thus fulfilling the museum's educational function as a part of the State University system. An especially dynamic rendition of the brilliant and hilarious *Calder Piece* by Earle Brown (**Fig. 3**), wherein a Calder mobile (appropriately entitled *Chef d'orchestre*) is used as a "conductor" and as a percussion instrument, was realized by four intrepid SUNY graduate students. Still, one would have preferred a good deal more supplementary documentation of the increasingly

prominent role that sound and music both are taking in current performance art (and that visual and theatrical effects are taking in current musical practice). The film program seemed somewhat more complete an examination of the sound-and-image phenomenon than did *Soundings* as a whole. This impression was certainly helped by the pervasive sense of an ongoing dialectic: is film a (or even "the") natural medium for the sound-image combination, or is sound as much an imposition in film as it is in static visual art? This consideration was broached clearly by Lucy Fischer in her essay for the catalogue.

Despite the fact that it does not include the comprehensive chronology on display in the show itself, the catalogue to *Soundings* is overall a clear examination—however brief—of sound art's history and of certain issues. With its profusion of reproductions (all black and white), the catalogue proves a valuable addition to the literature. It is farther from an exhaustive study than I would have expected, but it definitely does add a great deal of new and newly collated information, especially to what literature exists in English. Delehanty's own essay, unfortunately as New York centered as the show itself, is otherwise an excellent skeleton. There is even an attempt to differentiate between sound and music, a distinction which was not clarified in the show, although this attempt breaks down amidst the necessary

cross-references squeezed into limited space. Dore Ashton's "Sensoria" concentrates on Paris and the Bauhaus before the War (properly) and New York after (not so properly) and focuses usefully on the theoretical and actual attempts of artists and musicians to develop equivalents and coordinations of plastic and musical arts. Again, space prevents Ashton from delving very deeply into areas whose basic fascination she is readily able to convey. At least her concentration on one aspect of the whole complex of issues (addressed perforce by Deleahanty) allows Ashton to do *some* fleshing out, even to tell some anecdotes. Lucy Fischer's "Sound Waves," already mentioned, is the most concise essay, thanks in great part to its focus on a medium whose history is brief and whose range is not immeasurable. Least succinct but most agitating—in a positive way—is Germano Celant's "Artsound," which wanders rather far afield from the topic at hand without forgetting what the topic is. Celant's prose has been translated from the Italian by Carla Sanguineti Weinberg with, alas, little lost of the turgid effulgence characteristic of much European theoretical writing. Still, Celant clearly adopts a highly sociopolitical viewpoint, and a highly critical attitude, towards the phenomenon of artists crossing over into the use of sound, especially commercially diffused sound such as recordings and broadcast. Celant does not begrudge the artists this strategy, nor even their commercial success withal, but criticizes (capitalist) society for, in effect, forcing artists to go commercial for a living and providing a social context in which so doing is praised. Celant's is pithy stuff, and appropriate here despite its non-documentary nature. On the whole the catalogue is something of a compromise between the needs of scholars and the needs of the general public.

My complaints about *Soundings* itself have been registered from the point of view of the scholar. *Soundings* was expertly installed and provided a convincing and highly informative experience for those relatively uninformed in the field. Suzanne Deleahanty was basically correct in her decision to mount the show first and foremost as a spectacle and only secondarily as a scholarly survey; the best way to inform is to fascinate. It was only those gaping holes, and the conceptual inconsistencies that gave rise to many of them, that seriously bothered me.

Notes

- 1 Admittedly, this last area has not yielded much by way of, er, great art; the implications of the term favored by the French—*un violon d'Ingres*—point at the essentially dilettantish nature of such efforts.
- 2 In *Für Augen und Ohren*, curator René Block indulged his passion for mechanical music-makers by documenting a monumental history of them, from the most primitive contraptions to many kinds of sound-producing sculpture. But this massive scholarly and curatorial effort

was itself a self-contained effort, and did not make the case for a six-item appendage to *Soundings*.

Peter Frank is a critic and curator who specializes in intermedia. He is currently working on monographs on the Something Else Press, Fluxus, and artists' records.

Sol LeWitt Wall Drawings: 1968 – 1981

Sol LeWitt's reputation in the mid-sixties was made on the basis of art works that participated in and invented two of the most influential forms of post-modern art. By 1967 it became apparent that LeWitt's early three-dimensional structures, which helped define the "less-is-more" aesthetic of Minimalism, differed radically from those of his contemporaries and constituted a new style to which he gave the name Conceptual Art. As early as 1963 LeWitt was challenging the basic structure of modern art with obviously ordered but completely abstract systems. They presented the apparent contradiction of a seemingly meaningless visual structure married to an implicitly complex conceptual apparatus which remained virtual through the silence of the art work itself.

American artists from Jackson Pollock to Jasper Johns tried to dematerialize the representational object by enveloping it in the atmospheric haze of the artist's own subjectivity. Context grew to take precedent over content. LeWitt's art was the logical endpoint of the trend away from expressionism. Whereas the expressionists were acutely self-conscious in terms of the individual psyche, the minimal and conceptual artists developed their self-consciousness around the structure of art. The major technical innovations of Abstract Expressionism came about as a by-product of the search for the inner self. Whatever formal decisions LeWitt and his contemporaries made visible were the product of a deep understanding of the artist's relation to the evolution of forms contained in art history.

The recent retrospective of wall drawings at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford (September 29–November 22, 1981) demonstrated that Sol LeWitt's work of the past few years has developed a visual aesthetic as complex as his conceptual process without sacrificing the purity of his initial vision. It is almost trite to note the baroque or mannerist phase of any movement

which begins in aggressive simplicity and eventually comes to terms with time by conforming to the shape of the individual artist's talent. Any concept is compromised by its execution. The beauty of LeWitt's work is its elevation of this apparent contradiction into the focal point of his art. Not only is LeWitt sensitive to the formal structure of art; he is also aware of the nature of communication in general. That is why the notion of process is integral to his definition of Conceptual Art. Process changes the focus of vision from the thing to the relation between things. This is not to say that staring at a wall drawing will cause the observer to notice semiotic systems, any more than staring at a Jackson Pollock will produce a psychic catharsis. But a wall drawing does recreate for a jaded contemporary audience the sense of invasion and audacity that has characterized modernism in general.

A retrospective of wall drawings highlights an important medium that LeWitt has employed to great effect in the elaboration of his original vocabulary of the square wall relief and cube free-standing structure. The Hartford show gave one the opportunity to rediscover and reinterpret a series of wall drawings that LeWitt began in 1968 at the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York. The first wall drawings resemble traditional drawing, with a white background functioning as the illusionistic field of space. The first decisive step beyond this rather conventional application of drawing technique was to provide the negative version: white chalk lines on a black ground. The additive process of increasing complexity was furthered by the introduction of a colored ground in a wall drawing for the Baltimore Museum in 1975. LeWitt began using the basic primary hues of red, yellow, and blue in addition to black and white. The first sequential work using a color field was *Lines to Points on a Grid* for the San Francisco Museum, also in 1975. Up until that time LeWitt had employed pencil lines to draw on the wall. By 1976 he began using colored lines on a colored field. The Hartford retrospective presents for the first time three radical additions to LeWitt's basic vocabulary. He has introduced secondary colors (purple, orange, and green), new images (most noticeably an isometric cube that superficially resembles the work of the Russian Constructivists), and the use of india ink instead of just pencil, chalk, or crayon—which gives the works a more painterly facture.

The only possible drawback to a retrospective of this kind, which presents just one aspect of LeWitt's myriad artistic productions, is that it subverts his avowed intention to resist the predominance of one medium over another. This resistance is why he calls his three-dimensional constructions "structures" rather than sculptures. When one medium commands the viewer's attention, it overshadows the concept which supersedes its projection into space. Perhaps to mitigate the dominance of drawing,