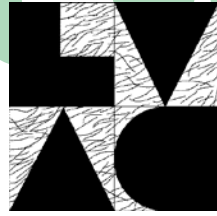


PublicWorks



Sol LeWitt

Bars of Color within Squares (MIT), 2007

**A Percent-for-Art Commission for the Physics,
Department of Materials Science and Engineering,
and Spectroscopy Lab Infrastructure Project**

The Green Center (MIT Building 6C)



Looking Down and Looking Up, Looking Here and Looking There

Sol LeWitt's astonishing *Bars of Colors within Squares (MIT)*, realized in a polychrome terrazzo floor covering 5,500 square feet, rewards visitors who enter the new atrium space between MIT's new atrium space between MIT's new Green Center (Building 6C) and the Institute's older Buildings 4, 6, and 8.¹ Located off MIT's Infinite Corridor, this three-sided, U-shaped floor exuberantly animates almost the entire space remaindered between the new and the old buildings.

Throughout a sunny day, beams of sunlight strike bright patches on the floor, "high lighting" LeWitt's selection of radiant colors. Even on a dull day the glass surfaces of both buildings' exteriors bounce the floor's vibrant hues and bold, geometric shapes back to the viewer. These reflections shift as the viewer moves about, and as the sun and changes in weather conditions pass over the glass ceiling. Under ideal conditions, it is a carnival of color, light, and movement.

Sol LeWitt, often referred to as a founding father of Conceptual art, introduced new ways of making and thinking about art. The essence of LeWitt's work is the primacy of the original idea as formulated in the artist's mind. Given the beauty and impact of much of his work, it may surprise some to learn that LeWitt did not focus primarily on the visual or perceptual appeal of the idea itself. For LeWitt, neither the particular sensitivity nor the skill of the artist's personal touch plays a leading role in the making of his art, although evidence of both can be seen in his many gouaches and drawings. He said, "Banal ideas cannot be rescued by beautiful execution."² Because it emphasizes conceiving rather than implementing, this kind of art has often been referred to as Conceptual art.

LeWitt was prominent among a group of artists (including Robert Mangold, Dorothea Rockburne, Dan Graham, Lawrence Weiner, Robert Ryman, and Carl Andre) who, in the early and middle 1960s, searched for alternatives to the long-established constraints of traditional painting and sculpture. Rejecting both the traditions of illusionism and the more recent traditions of expressionism, these artists of the '60s followed the lead of earlier twentieth-century artists who raised similar concerns: the Russian constructivists, the artists of de Stijl and the Bauhaus, Marcel Duchamp, and Ad Reinhardt, among others. LeWitt and his colleagues led a resistance (joined also by pop artists) against the triumphal hegemony of abstract expressionism, which, from their perspective, was excessively laden with personal and existential angst.

Thinking for LeWitt was never a brain-twisting or overly intellectual endeavor. Said LeWitt, "One should be intelligent enough to know when not to be too intellectual."³ He also was intent upon honoring intuition above all else: "Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach,"⁴ he wrote in 1969, describing his embrace of non-rational and intuitive approaches. Other LeWitt aphorisms tell us more: "Conceptual art is good only when the idea is good,"⁵ and "It is difficult to bungle a good idea."⁶

Terrazzo floors have traditionally been made of chips of marble or stone mixed into wet concrete and then highly polished. The origins of terrazzo go back to early Venice when laborers took home marble chips from their construction jobs and made for themselves a low-cost, durable flooring material. Here the aggregate is composed of chips of recycled glass suspended in specifically colored epoxy-resins. Combined in carefully considered proportions, these materials can

result in colors of great luminosity. The craftsmen who poured and finished these floors had consummate skills and were able to meet the unusually high level of precision required to realize this kind of artistic statement.⁷

LeWitt received the commission to do this piece in April 2005. Actual work on the floor began in late May 2007, just shortly after LeWitt died in early April, 2007, at the age of 78. Artist Jeremy Ziemann, one of LeWitt's longtime assistants, monitored the highly exacting physical production of the floor. At first, LeWitt had considered using ceramic tiles as the medium, but Ziemann suggested that LeWitt might want to try working with this new material for the MIT commission.⁸ After much exploration and experimentation, LeWitt and Ziemann worked with DePaoli Mosaic (Boston) to create the colors and tonal qualities that met the artist's satisfaction. The first major commission completed since the artist's death, this is likely to be considered among his finest works.

LeWitt held all mediums to be of unique but equal value. He tried consciously, though not always successfully, to contradict the conventional hierarchies that dictate one medium's inherent superiority over another,⁹ and enjoyed using a wide variety of mediums for his artistic statements. His work has included everything from three-dimensional structures made of wood, cinder blocks, metal, or painted fiberglass to wall drawings, gouaches, drawings, prints, artist's books, photographs, and set designs as well as—occasionally—furniture, books, photographs, and set designs. LeWitt has also designed a number of other floors, perhaps most notably a 1997 circular contribution to the main entrance hall at Washington, D.C.'s Reagan National Airport. (Fig. 1)

LeWitt delighted in taking one set of ideas and playfully executing them in a various mediums. Those familiar with LeWitt's oeuvre have had the pleasure of seeing a number of his ideas appear and reappear in a new medium, in a new scale or context, sometimes decades apart. The generative results are often a surprise and despite their common heritage are usually perceived quite differently.¹⁰

This is the case with *Bars of Colors within Squares*. These ideas were first hatched in March 2002, in a modest drawing by LeWitt that included eighteen variations on the title, for a book project (never realized) for John Kaldor. In April 2002, eight of these designs with the same titles were realized in a series of very large wall drawings at Juana de Aizpuru in Madrid. In 2006 Kaldor published a suite of nine linocuts (17 3/4 x 17 3/4 inches each, in an edition of twenty) drawn from the original eighteen. In *Bars of Color within Squares (MIT)* fifteen of the original eighteen designs are realized on the floor in squares that are approximately eighteen feet by eighteen feet each. It is, essentially, fifteen variations on a theme.¹¹ (Fig. 2)

In his earliest acclaimed work, LeWitt used only black, white, and grey, seeking to reduce the elements to a basic minimum. In the late 1970s, he added red, yellow, and blue, the three primary colors.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

Figure 1

Sol LeWitt

Within a Circle, Lines in Four Directions, 1997

Floor medallion cut marble, diameter 216 inches

Concourse Level Terminal B, Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, Washington, D.C.

Photograph by Saichi Cho

© 2007 Estate of Sol LeWitt/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Figure 2

Sol LeWitt

Bars of Color within Squares (#7), 2002

Acrylic paint

First drawn by: Sachiko Cho, Pia Frade Doriguez, Aurora

Ortega, Rafael Aragon Romero; First installation:

Juana de Aizpuru, Madrid, Spain, April 2002

Photograph Courtesy of Galeria Juana de Aizpuru

© 2007 Estate of Sol LeWitt/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Figures 3 and 4

Sol LeWitt

Bars of Color within Squares (MIT), 2007

Terrazzo Floor, approximately 5,500 square feet

Commissioned with MIT Percent-for-Art Funds for the Physics,

Department of Materials Science and Engineering, and

Spectroscopy Lab Infrastructure Project

Photos by George Bourret

Sometime later came the appearance of other colors, but they were always the result of layering red, yellow, and blue ink washes in various combinations and densities. Only when he switched from ink to acrylic paint in his wall drawings did he add the secondary colors—orange, purple, and green—to his repertoire.¹²

In this installation, the geometric configuration inside each square uses only four of the six primary and secondary colors. The colors of the first two interior bands of its frame are determined by which two of the six colors are missing. Those two “absent” colors are designated for the interior frames. Consequently each square’s total design includes all six primary and complementary colors, bordered in white and suspended in a field of gray. In this way *Bars of Colors within Squares (MIT)* includes aspects of LeWitt’s earliest pioneering work that was most often based wholly on pre-set systems, some elaborate, some eccentric, and some very simple.¹³

The actual sequence of the squares on this floor—just which squares would go where—was apparently a fairly casual decision by the artist.¹⁴ Whether using systems or not, LeWitt always hoped to be surprised by final results. Seen from above, the floor is full of intriguing multi-stable perceptions. These optical illusions, in which the geometric patterns shift ambiguously between flatness and the illusion of depth were not premeditated by the artist, but are the

chance outcome of LeWitt amusing himself with “bars of color within a square,” keeping within whatever parameters he set for himself.

LeWitt’s floor is best appreciated from above. Only from a height can one enjoy the richness and playfulness of the images, and the asymmetries within the symmetries. Even then, one can only encompass the entirety of the project by bringing it together in one’s mind.

The entrance to the atrium is not quickly identified, and the atrium itself is a cul-de-sac, not part of any thoroughfare. This makes LeWitt’s *Bars of Colors within Squares (MIT)* rather like a secret garden, or a vest pocket park. It is a very special space—quite unlike anything else around it—a place in which the willing viewer is likely to become totally absorbed in the environment LeWitt has created. It is soothing and exhilarating at the same time. Visitors who are so inclined may ascend to the top floor where they and those who busily cross the walkways are able to look down and around to enjoy the rhapsodic vistas.

Andrea Miller-Keller

For more information about this project please visit <http://web.mit.edu/lvac/www/percent/lewitt.html>

Endnotes

- 1 Opened in 1927, Buildings 4, 6, and 8 are part of William Welles Bosworth's 1912 original campus plan for MIT. The new Green Center (MIT Building 6C), designed by Payette, opened in 2007, and is connected to the original buildings by new walkways.
- 2 Sol LeWitt, "Sentences on Conceptual Art," *Art-Language* no.1 (May 1969): 11.
- 3 Sol LeWitt and Andrew Wilson, "Sol LeWitt Interviewed," *Art Monthly* 164 (March 1993): 6.
- 4 "Sol LeWitt Interviewed," 6.
- 5 LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* (June 1967): 80.
- 6 LeWitt, "Sentences," 11.
- 7 The team from DePaoli Mosaic Company included Mark Radziewicz, Kevin Campisano, Edmund King, and Edward Sheerin. Michael Wilson, Construction Manager for Payette, also played a key role in the outstanding quality of this installation.
- 8 Ziemann has worked for LeWitt for nearly two decades, first as an apprentice on a wall drawing in 1989 at the age of eighteen; eventually he was given primary responsibility for overseeing many of LeWitt's far-flung three-dimensional commissions. Ziemann had observed workmen in Pennsylvania Station (in New York City) installing a floor design using these materials and described them to LeWitt, thinking they might work well for the MIT commission.
- 9 LeWitt, "Sentences," 11: "Since no form is intrinsically superior to another, the artist may use any form, from an expression of words (written or spoken) to physical reality, equally."
- 10 When LeWitt was doing more system-based work, he often set out to explore "all possible combinations" of a set of variables. His openness to true experimentation is confirmed in his remark that "all possibilities means all possibilities." Using the same idea in various mediums is very much in this spirit.
- 11 LeWitt's further explorations of this same "theme" can be seen in over three dozen wall drawings realized between the years 2002–2004.
- 12 One notable exception is LeWitt's 1981 *Wall Drawing #344*, Six geometric figures in six colors (red, yellow, blue, orange, purple, green). The figures are filled in solid. LeWitt's explanation for this "deviation" at the time: "It is logical and natural to use six colors with six figures. The circle, square and triangle are, to me, more basic than the rectangle, trapezoid and parallelogram, and red, yellow and blue more basic than orange, purple and green." Sol LeWitt and Andrea Miller-Keller, "Excerpts from a Correspondence, 1981–1983," *Sol LeWitt Wall Drawings 1968–1984* (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Stedelijk Museum; Eindhoven, The Netherlands: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum; and Hartford, CT: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1984), 18.
- 13 LeWitt's interest in pre-set limits, systems, and serialism came, in part, out of his interest in Eadweard Muybridge's rapid-fire, time-lapse photographic studies of animal locomotion.
- 14 Conversation with Jeremy Ziemann, 21 August 2007.

Sol LeWitt's work has been the subject of hundreds of solo exhibitions in museums and galleries and is in major collections worldwide. He has been the subject of retrospective exhibitions at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York (1978); the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands (1984); the Tate Gallery, London, United Kingdom (1986); and Kunsthalle, Bern, Switzerland (1989). Another major retrospective, organized in 2000 by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California, traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois, and to the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York. Yale University Art Gallery and Mass MoCA jointly are organizing *Sol LeWitt: A Wall Drawing Retrospective*, an exhibition for 2008 that includes more than fifty of LeWitt's Wall Drawings. In conjunction with this exhibition, Yale University Art Gallery is co-publishing, with Yale University Press, the catalogue raisonné of Wall Drawings, edited by Susanna Singer, which is scheduled for publication in 2009.

Andrea Miller-Keller was the Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut from 1969 to 1998. As part of the original MATRIX program at the Atheneum, she organized numerous exhibitions on contemporary art including first one-person museum shows for such artists as Janine Antoni, Daniel Buren, Stan Douglas, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, Glenn Ligon, Cady Noland, Adrian Piper, Lorna Simpson, Richard Tuttle, and many others.

Miller-Keller received an NEA Museum Professional's Fellowship in 1992–93 and the Norton Family Curator's Grant in 1995. She is the co-author of *Sol LeWitt: Twenty-Five Years of Wall Drawings*. In 1996 Miller-Keller was United States Commissioner to the 23rd International Bienal, São Paulo, Brazil, presenting *Of Sun and Stars: Sol LeWitt Wall Drawings*. She also was a co-curator of the Whitney Biennial 2000 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York, and a co-author of the San Francisco MOMA publication, *Sol LeWitt A Retrospective*.

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 tile 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, which was designed by Steven Holl Architects; Jorge Pardo's untitled ceiling for MIT's graduate residence at 224 Albany Street, designed by S/L/A/M Collaborative; 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, designed by Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo Associates.

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, and Isaac Witkin.

Sol LeWitt was selected as the artist for the Physics, DMSE, Spectroscopy, Infrastructure Project by an art committee that included Marc Kastner, Head, Department of Physics; Samuel Allen, Professor, Department of Materials Sciences and Engineering; Washington Taylor, Professor of Physics; Virginia Esau, Physics Space and Renovation Manager; Marc Jones, Assistant Dean, School of Science; Jim Collins of Payette; John Hawes, Senior Project Manager, MIT Facilities Department; and Jane Farver, Director of the MIT List Visual Arts Center.

We also thank Susanna Singer of Susanna Singer Inc. and Charles Klee of Payette for their assistance.

MIT List Visual Arts Center

Wiesner Building, E15-109
20 Ames Street
Cambridge, MA 02139

Tel: 617.253.4400
Fax: 617.258.7265
<http://web.mit.edu/lvac>

Cover: Sol LeWitt
Bars of Color within Squares (MIT), 2007
Terrazzo Floor, approximately 5,500 square feet
Commissioned with MIT Percent-for-Art Funds for the Physics,
Department of Materials Science and Engineering, and
Spectroscopy Lab Infrastructure Project
Photo by George Bouret