

# The writing on the wall

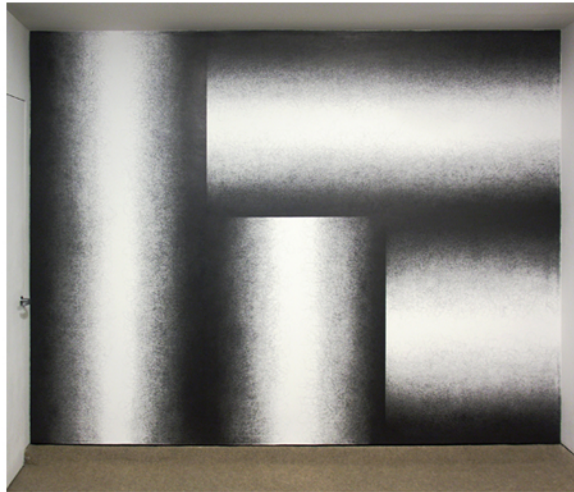
## Embracing the legacy of Sol LeWitt, Mass MoCA fills a 3-story building with shapes, swirls, lines, and colors

### SOL LEWITT: A WALL DRAWING RETROSPECTIVE

At: Mass MoCA  
87 Marshall Street,  
North Adams, Massachusetts  
413-662-2111,  
massmoca.org

Opens Nov. 16, 2008  
11:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m. closed Tuesday

By Geoff Edgers  
GLOBE STAFF



Sol LeWitt  
Wall Drawing #1212, 2006  
Black Pencil  
96 3/4 x 128 1/2 inches  
First drawn by: Ben Chaffee,  
and Jesse Good  
First installation: Barbara  
Krakow Gallery, Boston,  
MA, August 2006

**NORTH ADAMS** - A few months ago, in a cavernous new gallery space at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, Lacey Fekishazy took out a pencil and began to draw on a white wall.

Nobody bothered the Brooklyn artist. After all, she was doing her job, which was to create a Sol LeWitt wall drawing. The subtitle - "Ten thousand lines about 10" (25cm) long, covering the wall evenly" - pretty much described the task. Each day, ruler in hand, Fekishazy added to the piece, 10 inches at a time.

"I HAVE DRAWN 5,000 LINES!!!!!" she wrote on a sheet of scrap paper taped nearby after four days of work. When it was over, after day eight, Fekishazy spoke of the surprising pleasure she took from the process, which rendered the wall a mesmerizing sea of cross-hatched marks.

"I found it really meditative and calming," she said.

This month, the work of Fekishazy and 68 others brought in by Mass MoCA last summer will open to the public: a sprawling, unprecedented retrospective of the late LeWitt's wall drawings. This 105-work project, created according to specifications set out by the Conceptual master, covers three floors, nearly 30,000 square feet, and four decades of the artist's work. Mass MoCA's Building

7, formerly an abandoned mill building, was renovated especially for the show at a cost of roughly \$5 million. The exhibition, created through an unorthodox collaboration with the Yale University Art Gallery, Williams College Museum of Art, and LeWitt estate, will remain up for at least 25 years, until 2033.

For LeWitt fans, the project serves as a vast embrace of the artist's legacy and a new destination for a wall-drawing pilgrimage. For those less familiar with LeWitt, the installation is an eye-opening introduction, showcasing the dry humor of some of his early pencil drawings, the pulsating colors of his later paint and ink-wash creations, and the deceptively complex textures and almost trompe-l'oeil quality of his final graphite works.

"What becomes clear is that Sol was interested in making beautiful things," said Mass MoCA director Joseph C. Thompson during a recent walk through Building 7. "They're exquisite. You can feel human touch right through them."

#### A maze of creation

It is hard to stay in one place for long within the LeWitt installation. Each piece leads to another, every corner revealing the next sprawling creation. You are drawn in, as if visiting a multihued version of an English hedge maze. At different moments, you're surrounded by

geometric shapes, swirls, and blinding colors.

Before he died last year, LeWitt designed the entire exhibit's layout, with new internal walls that stand in contrast to the aged brick structure that surrounds them. He didn't want stanchions keeping viewers away from the works - which, while making Mass MoCA's leaders a bit jittery, creates an intimacy and flow for the show.

Why Mass MoCA? For LeWitt, a Hartford native whose art has been exhibited at some of the most prestigious institutions around the world, from New York's Museum of Modern Art to (Cont. pg 2) London's Tate Modern, Mass MoCA offered something many other institutions could not: space. At 16 acres, Mass MoCA has the largest campus of any contemporary museum in the United States, with a series of buildings once occupied by the Sprague Electric Co.

Jock Reynolds, director of the Yale University Art Gallery, was key to making the connection. In 1993, Reynolds, then director of the Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy, staged an important exhibit of LeWitt wall drawings. When the show ended the walls were whitewashed, as was typical for such a LeWitt exhibition.

There was a certain sadness, but I never felt a sense of desperation," said Reynolds by phone. "I was quietly confident that we'd have more chance to work together."

BARBARA

KRAKOW GALLERY

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Around 2001, LeWitt began treatments for the cancer that, six years later, would kill him. Facing his mortality, the artist, whose sense of artistic adventure had always been matched by his playfully self-deprecatory view of his own work, began to get serious. How, he wondered, would he maintain his legacy? The impermanent nature of his wall drawings, something he'd encouraged, appeared in conflict with the notion of an archive.

Reynolds made a suggestion: What about Mass MoCA? Thompson, a friend of Reynolds, loved the idea. He hosted LeWitt for a nearly six-hour visit in 2003. Not long afterward, the artist sent along a proposal.

"We have space and time and access to interns and housing, and we make art here," said Thompson. "It was a good fit. Sol's response was that a good idea like this would be hard to screw up."

### Follow directions

LeWitt began creating wall drawings in the late '60s. A response to the color-splashed Pop Art movement, the works were creations of geometric possibility, with more than a splash of humor. The directions for installing the pieces were generally in the subtitles. For example, 1970's "Wall Drawing 56" includes the following subtitle: "A square is divided horizontally and vertically into four equal parts, each with lines in four directions superimposed progressively."

LeWitt's idea was that anybody could create the work by following directions. In this sense, he helped pioneer the Conceptual notion that the idea of an artwork is the most important aspect of the piece, not its temporal manifestation. Works would then be executed the way an orchestra might perform a symphony. And each time, a piece would not necessarily be the same. Much depended on the technique, from how lightly or darkly lines might be drawn to an installer's preferences following directions. By giving his installers freedom, LeWitt turned what could have been a paint-by-the-numbers exercise into something more collaborative.

"The key to keeping you interested is the room that Sol leaves between the instructions and the complete piece," said Tomas Ramberg, a LeWitt installer for a decade who served as one of the leaders of the Mass MoCA project. "You get to sort of feel like you're the one doing it."

Ramberg described a typical working process with LeWitt. "We would get a plan from Sol and look at it and try to make sense of it," he said. "Sol would see it and refine his description of what he was after." For the late-period pencil sketches, other than the shapes LeWitt dictated, "the only thing he knew was he wanted scribble gradations from 0 to 6. Zero being white and six being completely closed up."

If LeWitt didn't like the result, he would offer more instruction, Ramberg recalled: "It needs to look more like corrugated steel," he might say.

Creating the wall drawings can be mentally taxing. In the past, Ramberg says, he has watched as installers left at the end of a day and never returned. That didn't happen at Mass MoCA. That's partly because this summer, there was the camaraderie of the team. Over the summer, as work progressed, the installers - all of them artists in their own right - taped pages of humorous messages ("Attn: Bugs, NO Dying on the Wall!!! TAKE YOUR DEATH ELSEWHERE") and R. Crumb-like cartoons on the brick walls of Building 7.

They shared rented apartments in town and blasted music in the space as they worked. Nick Kozak, a sculptor from the Hudson Valley, created Wall Drawing 38, a three-panel piece that required rolling up dozens of 1-inch-long slivers of colored paper to be inserted into pegboard holes. His secret weapon? Breaks.

"It's very relaxing in a way because you have an idea of what's going on and what's expected," he said. "But you always need to take a step back."

Or, as Fekishazy said, "On the most frustrating days, when it gets hot and the colored leads can get soft and break, you at least know that it'll be over someday."

Many of the workers left in August, and the rest were gone by the end of Sep-

tember. That left Mass MoCA to get ready for the Nov. 16 opening and surrounding events.

Composer Steve Reich, a longtime LeWitt friend, will be on hand the night before, playing at a small private party for project supporters and LeWitt's widow, Carol.

In a phone interview from New York, Reich talked first of LeWitt's generosity toward others. The artist was famous for helping artists and musicians who needed support. Reich remembers LeWitt coming to visit him in 1971, at a time when Reich needed to purchase three glockenspiels, which he couldn't afford.

"Sol said, 'I'd like to buy one of your scores,'" said Reich. "I didn't drop a beat, and said, 'What would you like?' Sol didn't need my score. He just decided he admired what I was doing and knew I could use the help financially."

Reich calls the Mass MoCA project a "fantastic undertaking."

"Sol is a great artist of the 20th and 21st century, and wall drawings are one of his major contributions," he said. "Sol deserves it."

Thompson, the museum's director, agrees. While touring the space, he showed off his favorites, including "Wall Drawing 880," a 70-foot-long swirl of intertwined bright green and orange.

"The edges buzz and vibrate," he said. "As you look at it, your eyes begin to flicker. You can feel Sol with his finger right in your rib cage."

Thompson said raising money for the LeWitt project, not only for the renovation but for an archivist who will work out of Yale and an endowment to operate Building 7, was easier than he expected. He considers the project a model for other long-term, single-artist installations that Mass MoCA might stage to augment the museum's regular slate of changing exhibits.

Walking through the newly renovated space, Thompson pointed through a window, across a courtyard, to Building 6. Abandoned long ago, it sits empty.

"There's room right over there."

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