

On the trail of Sol LeWitt

A pilgrim might need a car, but the artist's works to be seen around New England will enrich the soul

By Sebastian Smee
GLOBE STAFF

It is perhaps the most famous art pilgrimage in Europe - an itinerary that for quivering aesthetes can crystallize a life's purpose and meaning in the same way a pilgrimage to Mecca can for Muslims.

I'm talking, of course, about the Piero della Francesca trail. This tour of the great Renaissance artist's best-known works in Tuscany takes in the towns of Arezzo, Sansepolcro (the artist's birthplace), Anghiari, Monterchi, and Urbino.

Does New England, you might ask, have an artist whose work can be seen in this way, as part of a picturesque tour, a rambling road trip?

You bet it does. His name is Sol LeWitt.

LeWitt was born Solomon LeWitt in Hartford, in 1928. He died in 2007. Renowned as one of the foremost figures in Minimalism, a movement that sprang up in the mid-1960s, and a father, too, of Conceptual art ("The idea," he famously said, "is the machine that makes the work"), he is best known for his wall drawings.

These begin as simple sets of instructions to be carried out by others. For instance, "All two-part combinations of lines in four directions, progressively placed in two rows of three within a rectangle." That's "Wall Drawing #8."

For a period, especially in the '70s, LeWitt often left a lot of room for interpretation in these instructions. Even when he didn't, he recognized (and welcomed) the fact that, as he put it, "Each person draws a line differently and each person understands words differently."

...No one can do the same thing twice."

For LeWitt, this was part of the point. His instructions, as commentators have pointed out, bore the same relationship to the executed work as a composer's score does to the actual music.

In some ways, LeWitt's art, which also included sculpture and printmaking, was dauntingly cool and objective. He sought, as LeWitt scholar Veronica Roberts has said, "to eliminate the arbitrary, the capricious, and the subjective as much as possible."

But the strange paradox, for an art so built on impersonal logic, is just how beautiful, whimsical, surprising, and humanly endearing LeWitt's work really is.

Certainly museums around New England have long been in love with the artist. A LeWitt wall drawing in the foyer or in a stairwell is almost de rigueur for any self-respecting New England museum. But other public institutions, from synagogues and courthouses to colleges and cancer hospitals, are no less immune.

In 2008, the year after LeWitt died, the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams opened a stupendous, 30,000-square-foot retrospective of his wall drawings. It will remain in place for at least 21 more years. It is the Mecca, the 14th station, of what the Globe hereby dubs the "Sol LeWitt



Wall Drawing #905 by Sol LeWitt at the Mohawk Trail Regional High School in Shelburne Falls.



Wall Drawings #1005 and #999 at MASS MoCA in North Adams

Trail." Every Sol LeWitt Trail pilgrim should wind up in North Adams.

But to do this thing properly, you really need to start in Connecticut, where LeWitt was born, and then wend your way through Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Maine. (Others say you could just as well start with the large LeWitt installations at Dia:Beacon, in Beacon, NY. We have no opinion on that, since it's not part of New England).

As you can see, the list of LeWitt sites, while not exhaustive, is long. It is probably unrealistic to attempt to see them all in one trip. So think of the Sol LeWitt Trail as equivalent to the famous Way of St. James, a pilgrimage in Western Europe that ends up at Santiago de Compostela. Modern pilgrims and tourists who follow that trail usually break it up into legs, and do it over many years. We don't mind if you think of the Sol LeWitt Trail in the same way. We also don't mind if you take a car.

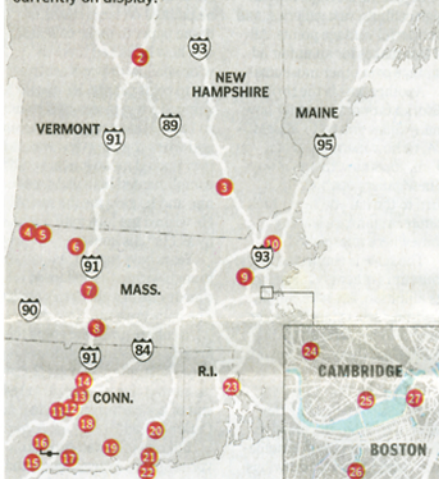
This fall is a great time to begin such a pilgrimage. Not only for the foliage, but because two first-rate temporary LeWitt shows have just opened. One, "Something Along These Lines," is a group show hinging on a single LeWitt wall drawing ("Wall Drawing #118") at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The other, "Sol LeWitt: the Well-Tempered Grid," is a hefty exhibition at Williams College Museum of Art in Williamstown (down the road from Mass MoCA in North Adams).

That said, if you wait until January, you will have the chance to see several more LeWitt pieces that are set to open at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art in Providence and Smith College Museum of Art in Northampton; later in the year, several more will also be on view at Colby College Museum of Art in Maine.

You decide. But here are the sites you will want to see.

Sol LeWitt in New England

Tracking many of the places where work by artist Sol LeWitt is currently on display:



WD = wall drawing

- 1 Seven Walls, and WD #250, Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine
- 2 WD #655, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, N.H.
- 3 WD #1255, Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, N.H.
- 4 WD #959, Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown
- 5 Sol LeWitt: A Wall Drawing Retrospective, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams
- 6 WD #905, Mohawk Trail Regional High School, Shelburne Falls
- 7 WD #139, Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton
- 8 WD #1259, Springfield Federal Courthouse, Springfield
- 9 Tower (DC), DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln
- 10 WD #713, Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover
- 11 WD #1196, The New Britain Museum, New Britain, Conn.
- 12 WD #1105, Dakile building, 61 Columbus Blvd., New Britain, Conn.
- 13 WD #849, Vernon Social Center, Trinity College, Hartford
- 14 WD #1131, The Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford
- 15 WD #692, Smilow Cancer Hospital, New Haven
- 16 WD #614, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven
- 17 WD #78A, Yale University, McNeil Lecture Hall, New Haven
- 18 WD #1072, Wesleyan University Math Department, Middletown, Conn.
- 19 Congregation Beth Shalom Rodfe Zedek Synagogue and Ark, Chester, Conn.
- 20 WD #1010, Three Rivers Community College, Norwich, Conn.
- 21 WD #1102, Crocker House, New London, Conn.
- 22 Irregular progression, Mitchell College, New London, Conn.
- 23 WD #327, Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art, Providence (coming January 2013)
- 24 WD #830, Sackler Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge
- 25 Bars of color within squares, Green Building, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge
- 26 One-Two-One with two Half off, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
- 27 WD #1128, 100 Cambridge Street, Boston

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