

## Sol LeWitt\_Conceptual Art\_Book Art

By Regine Rapp

The American artist Sol LeWitt (1928 - 2007) was a formative figure in Minimal art and is considered one of the most important representatives as well as the co-founder of American Conceptual art. The term "Conceptual art" arises directly from LeWitt, who in his so-called "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" and "Sentences on Conceptual Art" created a substantial impetus in the contemporary art discourse:

"The idea itself, even if not made visual, is as much a work of art as any finished product. All intervening steps –scribbles, sketches, drawings, failed works, models, studies, thoughts, conversations– are of interest. Those that show the thought process of the artist are sometimes more interesting than the final product." (Paragraphs on Conceptual Art, Artforum, Juni 1967)

In LeWitt's objects, wall paintings and drawings, the concept of the work stood on par with its form and material. He was fascinated by the phenomenon of analytical variations of forms and shapes, but he was even more interested in the infinite multitude of systems of order.

LeWitt's visual conception has close links with Minimal art, but LeWitt goes a step further: He stresses the serial structure and considers the *idea* as the essential part of an artistic work. Whether an object in a space (LeWitt preferred the term "structures"), wall drawings, or in his artist books - the idea was always more important than its physical elaboration. This is the pivotal moment of Conceptual art - the dematerialization of art, its disengagement from the physical work.

The first conceptual art exhibition *Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to Be Viewed as Art* was curated in 1966 by Mel Bochner. In addition to Dan Flavin, Carl Andre and Eva Hesse, there were also contributions by Sol LeWitt. The exhibition includes drawings, sketches and notes, which, as copies and collages, were laid out in a large black folder on a white pedestal in the middle of an empty space. In looking through and reflecting on the voluminous folder the "work" already existed as an intellectual process.

This describes very vividly how LeWitt, in this period, made the transition from the object based and abstract visual dimension of Minimalism to the purely intellectual reception of a Conceptual art work. Although his work had not completely dematerialized, it passed more and more into text form: the combinative structure of alphabet, letter, drawing. The visualized object receives its central significance in his intellectual imagination.

"I became interested in making books, starting about 1965, when I did the *Serial Project #1*, deciding that I needed a small book to show how the work could be understood and how the system worked. From that time I began to do books as works in themselves, not as catalogues... Buying books was a way anyone could acquire a work of art for very little." (Sol LeWitt, im Interview mit S. Ostrow, Bomb Magazine No. 85, 2003)

The reasons why Sol LeWitt and his colleagues from the mid-60s turned to the artist book as a new medium are diverse: for instance, there was a need of Conceptual art (as well as the

Minimal and Land Art) to break out of the conservative art market. The book serves as an ideal medium for extending the realm of traditional presentation in the exhibition space. In addition, Sol LeWitt and his colleagues discovered the non-hierarchical and mobile moment in the artist book genre, a large circulation and low-cost production could be acquired by large public and viewed in any location.

An example of the importance of these considerations to Sol LeWitt, was the "Printed Matter" project: With his close friend, the writer and art historian Lucy Lippard and other colleagues, Sol LeWitt founded "Printed Matters" in New York in 1976, which remains until today one of the world's most important institutions for art books and publications.

The intensive book production of Sol LeWitt proves to be extremely versatile: Different presentations and formats appear in different techniques as well as in varying material aesthetics. From color lithography to offset printing in black and white, from the small Octavo notebook to the leporello. Finally, for Sol LeWitt, the phenomenon of reproducibility was part of the concept: "Also, since art is a vehicle for the transmission of ideas through form, the reproduction of the form only reinforces the concept. It is the idea that is being reproduced."(ibid.)

In Sol LeWitt's case his bibliophile production functions not only as a visual studies for his structures and wall drawings, they can be much better understood and regarded as autonomous works. His early art books resemble 'sketches of concepts', which are dominated by sketches and explained with text (*Serial Project # 1*, 1967). From the late 70's, colored and graphic systems of geometric shapes (*Geometric Figures & Color*, 1979) are evident in his books. At that time he also began to produce artists' books that are not based on drawing or text, but only on photographs (*Photogrids*, 1977, or *Autobiography* in 1980, to *Chicago* 2002). He retained the 'sketches of concepts' in his artist books into the 90s (*The Cube*, 1990, or *Bands of Color*, 1999).

### **Sol LeWitt - an interdisciplinary approach**

The Sol LeWitt\_Symposium on 19 and 20 February, 2011 can be understood as a theoretical layer parallel to the exhibition. Study of the exhibited book objects should open into a discussion of the artist book genre (bibliophile production, reproducibility, formal composition, the book as object, etc.). On this basis, it is interesting to discuss contributions from various disciplines about specific phenomena in Sol LeWitt: themes & variations, seriality, graphic and spatial signs, book vs. space, imagery and textuality, pure phenomena of the medium(line, area, object, room) vs. synthesis of media (book, object, photography, film), idea vs. artwork, etc.

From a mathematical viewpoint, in Sol LeWitt's work, the geometric shape is the center of the debate. As a leitmotif he sets the cube as a grammatical sign at the center of his geometric vocabulary. How did Sol LeWitt visualize this and develop it further? Geometric formal elements are not only characteristic of the 'sketches of concepts' in his artists' books, but also building a structure for the work in space.

With contributions from the fields of art history, literature, philosophy, music, science and mathematics as well as the visual arts, it is the wish of Art Laboratory Berlin to present a comprehensive picture of the artistic theory and practice of Sol LeWitt.

*Translated from the German by Christian de Lutz*