

BOMB

Sol LeWitt

Author(s): Saul Ostrow and Sol LeWitt

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saul ostrow **Sol LeWitt**



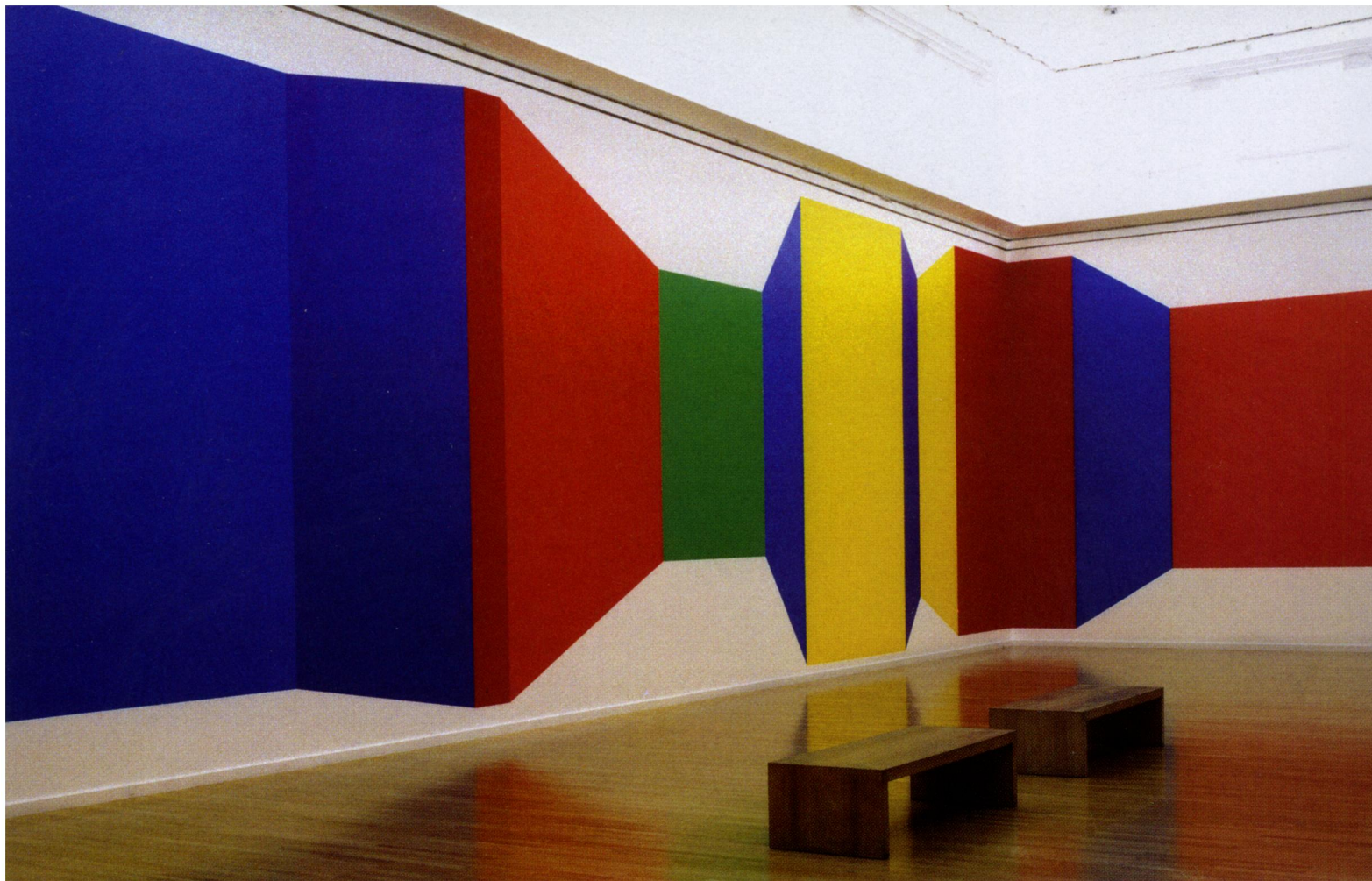


INTERVIEWING SOL LEWITT required a ride into the Connecticut countryside, where he lives with his wife and daughters. Many of the artists associated with Minimalism fled contemporary art's urban setting as soon as they could. This set me to thinking about the nature of Minimalism and the complex and often paradoxical role that LeWitt's work plays in its development.

One of the interesting things about living through a period is that you know where the neat and tidy hindsight of recorded history and the happenstance of the moment diverge. I have known LeWitt since my days as an art student in New York in the '60s. At that time he was one of the hard core of Minimalist artists that included the sculptors Donald Judd, Dan Flavin and Robert Smithson as well as the painters Jo Baer, Robert Ryman and Robert Mangold. Their works were characterized by an austere industrial aesthetic and reductivism that made their pieces seem highly impersonal, intellectual and urban. Yet as LeWitt moved from making systemic objects to wall drawings and eventually what can only be called murals, his use of plans, diagrams and instructions emphasized the ideas that circumscribed his work and the nature of those decisions that constitute an artist's taste and aesthetic vision—or in LeWitt's case, those of the people hired to execute his work.

LeWitt's work calls our attention to the disparity between the world of language and that of objects and actions. By focusing on the disjunction between these terms, LeWitt bridged the gap between Minimalism and Conceptual art. As an artist he is intent on both making art just another object in the world and seeking to dematerialize it. Although LeWitt's work of the last 20 years is still premised on the tension that exists between what can be said and what can be shown, the murals, wall drawings and sculptures he now produces are increasingly eccentric in form and individualistic in execution. After lunch at a café in town and a visit to the local synagogue that he designed and the warehouse where he stores his vast collection, Sol LeWitt and I retired to the comfort of his living room to excavate the past and shed light on the present.

Left: Sol LeWitt, *Web-like Grid*, 2001, gouache on paper, 60 1/2 x 88".
Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.
All images © Sol LeWitt. Unless otherwise noted, all photos courtesy of the artist.



Sol LeWitt, *Wall Drawing #1081: Planes of Color*. Kunstsammlungen, Chemnitz, Germany, March 2003.

sa **ostrow** Was there a relationship between your thinking about art and John Cage's composition, his scoring of chance? It seems that Cage was a pivotal figure to many artists of the late '50s early '60s.

sol **lewitt** The early '60s was a pivotal time. The thinking of John Cage derived from Duchamp and Dada. I was not interested in that. My thinking derived from Muybridge and the idea of seriality, from music. I thought Dada was basically perceptual, relying on the often outraged response of the viewer. Pop art was a legacy of this. I was not interested in irony; I wanted to emphasize the primacy of the idea in making art. My interest, starting around 1965, was in building conceptual systems, which grew out of Minimalism. Basically it was a repudiation of Duchampian aesthetics.

so I'm asking because Cage gave the performers of his later pieces nothing more than instructions, as you did in your instruction pieces. The idea seems to go from Cage to the Fluxists and from there to the Minimalists and then the Conceptualists.

sl The Fluxists' conceptualism, which predated mine, was influenced by Duchamp. My thinking was a reaction to theirs. As far as Minimalism goes, I don't think it existed as an idea at all. It was only a stylistic reaction to the rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism. It was self-defeating, because simplicity of form could only go so far. It ended once the simplest form was achieved—exemplified by Robert Morris's installation of polyhedrons at Green Gallery in 1964, or Rauschenberg's white paintings, though of course Robert Ryman can still do white paintings of great depth and inspiration. In my case, I used the elements of these simple forms—square, cube, line and color—to produce logical systems. Most of these systems were finite; that is, they were complete using all possible variations. This kept them simple.

so Could we go back a minute and talk about the difference between Ryman and Donald Judd? On the one hand, with Ryman, there is an endless series of series, as opposed to Judd, who systematizes an endless series of variations.

sl They were reactions to the dead end of Minimalism. One was the use of new materials. Judd with plywood and galvanized metal, and Flavin, with fluorescent tubes, did this. They systematized, as you said, an endless series of variations; think of Flavin's Tatlin pieces. Both used serial systems as well, Judd in his progression pieces and Flavin in his *Nominal Three*, for example. The other response to Minimalism was the idea of process, the simple act of painting. Ryman is the prime example of this.

so Where do you find yourself in that spectrum?

sl I was involved in both the idea and the object, not in the use of new materials or the process of action. The use of serial ideas became my vocabulary, which by using basic forms made a process of ideas.

so Once you start working serially, a certain amount of decision-making is being deferred. Say in the case of your wall drawings, which existed as a set of instructions. Giving the script over to someone else is adding



another variable to the formula and has been interpreted as an attempt either to de-aestheticize the work or at least to distance the artist from the results so that it wouldn't be about the artist's taste. I once did one of your wall drawings myself. You sent me a set of instructions that read, "Using pencil, draw 1,000 random straight lines 10 inches long each day for 10 days, in a 10-by-10-foot square." The distribution of the lines in the square was totally up to me. I didn't know what you wanted it to look like.

sl What it looked like wasn't important. It didn't matter what you did as long as the lines were distributed randomly throughout the area. In many of the wall pieces there is very little latitude for the draftsman or draftswoman to make changes, but it is evident anyway, visually, that different people make different works. I have done other pieces that give the draftsman a great liberty in interpreting an action. In this way the appearance of the work is secondary to the idea of the work, which makes the idea of primary importance. The system is the work of art; the visual work of art is the proof

of the system. The visual aspect can't be understood without understanding the system. It isn't what it looks like but what it is that is of basic importance.

so In 1961–62 the possibilities of making art ranged from the second generation of Ab Ex to Pop Art to Fluxus. How is it that the Conceptual approach ended up attracting you? For instance, does Ad Reinhardt play an important role in your thinking?

sl Of course. Ad Reinhardt was an artist of ideas, and he was very influential. His writings were of great interest, as was his art. In fact, his example provided another direction: not Pop art and Fluxus but a more vital and productive way. His art really became the key to my thinking.

so How important a role did Robert Smithson and Dan Graham play in the development of Conceptualist ideas? I know that Mel Bochner and Smithson shared a lot of ideas, and Dan was central because he opened Daniel's Gallery and introduced a lot of the artists we are talking about. I've always

thought of Dan as the George Maciunas of Conceptual and Minimal art. I remember these Sunday gatherings where Dan would show work; I saw his *Cloud* movie at one of those, as well as an installation of his sky photos. It was an important meeting place.

sl Dan is a polemicist. Both he and Smithson loved to hang around Max's Kansas City and talk. In a way that was also his art form. When I first met him, he was doing extremely interesting work on typewriter paper. He has a great mind. He did this kind of work long before anyone else. This work was the earliest form of the non-Duchampian type of Conceptual art that I had seen. It was very important to me. Robert Smithson's most interesting work was his writing. Even though he did important installations and earthworks, his writing was visionary and iconoclastic. His vision was more literary in general; his writing was where he could really express himself. If he had lived longer I believe he would have made more films. That's where he would have found a better form to advance his ideas. Mel Bochner was also involved with Smithson's writing, having



co-authored one piece. They fed off of each other's ideas for a time, before Mel went into his more important work using numbers and measurement.

so What about Seth Siegelau? You and Carl Andre participated in the *Xerox Book* and some of Seth's other early projects that bridged the gap between Minimalism and Conceptual art.

sl Seth's championing of Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, Douglas Huebler and Robert Barry was very significant, especially at the time. Each of these artists used a different tool of Conceptualism and produced very good and lasting work. In the succeeding years they all enlarged their ideas.

so What about those artists working in what came to be known as post-Minimalism, or anti-formalism?

sl Minimalism wasn't a real idea—it ended before it started. Artists of many diverse types began using simple forms to their own ends. Almost every artist of the '60s and '70s took off from Minimalism in different directions. There was no other place to start if you weren't involved with Duchampian-type thinking or Pop art. Those lines of escape were what eventually became classic Conceptual art. In the end all these things melded together during the '80s and '90s, mainly due to Bruce Nauman, who combined the two ways of thinking.

so And how about Robert Morris? Does he have less to do with Conceptual art because he comes from the Duchamp, neo-Dada end of things?

sl His work was more a provocation than anything else. He brought Minimalism to its logical end. Much of his early work was Duchampian.

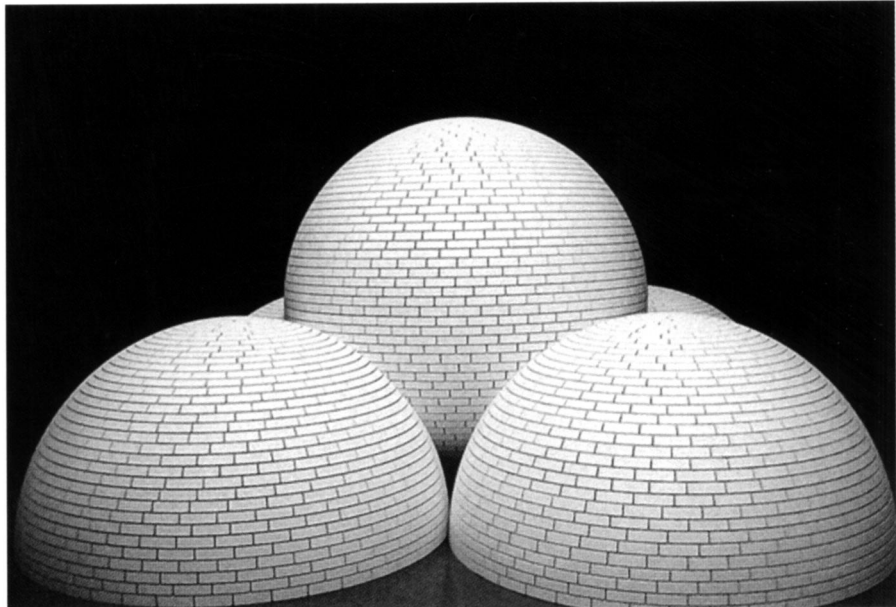
so I'm interested in what I take to be the implicit and explicit politics of your work. A lot is made of the dematerialization of art as a strategy, but on the other hand I still have a folded paper piece by you that I paid \$250 for and as far as I know, because it was a condition you placed on those pieces, it's still worth only \$250. Obviously that demonstrated a concern on your part for art's commodification and the ways it accrues value.

Sol LeWitt, *Tall Irregular Progression*, 2003, concrete-block sculpture in honor of worldwide victims of terrorism. Barcelona, Spain.

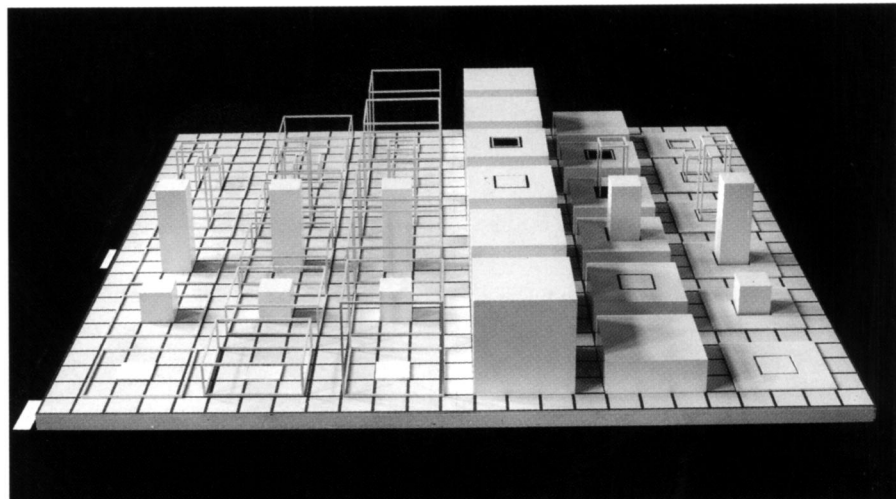
sl The '60s were awash in politics and revolution. Not only in art of course, but feminism, racial equality and opposition to war. I, like almost all of the artists I knew, was involved in all of these movements and was politically left-oriented. One of the ideas was the relation to art as a commodity. I thought by doing drawings on the wall, they would be non-transportable—therefore a commitment by the owner would be implied, and they could not be bought or sold easily. I also did a number of works that would be sold for \$100—not \$250; you were robbed. These were maps and postcards with drawings or cutouts, crumpled paper, folded paper, torn paper, and so on. Also since wall drawings were done from instructions, anyone could do one, no matter how badly, just as anyone can have a self-made Flavin very easily. 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. I used photography in most of these pieces. The importance of Ed Ruscha in this cannot be ignored. Buying books was a way anyone could acquire a work of art for very little.

so I knew somebody in Amsterdam who had made a wall drawing for herself. She had a whole collection of works that she could reproduce; she also had a Flavin and a Noland stripe painting. Do you see the notion of a democratic art being a significant aspect of the development of both Minimalism and Conceptual art? Is it what led you to do public art projects in recent years? Is this part of the politics of the work?

sl That was one aspect of it. It was a way of questioning the general perception of art as inaccessible. Just as the development of earth art and installation art stemmed from the idea of taking art out of the galleries, the basis of my involvement with public art is a continuation of wall drawings. As soon as one does work on walls, the idea of using the whole wall follows. It means that the art is intimately involved with the architecture. It is available to be seen by everyone. It avoids the preciousness of gallery or museum installations. Also, since art is a



Sol LeWitt, *Model for Brick Structure (four domes and a sphere)*, 2003, painted foam on board, 12 x 27³/₄ x 27³/₄". Courtesy of Barbara Krakow Gallery.



Sol LeWitt, *Serial Project #1 ABCD*, 1966–68, baked enamel on steel, 9 1/2 x 70 x 70".

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. Anyone who understands the work of art owns it. We all own the *Mona Lisa*.

so Do you think Minimalists and Conceptualists saw themselves as saving art, as opposed to bringing it to an end?

sl As an artist in the late '50s I was aware that while Abstract Expressionism was the major form and that prodigious works were being made at the time, the end was in sight. Perhaps it was a generation thing, but I knew I didn't want to do it. It was a form I couldn't

accept. I didn't want to save art—I respected the older artists too much to think art needed saving. But I knew it was finished, even though, at that time, I didn't know what I would do. Every generation renews itself in its own way; there's always a reaction against whatever is standard. It was to be expected. The reason I think the art of the '60s is valuable, both the Duchampian and the non-Duchampian models, is that it freed art from the formal and aesthetic. It allowed art to move toward the narrative. Instead of the aestheticism and formalism of modernism, art became politicized, then socialized, then sexualized.



Sol LeWitt, Beth Shalom Synagogue, Chester, CT. Photo: Robert Benson.

so Was that modernist aestheticism represented by Greenberg, for the most part?

sl Greenberg was the last vestige of the aestheticism that began with Roger Fry and with the early moderns. He hated Minimalism. Although it was still formalist in terms of its rhetoric, it put a stop to modernism. In turn, the problem of Minimalism was that it became an end in itself. Conceptualism provided an escape from the formal and the perceptual into the conceptual and the analytic. An idea is finished when it is codified by academics. Greenberg's espousal of the second generation of Abstract Expressionism was its kiss of death.

so Do you see your work as an abstract narrative, as telling a story about permutation or about how language and objects differ? How important is language to your work?

sl Serial systems and their permutations function as a narrative that has to be understood. People still see things as visual objects without understanding what they are. They don't understand that the visual part may be boring but it's the narrative that's interesting. It can be read as a story, just as music can be heard as form in time. The narrative of serial art works more like music than like literature. Words are another thing. During the '70s I was interested in words and meaning as a way of making art. I did a group of "location" pieces that would direct the draftsman in

making the art. All of the tracks leading to the final image were to be shown. A person could read the directions and verify the process and even do it.

so That brings us to the question of how you keep it interesting, how you keep it moving for yourself.

sl Unless you're involved with thinking about what you're doing, you end up doing the same thing over and over, and that becomes tedious and, in the end, defeating. When artists make art, they shouldn't question whether it is permissible to do one thing or another. In my case, I reached a point in the evolution of my work at which the ideology and ideas became inhibiting. I felt that I had become a prisoner of my own pronouncements or ideas. I found I was compelled by the innate logic of the work to follow a different way. Whether it was a step forward or a step back or a step sideways didn't matter. At that point I had moved to Italy. Quattrocento art really impressed me. I began to think about how art isn't an avant-garde game. It has to be something more universal, more important.

so So at one point what you are doing is liberating, and then it becomes inhibiting and you have to liberate yourself from your own devices.

sl You shouldn't be a prisoner of your own

ideas. Everyone gets into their own box and enunciates principles, if only in their own mind—you have your own constraints and your own structure that you think you're following, and then you realize that what you're saying is "I can do this, but I can't do that." And then at some point you say, "Well, why not?" and the answer is "Because I told myself I couldn't." If you keep telling yourself, "You can," then you are liberated. If you're totally constrained, all that's left for you to do is break the mold. "Every wall is a door."

so Critics and historians don't like artists to do that—it ruins the narrative that they are invested in.

sl Artists teach critics what to think. Critics repeat what the artists teach them. If you then say, "Oh, that doesn't work anymore," they get terribly upset. But that's to be expected, too, because they have to learn something else. Academics love the academy.

so In the mid-'80s color entered your work. There are those who see that as decorative or a return to aesthetics.

sl When I first started drawing on the wall, the logic of the idea took over. From line to form, from flatness to dimensionality, without illusion, and the use of color. It might seem to some that color is synonymous with decoration, but I try to use color objectively. At first I used colored ink, starting with the three primary colors. Color theory suggests that all color comes from the primary colors if used in combination with black. Later I used acrylic paint with the addition of three secondary colors—green, orange and purple—but without mixing them. I do not use color for effect, although I see no evil in that. Albers used color for its maximum effect.

so I'm also thinking of the wall drawings and painted murals that have very eccentric shapes and a ground color, and the color of these seems arbitrary; it's here that you seem to introduce the idea of the arbitrary element.

sl My work, to me, has proceeded in a logical, organic way. Each development leads to the next. Maybe sometimes there is a leap from one to another, but I don't think that is arbitrary. When I wrote the "Sentences on



Sol LeWitt, *Wall Drawing #260*, white crayon and black pencil on black wall, first installed at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in June 1975.

Conceptual Art" the first one was that artists are not rational but leap to new ideas. So, I hope to do that. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don't, but even if they don't they may lead to something that does—a revelation. When working on wall-size space, the eccentricities of the space may give me ideas.

so As a viewer, I get the impression from your recent works—for instance, the wavy-line gouaches—that you are literally re-evaluating the part of your art that was the background when you were making your more systemic, reductive works. Is it that the past comes back as something more usable?

sl The recent gouaches that I've been doing stem from some of the early wall drawings, using not-straight pencil lines. I've always made drawings and, later, gouaches simultaneously with the wall drawings. The wall drawings more and more began to be done by other people. As with the wall pieces, the gouaches have had their own organic development, I try to make them as part of the ritual of my life. I've found large paper, five feet wide, that allows me to make larger work. The ideas in the gouaches do not run parallel with those of the wall drawings. They are quite different and follow their own logic. The wall drawings have ideas that can be transmitted to others to realize. Only I can do the gouaches.

so Lawrence Weiner once told me that making art is a constant process of revision.

sl In my case, it's often revulsion. I see what I've done and can't stand it. Once a piece is done, I move on. I always think the next step will be much better than what I have done before—a chance for redemption, a hope I can erase the past and step into the glowing future. Of course, it never works that way, but it keeps me moving.

so Your recent sculptures—the concrete block pieces and the brick domes—have become architectural in scale. Does that give you still another variable to play with?

sl The problem of size and scale is crucial. There is, I think, an optimum size for each idea. Too large, and it becomes grandiose and rhetorical. Too small, and it becomes an object. When it's completed, it becomes obvious whether the scale is correct or not. I have always called my three-dimensional work "structures," because my thinking derives from the history of architecture rather than that of sculpture. I feel closer to Boullée than Canova. But I would not want to be an architect. The closest I've come to that is in the design of our local synagogue in Chester, which I saw as a problem of geometric forms in a space that conforms to the uses of ritual. In this instance, I worked with an architect, Steven Lloyd, who knew lots of things that I didn't. But the main ideas of form were preserved, and I find the space created to be what I had hoped.

so A lot of people see Minimal and Conceptual art as having contributed to a situation in which art is no longer important because it has become anything and everything. What do you think its effect has been?

sl Minimal art went nowhere. Conceptual art became the liberating idea that gave the art of the next 40 years its real impetus. All of the significant art of today stems from Conceptual art. This includes the art of installation, political, feminist and socially directed art. The other great development has been in photography, but that too was influenced by Conceptual art.

so If you could add a paragraph or revise the "Sentences on Conceptual Art," what changes would you make? Have you thought of writing a new text to represent what appear to be significant changes in your views?

sl I have no problem with the sentences. Although they pertain specifically to the art of the '60s, they are pertinent to my thinking now. I wouldn't delete or add anything. The art of today is a lot grander and more opulent than before, but the process of art-thinking hasn't changed very much—it's the emphasis that has changed.

so I think it's Adorno who said that the enemy of art is banality.

sl It shouldn't be boring. ☺