Lawrence Weiner's Materialism*

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I wrote this essay for the forthcoming catalogue of what turned out to be the final exhibition of Lawrence Weiner's lifetime: CLOSE TO A RAINBOW, curated by Anders Gaardboe Jensen and held from June to October 2021 at the Holstebro Kunstmuseum in Denmark. It is published in this issue of October *as an homage to the artist, who died on December 2, 2021.*

I met Lawrence for the first and only time in Holstebro to celebrate his exhibition on October 9, 2021, and encountered an artist passionately invested in arguing about the nature of his work, quick with a sardonic joke, and even ready to offer inimitable advice to a new parent (he reminded me of the eternal imperative to kill the father and warned, "Just don't let him join the Navy"). In Holstebro, I met both Lawrence the individual and a whole community that had been galvanized by his work. The outpouring of mourning and remembrance that has followed his passing makes it clear just how many such communities exist.

The fresh memory of meeting Lawrence Weiner made it difficult to revise into the past tense an essay originally written about a vital and still developing art practice. I have left the essay unillustrated, both to register the loss of Weiner and to make palpable one of the most essential implications of his work: that his words exist sufficiently as works of art simply as they are typed in the pages that follow. Weiner designed his work such that the nearly infinite number of possibilities for his words would be equally valid, exceeding his individual control and remaining in circulation as "PARADIGMS SUITABLE FOR DAILY USE" by anyone. In his absence, they remain in play.

Beginning in the 1960s, Lawrence Weiner persistently described his per-spective as being that of a "materialist."[1] The primary empirical stuff of Weiner's art was also consistent for over fifty years: words, supplemented by basic symbols and typographical emphases (plus signs, parentheses, ampersands, underlines, etc.), arranged into phrases that follow a few principles,[2] namely, that they frequently employ the past participle, rarely form complete sentences, (almost) never issue orders, often refer to everyday things and actions, and generally avoid abstract, specialized, or rarefied terminology. Is this what materialism in language looks like?

In fact, such a question would immediately have to be amended, for it is precisely the quality of "looking like"—of language's visual appearance—that Weiner's materialism put under pressure. What sort of materialist would, as Weiner did, pronounce himself mostly indifferent to the concrete form of his chosen material—language, in his case? Whether his works are painted onto walls or printed on posters or in books, whether they are designed in idiosyncratic polychrome typefaces or in deadpan sans serif capitals, whether they are spoken in a film or sung to music, whether printed on an ice-cream-cone wrapper or impressed on a manhole cover, Weiner maintained that each is simply a possibility chosen for a particular setting—and could just as easily be otherwise. The situation is further complicated by Weiner's practice of realizing his linguistic statements in nonlinguistic form: setting off an explosion, emptying various liquids on the floor (bleach or spray paint), removing a section of a wall, cutting a narrow furrow into a collector's driveway, tossing a dye marker into the Halifax harbor. . . . Yet, famously, he insisted that "the piece need not be built" because its existence as language sufficed.

To reiterate the question that will occupy me over the course of this essay: What form of linguistic materialism could possibly account for such a practice? To begin with, it will be useful to briefly eliminate two tempting but ultimately insufficient options: His linguistic materialism depended neither on the objecthood of the referent nor on the materiality of the signifier. Put otherwise, Weiner rejected the notion that his art's relationship to material reality required either an exit from language (necessitating the manipulation of nonlinguistic matter in the world) or a circumscription of language to its physical properties (typographical design, grammar, site-specificity, timbre of voice, etc.). After tackling these in turn, I'll advance an analysis of Weiner's work as an aesthetic proposition working through the social objectivity of language.

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1.   There are many instances, but to Benjamin Buchloh, for example, he affirmed, "I think that I am really just a materialist. In fact, I am just one of those people who is building structures out in the world for other people to figure out how to get around. I am trying to revolutionize society, not building a new department in the same continuum of art history." Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "In Conversation with Lawrence Weiner," in *Lawrence Weiner* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), p. 13.

2.   Birgit Pelzer specifies, "We are in the presence not of sentences but of distinct units of meaning." Pelzer, "Dissociated Objects: The Statements/Sculptures of Lawrence Weiner," *October* 90 (Autumn 1999), p. 76.

The thesis that Weiner's materialism depended upon the translation of words into nonlinguistic objecthood may be disqualified quickly with reference to the third clause of his "Statement of Intent" from 1969, which specified, as noted already, that "the piece need not be built." In the 1960s and '70s, Weiner frequently "constructed" works in a manner generally consistent with the vocabulary of Post-Minimal sculpture, realizing his linguistic "statements" through the task-like manipulation of physical materials, such as his execution of *A 36'' X 36'' REMOVAL TO THE LATHING OR SUPPORT WALL OF PLASTER OR WALLBOARD FROM A WALL* in the stairwell of the Kunsthalle Bern for Harald Szeemann's *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* (1969). But the proportion of his activity that may be described in this manner precipitously diminished in the decades following. For what amounts to the bulk of his career, Weiner predominantly restricted himself to the presentation of language. Yet he maintained that this was totally consistent with his commitment to an art practice occupied primarily with the human relationship to "objects" and "materials." Indeed, far from requiring a change of state into nonlinguistic matter, he held that it is "language [that] allows a total materialist reading."[3] He proposed that the language making up a work need never be instantiated in the form of a thing out there in the world for it to bear upon matter.

The second thesis—of the "materiality of the signifier"—requires more careful attention, given this assertion of a "total materialist" model of language. Adopting this point of view, Weiner's work should be placed squarely in the tradition that developed out of the "spatialized" writing of Stéphane Mallarmé and passed through the varieties of the Concrete poetry of the postwar period that experimented with "graphic space as structural agent" for manipulating the physical matter of the "object word."[4] Certainly Weiner's dynamic typographical experiments, the expanded terrain of vehicles he proposed for language (from bridges to bins used by Icelandic fisheries), and his exploitation of symbols and unconventional ordering of words to generate ambiguous or multiple meanings place him within this historical trajectory. Yet, crucially, Weiner never sought to reduce language—let alone succeeded in reducing it—to a sheer physical material, imagining that he might cleave the material mark either from the exterior world of putatively nonlinguistic objects or from the interior world of cognitive meaning. This thesis, finally, does not survive the test of a constant of Weiner's production, namely, the list of materials applicable to all his artworks since 1968, which reads, "Language + the materials referred to."

Weiner's art would thus appear divided between the material of words and the material referred to by words. Take the case of a work such as *A WALL*

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3.   Lawrence Weiner, "A Conversation with Robert C. Morgan [Interview on December 31, 1979]," *Real Life Magazine*, winter 1983. Reprinted in Lawrence Weiner, *Having Been Said: Writings & Interviews of Lawrence Weiner, 1968–2003*, eds. Gerti Fietzek and Gregor Stemmrich (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2004), p. 101. Henceforth cited as HBS.

4.   "Pilot Plan" of the Noigandres group, 1958, cited in Jean-François Bory, *Once Again*, trans. Lee Hildreth (New York: New Directions Press, 1968), p. 9.

STAINED BY WATER (1969): The materials would include the words themselves and the situation described, comprising a particular conjunction of water, wall, and stain. Whether the material situation preexists its representation in words or whether the words stand virtually for the materials is not decidable once and for all. Things are even further complicated when one assesses the range of Weiner's phrases that contain no evident reference to any specific materials (or even to nouns). What are the "materials referred to" in *BROKEN OFF* (1971), for example?[5] *BROKEN OFF* seems to refer not to a particular physical object or kind of material but to a material reality in which "having been broken off" might take on meaning: a twig, a romantic relationship, a conversation, diplomatic ties, an individual from a group. . . . And given the capacity of rhetorical speech to suspend referentiality, what are the "materials referred to" by *ON THE UP / ON THE ABOVE UP / ON THE BELOW UP* (2009), for example?[6] Do they include the British colloquialism "on the up" or its variant "on the up and up"? The material relations instated by Weiner's language seem to encompass not only the physical form of words, not only the given objects "pointed to" or named by words, not only specific actions to be performed on materials, not only figurative or rhetorical meaning, but a kind of open-ended situation in which each might equally obtain.

On these questions, the subject of poetry might be illuminating. Weiner consistently distinguished his language-based works from poetry—to the point of preferring the category of "sculpture" for his words.[7] As he put it in 1969,

> poetry is inherently involved in the medium of language as well as the content. I may utilize the medium in an attempt to get across only the content, in the most concise package I'm capable of at that moment. Inherent beauty or exciting ramifications of the language don't terribly interest me.[8]

While one might object that the appeal of Weiner's language frequently lies in its beauty or "exciting ramifications," he insisted that the formal manipulation of language was secondary to his work's intent, which did not coincide with the physical characteristics of the words he used. Weiner's work is thereby to be distinguished from poetry's binding of meaning to linguistic materiality (where, for example, the meaning of Racine's verse is inseparable from its syllabic count and that of Susan

5.   See Kathryn Chiong's analysis of Weiner's film *BROKEN OFF* in Chiong, "Words Matter: The Work of Lawrence Weiner," PhD diss. (Columbia University, 2013), pp. 88–95. My understanding of Weiner's work has benefited greatly from reading Chiong's dissertation, which constitutes by far the most sophisticated and detailed analysis of the artist to date.

6.   On rhetoric and referentiality, see Paul de Man, "Semiology and Rhetoric," *Diacritics,* V. 3, N. 3 (Autumn 1973), pp. 27–33. See also Toril Moi's recent reading of this essay and of the debates it sparked in Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), pp. 129–49.

7.   See Chiong on the category of sculpture in Chiong 2013, pp. 221–59.

8.   "Art Without Space (1970)," in HBS, p. 32.

Howe's poems from their articulation on the page). Poetry as "work on the signifier" is not where language's "empirical reality" is situated in Weiner's work.[9]

The topic of translation is crucial here. For Weiner, "the definition [of poetry] could almost be something that is not translatable . . . . And my work is designed initially to be translated, either into physical form or other languages."[10] The belief that poetry is inherently untranslatable—a tendency exemplified by Mallarmé—extends logically from its definition as a specific set of relations staged between the material constituents of language (sound, syllabic count, meter, line length, etc., and eventually the physical appearance of the word or letter and its spatial arrangement on the page) and the meaningful associations or significations the words generate. At its limits, the thesis of poetic untranslatability holds that to extract a poem's semantic content or meaning from its linguistic concretization and to express it otherwise in translation is to produce an explanation of the poem, an elaboration of aspects of the poem or an "approximation" or conspectus of it, or possibly to create a new poem altogether—whatever it is, it is no longer the same poem.[11] Weiner did not hesitate to translate his works into the most appropriate language for a given exhibition context. But the question of translation goes deeper than the transfer of words out of one language into another. Weiner's concept of "translation" also encompassed the capacity of words to change contexts and mediums, to take on "physical form," and to impel seemingly nonlinguistic objects, situations, actions, or thoughts.

What relationship to objects (or to objectification) does Weiner's model of translation presuppose, and how is this different from that assumed by the modernist poetic trajectory since Mallarmé? Mallarmé felt there was precious little overlap between words as he employed them poetically and the objects to which those words might once have referred. The poetic use of language by Mallarmé set itself against the linguistic economy of "common speech," which rested on the pretension to lossless "exchange" between words and things. Against this transactional model of communication, Mallarmé advanced "transposition": Poetry would offer "the marvel of transposing a fact of nature into its vibratory near-disappearance according to the play of language."[12] Deploying words as "abolished baubles of sonorous inanity," Mallarmé pursued not only the suspension of linguistic referentiality but a cosmic perspective in which the revelation of the emptiness and chance inherent in language would demonstrate "the intimate correlation of Poetry with the Universe."[13] Mallarmé's conviction, then, was that the poetic

9.   "A Conversation with William Furlong… (1980)," in HBS, p. 108.

10.   "Interview with Dieter Schwartz (1989)," in HBS, p. 196.

11.   On translatability and untranslatability, see Barbara Johnson, "The Task of the Translator," in *The Barbara Johnson Reader: The Surprise of Otherness* (Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 377–400.

12.   Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations,* trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 210.

13.   Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes, vol. I,* ed. Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), p. 37; Mallarmé, *Correspondance complète, 1862–1871; suivi de Lettres sur la poésie, 1872–1898: avec lettres inédites,* ed. Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 366.

search for a kind of essential language—language as such, stripped of its instrumental usage, referential function, and even its capacity to be linked to a particular speaker or recipient—would necessarily entail a negative relation to the empirical world. "Destruction was my Béatrice," Mallarmé wrote, and a whole tradition followed that posited the negation of objecthood as the truth of language.[14]

This modernist myth found its "scientific" counterpart in the contemporaneous linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure.[15] In Saussure's attempt to seize the essence of language qua language, he began by bracketing secondary considerations (in a manner similar to Edmund Husserl's phenomenology). First, Saussure set aside the question of the "referent," that is to say, the capacity of language to name particular physical objects in the world, discarding it as a residue of a "nomenclaturism" that conceived of linguistic signs as a set of labels (varying in different tongues) for discrete things. Instead, he advanced a conception of the sign as an entity split between a material signifier (the sound of a word or its graphic inscription, for example) and a conceptual signified (the idea or meaning cognitively called forth by the signifier). Meaning in language functioned not by matching up certain positive entities called words with other positive entities called things; instead, language was a structure for differentiating signs negatively from other signs. The material signifier and the conceptual signified mutually delimited one another: Their unity in the sign forged meaning from, on the one hand, the exterior world of otherwise meaningless marks and sounds and, on the other, the interior world of fleeting sensory and cognitive activity. Secondly, Saussure bracketed from the considerations of linguistic science any particular individual's speech—the diversity of everyday utterances made by users in a particular "language state." The empirical study of specific uses of language would lead the linguist down the wrong path, for the "social crystallization of language" that Saussure sought to analyze existed only at the abstract level of the collectivity.[16] Thus Saussure justified the exclusion of individual speech on the grounds that it was "accessory and more or less accidental."[17]

What I have called in shorthand the Mallarméan tradition in modernist aesthetics and the Saussurean field of semiology thus both took a negative stance toward a) the exchangeability of language and objecthood and b) the world of

14.   Ibid., pp. 348–49.

15.   Benjamin Buchloh is the first, to my knowledge, to link Weiner's work to Saussure. He writes, "Weiner defined an aesthetic proposition as a set of relations or differences, comparable to the way a linguistic proposition had been defined as a set of variable functions and differences, since the first decade of the twentieth century when Ferdinand de Saussure made his famous observation that 'in language there are only differences…'" Buchloh, "The Posters of Lawrence Weiner," in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000), p. 559. I discuss the relationship of Mallarmé and Saussurean linguistics in Trevor Stark, *Total Expansion of the Letter; Avant-Garde Art and Language After Mallarmé* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2020), pp. 61–62.

16.   Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye; trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), p. 13.

17.   Ibid., pp. 13–14.

empirical usages of language or "common speech." It is clear, however, that Weiner's use of language is distinct from these traditions on precisely these points: the relation to objects and the priority of everyday language. What is crucial to recognize is that Weiner's fundamental interest was not the nature of the linguistic sign as such but how language may be used—never once and for all, always contingently—to construct relationships between humans and objects. One of his frequently reiterated statements of principles reads: "Art is and must be an empirical reality concerned with the relationship of human beings to objects and objects to objects in relation to human beings."[18]

The task Weiner set for his art was decidedly *not* to determine the nature of language in itself, theoretically severed from the infinite particularity of its social uses and from its capacity to stand for objects and materials. Instead, he asked, "What does language refer to? It refers to material. It doesn't stand by itself. Therefore you can't get away from a materialist viewpoint."[19] Yet language's relationship to material, as envisioned by Weiner, is not predetermined or fixed but fragmentary and open-ended. As he proposed, in language "there is always an incomplete relationship to objects."[20] With this, Mallarmé and Saussure might agree: It's the arbitrariness of the sign, its "incomplete" relationship to the ideas and objects it refers to, that allows for linguistic change in history, as well as for interpretive multiplicity. (After all, Mallarmé noted, "words have several meanings, otherwise we would always understand one another."[21]) The difference with Weiner is that this recognition of language's "imperfection" (as Mallarmé would call it) led him to emphasize not the chasm between the word and the world but the way language is always in relation, pointing outside itself (to objects and people), waiting to be *converted* into meaning, action, material, or more words. Elsewhere, Weiner formulated these minimal conditions for his work: "Content plus use are sufficient."[22]

The category of *use* was crucial to Weiner's conception of language, which he considered "an applied part of the way people learn to deal with their world."[23] In this, he fell closer to the tradition of "ordinary language" philosophy originating in the late work of Ludwig Wittgenstein than to Saussurean semiology. Weiner himself established the link between his work and that of Wittgenstein: In one of the rare occasions of citation in Weiner's work, in his film *Plowman's Lunch* (1982),

18.   "Section 2 (1982)," in HBS, p. 135.

19.   "Red as well as Green as well as Yellow as well as Blue: Interview by Irmelin Lebeer (1973)," in HBS, p. 67.

20.   "Gordon Matta-Clark (1985)," in HBS, p. 156.

21.   Mallarmé, *Oeuvres, vol. 1*, p. 508.

22.   Cited in Ann Goldstein, "If It Looks like a Duck and It Walks Like a Duck, It Is Probably a Duck," in *Lawrence Weiner: AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE,* eds. Donna De Salvo and Ann Goldstein (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 134.

23.   "Early Work: Interview with Lynn Gumpert (1982)," in HBS, p. 128.

one actor states, "An idea only has meaning in the stream of life." As Kathryn Chiong discovered, Weiner included a version of this quotation with attribution in a notebook from 1975: "An expression has meaning only in the stream of life (Ludwig Wittgenstein)."[24] Chiong formulated the decisive point of contact between Weiner's and Wittgenstein's conceptions of language in this way: "Language is . . . not analyzed in its abstraction, as an idealized system of relations between words and objects. Rather it is observed as a tool for use…"[25] In brief, Weiner and Wittgenstein both held that for a linguistic statement to possess meaning at all depends upon a context of use, what Wittgenstein called, in aquatic language that appealed to Weiner, the "stream of life."

I'll turn now to certain coordinates of this territory shared by Weiner and Wittgenstein, most notably their refusal to pin down the nature of language *in itself*; their emphasis on use in language (and on the unforeseeable and potentially infinite diversity of uses to which language may be put); and their conviction that language is inseparable from the "stream" of everyday life. Finally, I'll indicate certain significant differences.

Early in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein addresses a potential critic who berates him for avoiding the question of the "essence" of language. He agrees, and writes, "Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all—but that they are related to one another in many different ways."[26] As opposed to engaging in a philosophical search for the "essence" of language (let alone the essence of the "object" or of "being"), Wittgenstein seeks to "bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use."[27] Words simply mean what they allow us to do with them, and the kinds of uses to which humans put language are innumerable: "This multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten."[28] This concrete multiplicity of language is obscured "because the cloth-

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24.   Chiong 2013, p. 152. The phrase is obscure and is not used in Wittgenstein's major works available prior to 1975. Weiner likely found it in Norman Malcolm's 1958 memoir about Wittgenstein. There, Malcolm recalls a remark by Wittgenstein in a conversation in 1949: "'*Ein Ausdruck hat nur im Strome des Lebens Bedeutung*' [An expression has meaning only in the stream of life]." Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 75. A variant of this phrase was also published in English in 1967 in a collection of aphorisms: "Only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning." Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, eds. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. Wright and trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 31e. On the "stream of life" in Wittgenstein, see David Kishik, *Wittgenstein's Form of Life (To Imagine a Life, I)* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 54–60, 133–134.

25.   Chiong, "Sympathy for Lawrence Weiner (One Plus One)," in *AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE*, p. 335.

26.   Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 31.

27.   Ibid., p. 48.

ing of our language makes everything alike."[29] Thus follow, for Wittgenstein, the many significant errors of traditional philosophy, which in its search for an abstract and general definition of language sets aside its different uses in specific cases.

In her recent account of ordinary-language philosophy, Toril Moi writes, "Use is not a ground. Use is a practice grounded on nothing. Use is simply what we do." "Wittgenstein's radical point," she continues, is that "there is no meaning 'behind' the use (for if there were, what kind of thing would it be? A mental [psychological] entity? A real thing in the real world? . . .), there is only meaning in use."[30] In accounting for Weiner's work, too, it seems mistaken to ask about the "meaning" either of a particular set of words or of language as such; it would be mistaken as well to seek to root that meaning in the physicality of words (the "materiality of the signifier"), in the conceptual content of the signified ("a psychological entity"), or in the objecthood of the referent ("a real thing in the real world").

Rather, following Moi, one should ask after what uses his words can be put in a variety of different circumstances. Indeed, Weiner posited in one of his works that a word is "SIMPLY A NAME FOR USE AT THE MOMENT."[31] His words may be used to establish relationships of different sorts to physical objects in the world at different degrees of specificity or generality: *CONCRETE POURED UNTIL IT SETS ITSELF ABOVE THE GROUND* (1988) is quite clear in the materials referred to, although presumably a concrete-filled ditch of either five square centimeters or of five square meters would fit the bill; conversely, *BITS PUT TOGETHER TO PRESENT A SEMBLANCE OF A WHOLE* (1994) is almost infinitely variable. Other works, such as *DONE WITHOUT* (1971), suggest the paradoxical use of severing a particular action from an object. Weiner's choice of medium also importantly allowed for the specifically linguistic fact of iteration: His works may be read aloud, written anew, spray-painted, sung, built, etc. (though he did maintain that if the words themselves were changed in any way, they would cease to be a "Lawrence Weiner"[32]).

Likewise, Weiner's emphasis on the everyday can't be reconciled with either the Mallarméan negation of instrumental communication or the Saussurean indifference to the individual uses of language. His work's materialism lies in language's capacity to bind itself to the world in an unforeseeable multiplicity of ways. This is what motivated Weiner's move beyond the circumscribed space of the canvas:

> The picture-frame convention was a very real thing. The painting
> stopped at that edge. When you are dealing with language, there is no

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28.   Ibid., p. 11.

29.   Ibid., p. 224.

30.   Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary,* p. 29.

31.   Cited in Chiong 2013, p. 119.

32.   If the words of one of his works were altered by its "owner," Weiner argued, it would be a breach of a certain kind of "social contract." "From an Interview with Maria Eichhorn (1998)," in HBS, p. 371.

edge that the picture drops over or drops off. You are dealing with something completely infinite. Language, because it is the most non-objective thing we have ever developed in this world, never stops.[33]

In other words, it is language's "nonobjective" character—its irreducibility to either its material substrate or to the particular objects that it might name—that renders it capable of remaining open to the infinite possibilities of human relationships to objects. His words, as he put it, are simply "PARADIGMS SUITABLE FOR DAILY USE" and presuppose no definitive objectification.[34] They do not exist in the abstract sphere of the concept but in the ordinary world of any person who might put them into practice. "I would like to go on record," he confirmed, "and say that the reason I'm making these things is for people to use."[35]

Weiner, like Moi and Wittgenstein, affirmed the thesis that the meaning of a linguistic statement simply is its use. But the question remains: How might one *use* a work by Weiner? The question has no general answer but must be explained through particular examples. In this, too, we are following Wittgenstein's move from "concepts to examples," his focus on how, in Moi's words, "examples neither represent nor hide essences; they teach (show, instruct) us how to use words."[36] If we are to "LEARN TO READ ART," to cite a rare injunction by Weiner, this will amount to learning how to use words in the context of his artwork.

Take, for example, the words in *2 BLOCKS OF SALT [IN THE MORNING MIST]* (1991). To enumerate different ways of understanding them is to enumerate different ways in which they can be used:

A) As a linguistic statement: The work is an incomplete sentence or phrase describing a relationship between four nouns (blocks, salt, morning, mist). It is composed of two parts, with the second enclosed in square brackets. The words as presented at the Holstebro Kunstmuseum in Denmark in 2021 were in English and Danish. Restricting oneself to their character as signifiers, the words and brackets may be used in any number of ways, including but not limited to:

    A1) being spoken
    A2) being written by hand
    A3) being typed
    A4) being sung
    A5) being printed as a poster
    A6) being printed as a book
    A7) being printed on a wall

33.   "Art Without Space (1969)," in HBS, p. 33.

34.   These words were printed on a poster in 1986 and make up the title of a chapter on drawing in Chiong 2013, pp. 125–62.

35.   Cited in ibid., p. 116.

36.   Moi, p. 77.

A8) being translated into another language

A9) being written in an essay

A10) etc.

Each of these forms, according to Weiner's principles, is "equal and consistent with the intention of the artist." Thus, as per A9, sufficient conditions are in place for *2 BLOCKS OF SALT [IN THE MORNING MIST]* to exist fully as an *artwork* just as it is typed out within these pages of *October*.

B) As a statement of fact: Weiner specified that the title of his book *Statements* referred to a bank statement rather than a linguistic statement.[37] That is, the words serve as a factual record of a particular material or set of materials' having been there—somewhere, at some point in time. In this instance, we're informed that two blocks of salt once sat in particular atmospheric conditions (mist) at a particular time of day (morning): We know not whether they were in use (by a cook on a grill or by deer as a salt lick), being mined, produced by compression, stored, or on view in a gallery. Though the phrase is verbless, Weiner's general preference for the past tense is significant, for the work describes an unstable arrangement of two objects in conditions that would likely cause them to change state: The salt blocks would absorb moisture and possibly melt in the mist until they were no longer blocks at all. At that point, the work would persist only as language.

C) As a signified: As I read the work, I call forth a mental image of two blocks of salt sitting in a misty environment or simply consider the meaning implied by the words. The objects exist virtually in the mind as a set of associations with almost infinite variations depending on the reader.

D) As an object to be fabricated: *2 BLOCKS OF SALT [IN THE MORNING MIST]* might function as a recipe, a list of components for production. Though Weiner resists the notion that his works provide "instructions"—for he does not wish to impose on viewers—there is nothing in the words themselves to dissuade a reader from taking them as a suggestion. In this case, one would need two objects, a particular time of day, and particular weather. This might constitute a sculpture. However, the two salt blocks would cease to be the particular sculpture described by the work every day at noon, whatever the weather, and begin to be that sculpture again at midnight, but only if it is misty. One might alternatively interpret "morning mist" as a single term restricted to naturally occurring morning weather conditions or as two conjoined terms indicating any mist before noon. If the former, the words could not be acted upon outside very specific climate conditions and times of year. If the latter, one might generate mist indoors with a humidifier or fog machine.

37.   "Interview by Phyllis Rosenzweig (1990)," in HBS, p. 237.

E) As ostension: Were one to pronounce the words and point to two salt blocks in the morning mist or even to affix the phrase next to the objects as a label, they could function linguistically by "ostension," i.e., demonstrating or defining by giving examples. The words would indicate a particular instance of the things or characteristics to which they refer: Depending on the emphasis of speech, an accompanying gesture, or context, "Two blocks of salt in the morning mist" might mean, "This is salt," "these are blocks," "this is mist," "there are two," "it is morning," or any further combination. The words in conjunction with the objects might be used to help a child add to their vocabulary or learn how to count.[38]

F) As words to be looked at: The phrase is given a particular realization in visual form, with its "meaning" bracketed. At the Holstebro Kunstmuseum, the English text is red and Danish text blue, and both overlap slightly. The sites of overlap are unpainted, showing the white of the wall. The text for "2 BLOCKS OF SALT" has no outline, while the text for "[IN THE MORNING MIST]" is outlined in black. The colored paint is matte (Blue: PANTONE 2995 U; Red: PANTONE 032 U), while the black paint outlining the text is glossy (PANTONE PROCESS BLACK C). The work is 234 centimeters tall and 542 centimeters long. The words have a graphic impact quite apart from their semantic content and might trigger visual associations with, for example, the history of Constructivist typography.

G) As an art object: The words are a particular kind of artwork authored by Lawrence Weiner in 1991, comprising "Language + the materials referred to." It may take different physical forms, including but not restricted to the conditions described above in F): For example, in 1991 at the Galleri Susanne Ottesen it was shown only in English in differently colored paint, in a different font, and with a horizontal line separating "2 BLOCKS OF SALT" from "[IN THE MORNING MIST]." In 2014, as part of a show with Per Kirkeby at Galleri Susanne Ottesen, it appeared again in a different font, but this time next to the Danish translation. While Weiner chose how the words looked when invited to exhibit the work, an owner can always install the work how and where they wish (Weiner provided suggestions only if they were requested).

 If we think through further examples, the kinds of uses suggested by Weiner's works expand dramatically. Some works imply the playing of a game: *PAPER + STONE OR FIRE + WATER (WHEN IN DOUBT) PLAY TIC TAC TOE & HOPE FOR THE BEST* (1996), installed in Ballerup, Denmark (Weiner commented on this gnomic work, "Every single child knows what it means").[39] Others are almost infinitely general and encompass rhetorical, constructive, or cognitive uses, such as *ANYTHING ADDED TO SOMETHING* (2009): As I write this essay, adding

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38. It is not possible to delve into the topic of early-childhood language acquisition here, but Weiner has on numerous occasions signalled the importance to him of Jean Piaget's work. See Buchloh, "In Conversation with Lawrence Weiner," p. 30. See also Wittgenstein on the "ostensive teaching of words" and "ostensive definitions" in Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, pp. 4–6, 13–19.

39. "Interview by Marjorie Welsh (1996)," in HBS, p. 352.

words to a document, I may be performing or enacting this particular work by Weiner (I am intending to do so at this moment, but when I added water to my coffee maker this morning, I had no intentional relationship to Weiner's work). Others are exceedingly specific in their designations while specifying no determinate content for use: *PUT ASIDE OR PUT AWAY / REACHING FOR THE MOON* (2002), for example. What is to be put aside or away while reaching for the moon? Or should one put aside/away the act of reaching for the moon itself? In an example analyzed by Chiong, Weiner insisted that *TRIED AND TRUE* (1970), his submission to Kynaston McShine's *Information* exhibition at MoMA, could be built; although, he confessed, "I can offer no suggestions as to how this is accomplished."[40] His works sustain conviction in use value, but the particular relationship entailed to the world of objects may flummox even the artist.

Here we run against the limits of a model of use drawn from ordinary-language philosophy. For Stanley Cavell, the negative insight of Wittgenstein's writing on language (though Cavell does not use the term "negative") is that "it makes no sense at all to give a general explanation of the generality of language."[41] Yet, Cavell argues, language use is "pervasively, almost unimaginably, systematic," defined by "grammatical" constraints and shared "criteria" for use that *precede* the capacity to make words function, into which a speaker must be initiated.[42] (In this, Cavell and Wittgenstein might agree with Saussure's emphasis on the stability of rules in a given language state, which make it like the rules of a game of chess; although "in order to make the game of chess seem at every point like the functioning of language, we would have to imagine an unconscious or unintelligent player," Saussure specifies.)[43] For Cavell, "You cannot use words to do what we do with them until you are an initiate of the forms of life which give those words the point and shape they have in our lives."[44]

Wittgenstein gives an example that is apparently quite germane to our discussion of Weiner's *2 BLOCKS OF SALT [IN THE MORNING MIST]*: If one hears the words "five slabs," Wittgenstein writes, one must be "initiated" into a particular context of use to know whether the two words constitute a "report" (a "statement" in Weiner's sense) or an "order," that is, whether they merely describe an existing state of affairs or consist of instructions that must be acted upon.[45] What helps the person hearing these words to decide what to do is "the part which uttering these words plays in the language game."[46] This is what Wittgenstein calls, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, a "form of life," a phrase he seems to have decided on in

40.   See Chiong 2013, p. 70.

41.   Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 188.

42.   Ibid., p. 29.

43.   Saussure, p. 89.

44.   Cavell, *Claim of Reason,* p. 184.

45.   Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* p. 10.

46.   Ibid.

preference to "stream of life": It is the context that provides criteria for determining what kind of "language game" one is playing, and thus how to use the words.[47] The number of possible "language games" is infinite, but each exerts exacting constraints upon the way words can be used in a particular "form of life." This can be glimpsed by the list of "language games" that Wittgenstein provides, which we might imagine applying to Weiner's works:

> Giving orders, and obeying them— Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements— Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)— Reporting an event— Speculating about an event— . . . Forming and testing a hypothesis— Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams— Making up a story; and reading it— Play-acting— Singing catches— Guessing riddles— Making a joke; telling it— Solving a problem in practical arithmetic— Translating from one language into another— Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.[48]

Where Weiner's "stream of life" branches off from Wittgenstein's is precisely in the lack of social criteria to decide in advance what kind of "language game" is entailed by *2 BLOCKS OF SALT [IN THE MORNING MIST]* as opposed to "five slabs." In the context of a mine, for example, a person unable to tell whether "five slabs" is ordering or reporting would not last long on the job. A work by Weiner, on the other hand, strips away the criteria that would delineate correct usage from misunderstanding or misuse. More radically, Weiner's artwork *requires* ambiguity in the determination of criteria for possible use.

Weiner's phrases solicit an aesthetic use that cannot simply be enumerated alongside other uses (as I vainly attempted above) but that inflects and ultimately defeats every attempt to use his words as one might do others while immersed in the "stream of life." For, as Weiner himself asked, "What use [does] society or culture make . . . of its art? . . . . It uses the objects of the real world to discuss the place of human beings in the real world."[49] This use of words—to discuss the place of humans in the world—is a very particular case in human language, in that it questions and even undermines its own everyday use.[50] Thus Weiner is right to caution

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47.   Wittgenstein writes, "The term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life." Ibid., p. 11.

48.   Ibid.

49.   Cited in Goldstein in *AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE*, p. 103.

50.   Though the topic far exceeds the scope of this essay, Wittgenstein or Cavell might critically describe this as a pretension comparable to that found in philosophical uses of language: to speak "outside language games," and "in investigating ourselves" to "consider expressions apart from, and in opposition to, the natural forms of life which give those expressions the force they have," as Cavell puts it. He continues, "What is left out of an expression if it is used 'outside its ordinary language game' is not necessarily what the words mean (they may mean what they always did, what a good dictionary says they mean), but what we mean in using them when and where we do. The point of saying them is lost." Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, p. 207.

that "basing so-called art on Wittgenstein would be a rather big mistake . . . antithetical to what Wittgenstein was trying to do."[51]

Like Wittgenstein's philosophy, Weiner's words bring the work of art down from the metaphysical to the everyday: They translate art's questioning of the human relationship to the world into ordinary language, the medium of everyday human transaction with the world. However, even in so doing, his works are not implacably carried along by the "stream of life," the objective current of socially determined criteria for language use; rather, his works might operate within language like *A NATURAL WATER COURSE DIVERTED REDUCED OR DISPLACED* (1969). They are "structures out in the world for other people to figure out how to get around."[52]

After a talk by Weiner at the PowerPlant Gallery in Toronto in 2009, I recall an audience member asking why his public art had such a negligible physical effect on the viewer, as opposed to other interventions of the Minimalist and Post-Minimalist generations (perhaps the questioner had Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* in mind). They cited Weiner's work *IN DIRECT LINE WITH ANOTHER & THE NEXT* (2000), imprinted on manholes in New York City, as a sort of site-specific art so unassertive as to escape notice completely. Weiner responded, "Listen, I don't want to fuck up your day," and after a beat added, "I want to fuck up your life." Weiner's joke balanced the modesty of his devotion to the ordinary with his desire to "revolutionize society":[53] He did not want to *act upon* viewers by impeding their movement through space (as in what he derides as "heavy-metal macho sculpture"[54]) or by deploying language to give instructions or commands (which he sees as a form of "aesthetic fascism"[55]) and thus fuck up their day. Rather, as he put it elsewhere, "I made art because I was unsatisfied with the configuration that I saw before me. . . . The reason I make art is to try and present another configuration to fuck up the one I'm living in now."[56] Rather than place particular objects in the viewer's way, Weiner deployed words, one of the primary tools with which humans relate to objects (as well as communicate, conceive of themselves, think, order one another around, describe the world, imagine others, play games, impose rules, renegotiate them, etc.), but freed them from the imposition of any particular "grammar" that could be determined in advance.

These conditions of "erratic" use and of potentially universal accessibility define the social reality of language as Weiner saw it.[57] Rather than expose the reification of language and art under capitalism (as, say, Marcel Broodthaers did), Weiner held fast to a definition of language as a kind of object that can never be

51.   "Lawrence Weiner at Amsterdam: Interview by Willoughby Sharp (1971)," in HBS, p. 50.

52.   Buchloh, "In Conversation with Lawrence Weiner," p. 13.

53.   Ibid.

54.   Discussed in Chiong 2013, p. 85; "Early Work (1982)," in HBS, p. 122.

55.   Cited in Chiong 2013, p. 86.

56.   "Interview by Marjorie Welsh (1996)," in HBS, p. 352.

57.   "Lawrence Weiner at Amsterdam," in HBS, p. 49.

completely owned. This is made most evident in Weiner's practice of designating a percentage of his works "public freehold" ("approximately half," he noted in 1982),[58] meaning they are not available for sale and are kept in the public domain to be reproduced and used however anyone wishes. Yet he insisted that even the works that were put up for sale and bought on the art market remain available for use: The "owner" of a work merely assumes "responsibility" for it, in a manner comparable, according to Weiner, to "signing your name at the bottom of a petition."[59] The works that are owned privately are still reproduced and published, and Weiner reserved the right to continue to exhibit them as he saw fit; further, he allowed that "anybody that really is excited can make a reproduction. So in fact the art is all public freehold."[60] He emphasized that he was not concerned by any changes anyone might make to the visual appearance of the language or to the particular character of its use ("they can tattoo it on their ass if they want").[61] The one thing that cannot be done with a particular arrangement of words, even if one purchases them, is to lock them up in a bank vault or free port.[62]

Weiner's politics as a "hardcore American socialist"[63] were in this way bound up with his decision to use language as his medium: "I prefer language—it's a political question, not an aesthetic question."[64] If capitalism has produced a historical world of apparently thing-like objectivity, in which "the definite social relation between men themselves . . . assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things," Weiner's words modestly and unobtrusively remind us of a class of "thing" that can never wholly become private property, whose capacity is to stage relationships between humans and objects in a manner that is impossible to determine in advance.[65] This social reality of language is the ground of Weiner's "dialectical materialism,"[66] the foundation of an art practice conceived as "a methodology to deal with the relationship of human beings to material as well as the methodology of a dialectic accessible to all."[67]

58.   "Early Work," in HBS, p. 127.

59.   "Interview by Michel Claura (1971)," in HBS, p. 42.

60.   "From an Interview by Patricia Norvell (1969)," in HBS, p. 27.

61.   "From an Interview by Maria Eichhorn (1993)," in HBS, p. 371.

62.   "A Conversation with Robert C. Morgan (1983)," in HBS, p. 102.

63.   "The Only Thing That Knows Its Own Essence Is the Thing Itself: Interview by Charles Guerra (1996)," in HBS, p. 336.

64.   "I Don't Converse with Heaven: Interview by Jean-Marc Poinsot (1989)," in HBS, p. 182.

65.   Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 165.

66.   Buchloh, "In Conversation with Lawrence Weiner," p. 14.

67.   "Notes for a Talk Introducing a Screening of 'A First Quarter' (1974)," in HBS, p. 73.