

# Public Works



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**Lawrence Weiner**

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***Dead Center, 2008***

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**A Percent-for-Art Commission  
for Ashdown House**

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**Building NW35, 235 Albany Street**



# Lawrence Weiner/Dead Center

MIT's new Ashdown House envelops landscaped patches of foliage and grass. With curved facades of aluminum and brick, the five-building complex modernizes the aesthetic of old Cambridge. Sheltered within this carefully planned dormitory, the pathway connecting the inner courtyards is concrete, muted, and unassuming. It is unsurprising then, that Lawrence Weiner chose to insert his new piece along that utilitarian space, which, in comparison to the rest of the structure, seems incidental. Weiner strives to make art that is both useful and unobtrusive, and the walkway, serviceable and unadorned, complements his aspirations for the work.



Photos by George Bouret

Over the course of his career, Lawrence Weiner's practical and generous goals have challenged the responsibility of contemporary art. Though often associated with the Conceptual art movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Weiner is among the most prolific artists working today and his singular *oeuvre* reaches beyond the scope of any set time or place. Made in language, Weiner's pieces are designed for reinvention. On the MIT site, the new commission fits effortlessly: the words, immediately contextualized by their surroundings, are poised to be interpreted by each student and every generation to pass through the courtyard of Ashdown House. Lawrence Weiner's practice renews the most simple goal of art: to facilitate a personal experience and consideration of one's place in the world.

Lawrence Weiner was born in February of 1942 and grew up in the Bronx, New York. Early mornings before school, he worked on the ship docks. As a young man he studied philosophy at Hunter College; before receiving his degree, he packed his things, positioned himself at the entrance to the Lincoln Tunnel, and began hitchhiking across the United States. Along the way, he made small pieces of artwork he would trade for a drink or leave on the side of the road. Weiner was engaged with the world around him; he lived above the City Lights bookstore in San Francisco, protested nuclear proliferation, and traveled to Canada and Mexico. Weiner eventually returned to New York to work among an evolving and vital generation of artists. The time was one of fluidity, social awareness, and personal responsibility; and these conditions are at the core of Weiner's artwork.

Before Weiner resolved to be an artist, he wanted to be an explorer. According to Weiner, the careers have a fundamental correlation: "the point of being an artist is that you go off and you enter territories where you're not supposed to be, and you come back and tell somebody."<sup>1</sup> Weiner ultimately pursued a form of exploration that began in his studio: experimenting with materials and then using language to describe what he did. His artwork is not the text, but the idea or content: the material, movement, or transition referred to by his words.

Language first entered Weiner's art as titles. Around 1965, while he was working on his paintings, the titles began to take on more responsibility: describing the work and communicating the context surrounding each piece's creation, including their size, color, and for whom they were made. The titles were not subordinate to the objects, nor were they supplementary; they stood as simultaneous presentations of the work. However, as the titles evolved, they surpassed their material counterparts in their ability to describe conditions that the objects themselves were unable to enunciate.<sup>2</sup>

In February 1968, forty years before making *Dead Center* for MIT, Weiner was working on another outdoor installation for a campus dormitory. The Siegelau Gallery had organized the exhibition at Windham College in Vermont. Weiner acknowledges, "That's the classic turning point—at least it fits historically."<sup>3</sup> Titled *Staples, Stakes, Twine, Turf*, his contribution was a 75- by 100-foot grid constructed with twine and thirty-four wooden stakes installed into the ground between two dormitories. Students reclaimed access to the field by cutting the

twine. Weiner accepted the situation: “When I got there and looked at it, it didn’t seem as if the philistines had done the work any particular harm. And that was it. ... There was this emotional transition right then and there when I realized it didn’t matter.”<sup>4</sup> What was a site-specific outdoor installation became: *A SERIES OF STAKES SET INTO THE GROUND AT RECTANGULAR INTERVALS TO FORM A RECTANGLE—TWINE STRUNG FROM STAKE TO STAKE TO DEMARK A GRID—A RECTANGLE REMOVED FROM THIS RECTANGLE*. Weiner’s next project, in December of the same year, consisted solely of the book *STATEMENTS*.<sup>5</sup> Weiner had found his artistic literacy: all of the works were presented as text.

From that point on, Weiner continued to use language as a discrete means of presentation. In 1969, he wrote his “Statement of Intent” and set out the conditions of his work:

1. THE ARTIST MAY CONSTRUCT THE WORK
  2. THE WORK MAY BE FABRICATED
  3. THE WORK 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

The “Statement of Intent” describes three ways that the work may exist. According to Weiner, “if the information is conveyed then the piece exists.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, a piece that is not constructed could be written, spoken, or thought about. In the same vein, a built piece does not indicate how the work should look, but simply how it could look; there is no correct way to build a piece and no incorrect way as long as it conveys the information.

Text is to be read. Language is a human invention that relies on the viewer’s understanding of its system of signification, therefore it holds no value unless it is processed. Similarly, Weiner’s art depends on an audience to convert it into meaning.<sup>7</sup> In keeping with the social nature of language, Weiner’s pieces have a social function: to prompt the viewer to consider his or her relationship to the objects around them. This purpose is of supreme interest to Weiner, who stipulates that the artist’s responsibility is to “place material which could be used to enrich the daily lives of other human beings.”<sup>8</sup> “Use factor,” a term posited by Weiner, refers to the effect a piece of art has once it is put in society.<sup>9</sup> He strives to make art that is accessible and that provokes the viewer to turn it into something he or she can use. In order for art to serve in this capacity, it should communicate fluidly with a diverse audience and move through society with a similar flexibility.

For the work at MIT, Weiner chose a subject that he hoped would speak universally to the residents of Ashdown House: “I wanted to make something they could live with...everyone sleeping there understands this.”<sup>10</sup> For optimal legibility and durability, Weiner chose to incise each of the three phrases of text into a curved arrow, a rectangle, and a circle of colored granite, which are imbedded into the concrete path. The piece reads:

& A RELATIVE CALM POISED AT A TANGENT TO DEAD CENTER  
& AN UNKNOWN VECTOR POISED AT A TANGENT TO DEAD CENTER  
& A MEANS POISED AT A TANGENT TO DEAD CENTER

The composition changes rhythmically, eliciting a sensation of impending movement and pause beyond the meaning of the words themselves. The walkway itself is an axis of transition, of coming-and-going. Installed along the path, the first two sets of arrows point

toward the interior of the house, beckoning visitors forward. In the last sequence, however, the arrow points in the opposite direction, guiding viewers out of the pub and back into the courtyard towards their beds.

In each of the compositions, a portion of the text remains constant: POISED AT A TANGENT TO DEAD CENTER. Dead center is a term used in mechanics and applicable to crank-driven machines, such as bicycles and car engines. It occurs when the applied force is directed toward the axis and therefore fails to turn the crank. It can bring the machine to a standstill if there is no auxiliary method to move the crank past dead center. The phrases & A RELATIVE CALM, & AN UNKNOWN VECTOR, and & A MEANS each offer a possible way in which to overcome dead center. A relative calm refers to materials that are close to stasis: a temporary stillness with the implication that the state may change according to shifting circumstances. An unknown vector provides tangential force from an unidentified direction. A means could refer to any means, such as stored energy, applied pressure, or momentum. Each of these possibilities is *poised*: ready, but suspended, and thus the circumstances are captured in a moment of hesitation.

Dead center has a metaphoric relationship to entropy, which is a measure of the unavailability of a system’s energy to do work. Entropy is a concept that has widespread application, ranging from thermodynamics to information theory and is often used to describe disorder in various contexts. In physics, thermodynamic entropy is also a measure of system’s disorder; the Second Law of Thermodynamics states that the entropy (or disorder) of the universe continually increases if it is a closed system. However, we cannot assert with any certainty that the universe is a closed system. The discussion of closed versus open systems is at the core of Weiner’s piece; it describes a closed system at dead center on the verge of being opened to other means of energy and entropy. Dead center cannot be overcome without the help of outside force.

Given that the scientific correlations to dead center are expansive, the metaphorical applications are endless. Work in language allows for ambiguity, and that which is vague has a greater chance of being true. When a viewer reads the piece, an immediate translation occurs from the eye to the mind. One creates a private understanding of the circumstances, depending on one’s personal history.

Weiner’s new commission at MIT is poised to be the anchor of Ashdown House. The artist has invited residents to propose other ways to realize the work, with his approval, themselves: on coasters, t-shirts, and in other manifestations. All of these are viable ways to convey the information. Weiner has omitted his own explanation and left the words in their recursive state, positioned to be interpreted ad infinitum.

According to Weiner, “you are dealing with something completely infinite. Language, because it is the most non-objective thing we have ever developed in this world, never stops.”<sup>11</sup> Language is designed to evolve. In this way, it is like any successful system, species, or person. Weiner’s commission for MIT explores the relationships between objects, and in doing so necessarily prompts a consideration of the way in which physical systems adeptly describe human experiences and interactions. The accomplishment of Weiner’s practice is the consequent effect of his work. His words relate humans to one another and to the world around them. Weiner’s work with dead center gently interrogates the arresting parallel between humans and objects: they suffer the same damages, movements, and effects.

## Endnotes

- 1 Conversation with the artist, 7/28/08
- 2 Lawrence Weiner, "Interview by Lynn Gumpert," in *Early Work* (New York: New Museum, 1982), 46–7.
- 3 Weiner, *Early Work*, 48.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Lawrence Weiner, *STATEMENTS* (New York: Seth Siegelau and the Louis Kellner Foundation, 1968).
- 6 Weiner, "Lawrence Weiner at Amsterdam, Interview with Willoughby Sharp," reprinted in *Having Been Said*: 44.
- 7 Weiner, *Early Work*, 50–1.
- 8 Lawrence Weiner Interviewed by David Batchelor, "I Am Not Content," in *Artscribe* (March/April 1989), 50.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Conversation with the artist, 7/28/08
- 11 Weiner, quoted in "Art without Space: A Symposium Moderated by Seth Siegelau with Lawrence Weiner, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, and Joseph Kosuth, 1969," reprinted in *Lawrence Weiner* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), 96.

**Lawrence Weiner**, born in 1942 in New York, is considered to be one of the founding members of the Conceptual art movement of the late 1960s. After finishing public high school in the Bronx, Weiner worked a variety of odd jobs—on docks, on an oil tanker, and in railroad yards—and traveled throughout Canada and Mexico before settling back in lower Manhattan. His first exhibition was of paintings at the Seth Siegelau Gallery in 1964. He has since taken part in numerous solo and group exhibitions in North America, Europe, and Asia.

As a practicing artist for over 45 years, he has created nearly one thousand of his textual works as wall pieces or installations in museums and public spaces throughout the world. He has produced artist's books, audio discs, films, Internet projects, radio broadcasts, video works, performances, and numerous small "multiples."

His work is included in the permanent collections of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, all in New York, NY, and in the collection of the Center Georges Pompidou, Paris. In 2007, the traveling exhibition *Lawrence Weiner: AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York was the first retrospective exhibition mounted in the United States of his extensive body of work.

**Jarrett Gregory** is curatorial assistant at the New Museum in New York City. She attended Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, NY, graduating summa cum laude in art history. Since then, Gregory has worked at the Whitney Museum of American Art as assistant coordinator of the 2006 Whitney Biennial, and curatorial assistant to Donna De Salvo, chief curator and associate director for programs. She independently organized an exhibition of Lutz Bacher's work, *Scenes from the Ring* at White Box non-profit space in New York City (July 2006), and an exhibition of artist Neil Beloufa's work (summer 2008). She joined the New Museum as curatorial assistant in November, 2007, where she co-organized the 2008 *Altoids Award* exhibition with Massimiliano Gioni, Director of Special Exhibitions, and worked on *Paul Chan: The 7 Lights* and *After Nature*. Gregory first worked with Lawrence Weiner on his retrospective exhibition *Lawrence Weiner: AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE*, co-organized by the Whitney Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

**About Public Art at MIT:** MIT's Percent-for-Art program, administered by the List Visual Arts Center, allocates up to \$250,000 to commission art for each new major renovation or campus construction project. The policy was formally instituted in 1968, but earlier collaborations between artists and architects can be found on MIT's campus. When architect Eero Saarinen designed the MIT Chapel in 1955, sculptor Theodore Roszak designed the bell tower and sculptor Harry Bertoia designed the altar screen.

In 1985, architect I.M. Pei and artists Scott Burton, Kenneth Noland, and Richard Fleischner collaborated on Percent-for-Art projects for the Wiesner building and plaza, home to the MIT List Visual Arts Center and the Media Laboratory. Other Percent-for-Art works include a stone floor by Jackie Ferrara for the Tang Center; outdoor sculptures by Louise Nevelson, Tony Smith, and Sarah Sze; Dan Graham's *Yin/Yang Pavilion* at Simmons Hall; Jorge Pardo's untitled ceiling for MIT's graduate residence at 224 Albany Street; and Matthew Ritchie's *Games of Chance and Skill*, a three-part map of time and space created for the Zesinger Sports and Fitness Center. Other publicly sited works from the MIT Permanent Collection include those by Alexander Calder, Henry Moore, Pablo Picasso, Beverly Pepper, Michael Heizer, Victor Burgin, Jennifer Bartlett, Bernar Venet, Frank Stella, Mark di Suvero, and Isaac Witkin.

Lawrence Weiner was selected as the artist for Ashdown House by an advisory committee that included William Kaminsky, Sian Kleindienst, and Suelin Chen, resident graduate students; Terry and Ann Orlando, Housemasters; John Hawes, MIT Facilities Project Manager; Cliff Gayley, William Rawn Associates, Architects; Dennis Collins, Associate Director, MIT Housing; and Jane Farver, MIT List Arts Center Director.

Special thanks to: Alice Weiner, Kirsten Weiner, and Bethany Iazard, Lawrence Weiner Studio; Gary Tondorf-Dick, MIT Facilities Project Manager; Erik Tellander and Rob Wear, William Rawn Associates, Architects; Jerry Friedman, Institute Professor Emeritus, MIT; Denise Lanfranchi, House Manager, Ashdown House.

Funding for this publication was generously provided by the Henry Luce Foundation.

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Cover: Lawrence Weiner  
*Dead Center*, 2008  
Granite, dimensions variable  
Commissioned with MIT Percent-for-Art  
Funds for Ashdown House  
Photo by George Bouret