

Sol LeWitt, Master of Conceptualism, Dies at 78

By Michael Kimmelman

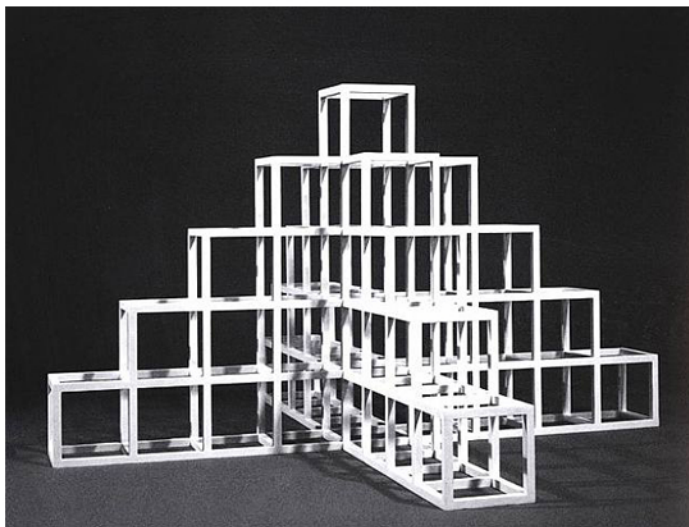
Sol LeWitt, whose deceptively simple geometric sculptures and drawings and ecstatically colored and jazzy wall paintings established him as a lodestar of modern American art, died yesterday in New York. He was 78 and lived mostly in Chester, Conn.

The cause was complications from cancer, said Susanna Singer, a longtime associate.

Mr. LeWitt helped establish Conceptualism and Minimalism as dominant movements of the postwar era. A patron and friend of colleagues young and old, he was the opposite of the artist as celebrity. He tried to suppress all interest in him as opposed to his work; he turned down awards and was camera-shy and reluctant to grant interviews. He particularly disliked the prospect of having his photograph in the newspaper.

Typically, a 1980 work called "Autobiography" consisted of more than 1,000 photographs he took of every nook and cranny of his Manhattan loft, down to the plumbing fixtures, wall sockets and empty marmalade jars, and documented everything that had happened to him in the course of taking the pictures. But he appeared in only one photograph, which was so small and out of focus that it is nearly impossible to make him out. His work - sculptures of white cubes, or drawings of geometric patterns, or splashes of paint like Rorschach patterns - tested a viewer's psychological and visual flexibility. See a line. See that it can be straight, thin, broken, curved, soft, angled or thick. Enjoy the differences. The test was not hard to pass if your eyes and mind were open, which was the message of Mr. LeWitt's art.

He reduced art to a few of the most basic shapes (quadrilaterals, spheres, triangles), colors (red,



yellow, blue, black) and types of lines, and organized them by guidelines he felt in the end free to bend. Much of what he devised came down to specific ideas or instructions: a thought you were meant to contemplate, or plans for drawings or actions that could be carried out by you, or not.

Sometimes these plans derived from a logical system, like a game; sometimes they defied logic so that the results could not be foreseen, with instructions intentionally vague to allow for interpretation. Characteristically, he would then credit assistants or others with the results. With his wall drawing, mural-sized works that sometimes took teams of people weeks to execute, he might decide whether a line for which he had given the instruction "not straight" was sufficiently irregular without becoming wavy (and like many more traditional artists, he became more concerned in later years that his works look just the way he wished.) But he always gave his team wiggle room, believing that the input of others - their joy, boredom, frustration or whatever - remained part of the art.

In doing so, Mr. LeWitt gently reminded everybody that architects are called artists - good architects, anyway - even though they don't lay their own bricks, just as composers write music that other people play but are still musical artists. Mr. LeWitt, by his methods, permitted other people to participate in the creative process, to become artists themselves.

A Dry Humor

To grasp his work could require a little effort. His early sculptures were chaste white cubes and gray cement blocks. For years people associated him with them, and they seemed to encapsulate a remark he once made:

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that what art looks like “isn’t too important.” This was never exactly his point. But his early drawings on paper could resemble mathematical diagrams or chemical charts. What passed for humor in his art tended to be dry. “Buried Cube Containing an Object of Importance but Little Value” (1968), an object he buried in the garden of Dutch collectors, was his deadpan gag about waving goodbye to Minimalism. He documented it in photographs, in one of which he stands at attention beside the cube. A second picture shows the shovel; a third, him digging the hole.

Naturally, he was regularly savaged by conservative critics. By the 1980s, however, he moved from Manhattan to Spoleto, Italy, seeking to get away from the maelstrom of the New York art world. (He had had a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1978.) His art underwent a transformation. Partly it grew out of what he saw in Italy. But it was all the more remarkable for also proceeding logically from the earlier work.

Eye-candy opulence emerged from the same seemingly prosaic instructions he had come up with years before. A retrospective in 2000, organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, which traveled to the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, concluded with some of these newly colorful wall drawings. (Mr. LeWitt always called them drawings, even when the medium became acrylic paint.)

His description for a wall drawing, No. 766 - “Twenty-one isometric cubes of varying sizes each with color ink washes superimposed” - sounded dry as could be: but then you saw it and there were playful geometries in dusky colors nodding toward Renaissance fresco painting. “Loopy Doopy (Red and Purple),” a vinyl abstraction 49 feet long, was like a psychedelic Matisse cutout, but on the scale of a drive-in movie. Other drawings consisted of gossamer lines, barely visible, as subtle as faintly etched glasses.



Librado Romero/The New York Times

Sol LeWitt's "Wall Drawing No. 752" was part of a retrospective of his work at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2000.

Some people who had presumed that Mr. LeWitt's Conceptualism was arcane and inert were taken aback. He began making colored flagstone patterns, spiky sculptural blobs and ribbons of color, like streamers on New Year's Eve, often as enormous decorations for buildings around the world. It was as if he had devised a latter-day kind of Abstract Expressionism, to which, looking back, his early Conceptualism had in fact been his response.

Sol LeWitt was born in Hartford, on Sept. 9 1928, the son of immigrants from Russia. His father, a doctor, died when he was 6, after which he moved with his mother, a nurse, to live with an aunt in New Britain, Conn. His mother took him to art classes at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. He would draw on wrapping paper from his aunt's supply store.

Finding His Way

At Syracuse University, he studied art before he was drafted for the Korean War in 1951, during which he made poster for the Special Services. After his service he moved to New York to study illustration and cartooning. For a while he did paste-ups, mechanicals and photostats for Seventeen magazine. He spent a year as a graphic designer in the office of a young architect named I.M. Pei.

Meanwhile, he painted, or tried to. For a while, he hired a model to draw from life and copied old masters. He felt lost. An aspiring artist in New York during the waning days of Abstract Expressionism, an art squarely about individual touch, he thought he had no particular touch of his own and therefore nothing to add.

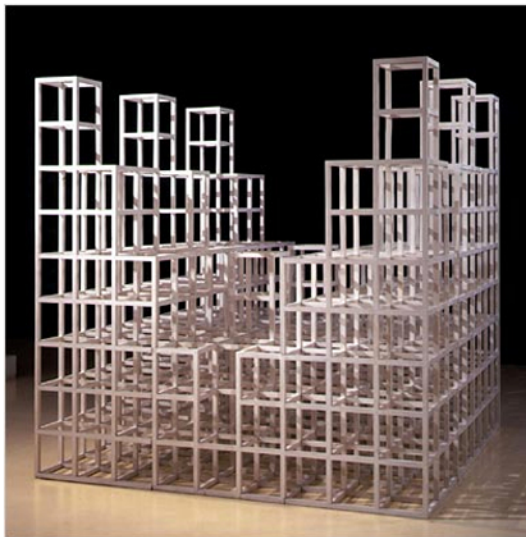
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But then he took a job at the book counter at the Museum of Modern Art, where he met other young artists with odd jobs there, including Dan Flavin, Robert Ryman and Robert Mangold. He noticed the nascent works of Flavin and also absorbed early art by Jasper Johns and Frank Stella. Minimalism, a yet-unnamed movement, seemed like a fresh start. Mr. LeWitt was meanwhile intrigued by Russian Constructivism, with its engineering aesthetic, and by Eadweard Muybridge's photographs, sequential pictures of people and animals in motion, which he came across one day in a book that somebody had left in his apartment. From all this he saw a way forward. It was to go backward.

He decided to reduce art to its essentials, "to recreate art, to start from square one," he said, beginning literally with squares and cubes. But unlike some strict Minimalists, Mr. LeWitt was not interested in industrial materials. He was focused on systems and concepts - volume, transparency, sequences, variations, stasis, irregularity and so on - which he expressed in words that might or might not be translated into actual sculptures or photographs or drawings. To him, ideas were what counted.

At the time, linguistic theorists were talking about words and mental concepts as signs and signifiers. Mr. LeWitt was devising what you might call his own grammar and syntax of cubes and spheres, a personal theory of visual signs. It was theoretical, but not strictly mathematical. Partly it was poetic. He began with propositions for images, which became something else if they were translated into physical form by him or other people.

He also like the inherent impermanence of Conceptual art, maybe because it dovetailed with his lack of pretense: having started to make wall drawings for exhibitions in the 1960s, he embraced the fact that these could be painted over after the shows. (Walls, unlike canvases or pieces of paper, kept the drawings two-dimensional, he also thought.) He wasn't making precious one-of-a-kind objects for



"Inverted Six Towers" (1987)

PaceWildenstein, New York

posterity, he said. Objects are perishable. But ideas need not be.

"Conceptual art is not necessarily logical," he wrote in an article in Artforum magazine in 1967. "The ideas need not be complex. Most ideas that are successful are ludicrously simple. Successful ideas generally have the appearance of simplicity because they seem inevitable."

Relishing Collaboration

To the extent that Mr. LeWitt's work existed in another person's mind, he regarded it as collaborative. Along these lines he became especially well known in art circles for his generosity, often showing with young artists in small galleries to give them a boost; helping to found Printed Matter, the artists' organization that produces artists' books; and trading works with other, often needier artists, whose art he also bought. Some years back he placed part of what had become, willy-nilly through this process, one of the great private collections of contemporary art in the country on long-term loan to the Wadsworth Atheneum, his childhood museum and the one that again was in his neighborhood after he moved, in the mid-'80s, from Spoleto to Chester. He lived there with his wife, Carol, who survives him, along with their two daughters, Sofia, who lives in New York and works at the Paula Cooper Gallery, and Eva, a senior at Bard College.

It was said that Mr. LeWitt didn't like vacations. His pleasure was being in his studio. He explained that he had worked out his life as he wanted it to be, so why take a vacation from it?

To the sculptor Eva Hesse, he once wrote a letter while she was living in

and at a point when her work was at an impasse. "Stop it and just DO," he advised her. "Try and tickle something inside you, your 'weird humor.' You belong in the most secret part of you. Don't worry about cool, make your own uncool." He added: "You are not responsible for the world - you are only responsible for your work, so do it. And don't think that your work has to conform to any idea or flavor. It can be anything you want it to be."

Gary Garrels, a curator who organized Mr. LeWitt's retrospective for San Francisco in 2000, said: "He didn't dictate. He accepted contradiction and paradox, the inconclusiveness of logic."

He took an idea as far as he thought it could go, then tried to find a way to proceed, so that he was never satisfied with a particular result but saw each work as a proposition opening onto a fresh question. Asked about the switch he made in the 1980's - adding ink washes, which permitted him new colors, along with curves and free forms - Mr. LeWitt responded, "Why not?"

He added, "A life in art is an unimaginable and unpredictable experience."

