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The Importance of Colour in Sol Lewitt's Works Evolution —About the Retrospective Exhibiton of Lewitt's Works in Madrid. 1996—

**Jesús DIAZ BUCERO, Justo ROMERO TORRES
and Teresa Fernanda GARCIA GIL**

The first point to be borne in mind with regard to LeWitt's work is, as he himself declares in his conceptual postulates, that ideas dominate over form. Therefore that is his approach regarding his own work process.

LeWitt created his first Wall Drawings in 1968, on the walls of the Paula Cooper Gallery. From that date onwards, it can be broadly said that drawing passed from the most traditional paper forms to the two-dimensional space of the architectural wall-based works. This feature defines him as an artist, as much for his choice of a form seeking an alternative two dimensional projection as for the development of structures coming out of a pre-conceived system.

Despite this, his works are not bound to the two-dimensional form of walls. He also draws on paper forms as well as on the surface of three-dimensional objects such as ceramics, gravures, drawings printed on catalogues, posters, books and magazines. His works designation as "drawings" derives, logically, from the two-dimensional alternative defined by LeWitt himself.

He starts drawing lines which cross themselves in the basic directions of limited surfaces of different sizes. As technique, he uses graphite. In the 70's he draws with coloured crayons. During the first half of the 80's he already works with indian ink and tints with the primary colours of printing. At that time, he uses techniques such as the mixing of water and tints, superposition by means of transparency and frottage.

These comments on his technical choice clearly show the way his works and his ideas evolved.

This important evolution has its own characteristics within conceptual art. That is so because LeWitt uses serility, permutation, variation, intuition or chance, without neglecting his original conceptions. This feature not only preserves the leading idea of all his works but also is part of his internal coherence, as will be shown later on, when the use of colour in his wall drawings will be discussed in detail.

Therefore, the self-restraint, approaching creative sterility, which occurs in other conceptual artists, evolves in a completely oposed sense in LeWitt's case. That means that, surrounding LeWitt's conceptual aims, his structures grow and develop before the viewer a kind of bared and unembellished beauty which can be traced back into the memory of art and, as the critic Aurora Garcia does, be compared to the italian¹ frescoes.

Studying LeWitt's works and the criticism written about them, I was surprised by the little reference made to colour. This fact becomes clearer specially when compared to the references made to lines and other geometric elements appearing in his structures. Despite this, the use of colour becomes important

Regarding intuition, LeWitt vindicates it fiercely, especially when he reduces to its minimal degree the presence of emotion in his works. This defence reminds us of the confrontation between two important authors of the philosophy of nature which gave origin to the modern thinking. Schlegel even said: "By the way, feeling is the only authentically immediate act, but there is also an immediate thought. On the contrary, Fichte defends that "... concept is brought into practice only through intuition"⁴ (Sammtliche "Werke", p. 533).

¿Does it mean that the language of colour, when used in variations and permutations of its basic signs⁵, becomes the most suitable way to confront the intuition and the "frozen⁶ emotion" pursued by LeWitt in order to develop his ideas? In his last works the answer is a positive one.

But there are more resemblances to come. For instance, Goethe, a theoretician from Romanticism, developed a line of thought on art origin which gives the importance to the idea, as LeWitt also does not exist. What really occurs is that the artistic piece imitates nature (ideas in order to make it fit the paragon originary phenomena).

Goethe was also one of the first authors who spoke about colour and its perception in opaque, transparent, translucent materials and surfaces. In that sense, his most outstanding research on that subject, *Farbenlehre* (A theory on colours) has become an important reference in order to understand colour and light in the artistic domain.

Nowadays, these modes of colour perception or sensations can be brought together in the "Cesia"⁷ and its system. Cesia (appearance) is a term coined by Cesar Jannello and it refers to the visual sensations produced by the different forms of the spatial distribution of light such as the transparent, translucent, matte, specular reflection, bright ones. The term Cesia is opposed to that of "Colour" because the latter refers to the differences lying in the spectral distributions of light.

In his early period, exhibited at Madrid in the third floor, the twelve LeWitt's works, such as Wall Drawing 85 and 46, emerged before the observer like an evasive mirage. It occurred that way because the lines either of a crayon of graphite or colour, when seen from a certain distance, meet into the white from the Wall so that the result was an optic mixture producing tones of fading perception, quite similar to translucence. Works created from the 80's up to nowadays, in Madrid on the second and first floor, show the specific quantities of water and tints. Those mixture were used in order to produce works such superposition and frottage, allowing the pure spaciousness of colour.

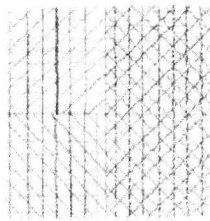
Therefore, this technique offers matte, more or less translucent and opaque, deep sensations, all of them isolated in different fragments. All this clearly shows the way LeWitt has incorporated colour in his works. The theories which influenced creative expressions during the 70's, all of them craving a "Structuralist and transformational methodology of drifting applied to language", as Aurora García declares, must be added to all what has been a forementioned. Moreover, emphasis is placed on the structure as an amalgating macrosystem of those concrete creative processes.

The precursor of the organization of the plastic elements as a system can be found in Russian Constructivism and in the Bauhaus postulates which appeared at the beginning of the century. Some of their theoreticians think that there is a "grammar of creation". Kandinsky has even written a book entitled that way: "The grammar of creation"; and Klée believes that there is a modular Structure that can be observed in his unadorned, fine and mystic works. These were the authors who smoothed the way of the artistic language evolution from the second half of the century. Sometimes, they even remained only in the linguistic side, as is the case for an important part of conceptual art.

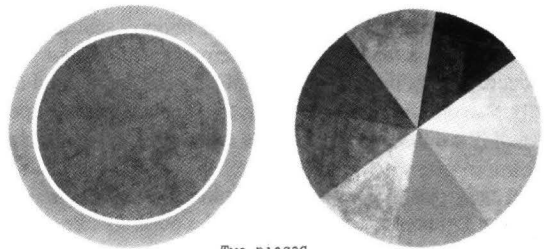
Maybe, LeWitt does not find himself in locked system because he tries to combine a geometric system which LeWitt Wants to be free and open While using minimal elements, which a system having its own variations: the ones of colour and light. The latter allows "intuition" to enlarge the links between both systems. It is known, specially by those teaching The "means" of art (philosophy, technique, history), that colour and form constite a close and undivisible unit. This unit is preserved from all expressive influences, specially in the domains of conceptual and abstract art. Thas is so because as well as in the systems of colours as in its use by LeWitt us a sign, there can be found the wish to treat it with an approach diverging from the traditional one.

This approach, that is, the renewal of this unit due to the unbeated strenght to return to the origins, is better delimited by the structuralist definition, even if it seems a contradictory one

As a last comment, it must be emphasized that the huge woks produced by Sol Lewitt contradict completely the information excess, characteristic of the present society, which allow us to see neither deeply nor clearly. This idea, also atated by Bernice Rose, points out how difficult it is to "sense" of the individual "I". However, this possibility is offered to us by the mystic observation of those works when the coloured and limited surfaces become meaningful space. Rose quotes, rightly, Saul Bellow s point of view stating: "If there is not a meaningful space, there can be no judgement, not even freedom, nothing left to be determined by individuality".



Detail



Two pieces

NOTES

¹ Aurora Garcia, in her text entitled, "Sol LeWitt. The richness of ideas", published in a catalogue on Sol LeWitt's works exhibition. Sala de Alhajas at Caja Madrid, February-March 1996. She affirms: "It can not be forgotten that Lewitt spends part of the year in Italy, that he has admitted his admiration for Gothic painters (Giotto and P. della Francesca). Moreover, there is a group of studies based on P. della Francesca among LeWitt's first drawings of 1958.

² In Andrea Keller Miller's text entitled: "Sol LeWitt. Twenty five years of wall based works", included in the catalogue of the exhibition held at Madrid, 1996. She writes some interesting comments on colour because, Without mentioning the significance of colour it self as a system, she points out in page 17, "LeWitt has spent an important part of this ten years to alotain an enriching and varied group of Wall-drawings out of the primary colours. These pieces seem to offer a feat to all the variations of hue and saturation.

³ "The book of colour", by J. C. Sanz, Alianza Editorial, Madrid 1993, shows clearly the problematic of colour. He says "The science of colour has become, in some way, a science of information. The psychological point of view has increasingly overcome the field of optic physics and, therefore, has returned colour to its primary function in nature: reference about the surroundings.

⁴ Both quoted by Walter Benjamin in "The concept of art criticism on german romanticism" Ed. Peninsula. Barcelona 1988. p. 60.

⁵ LeWitt himself in "Paragraphs on conceptual art" (1967), refers to his concrete aims regarding emotion on his works.

⁶ In the article of J. L. Caivano. "The meaning of colour . Semiotics and the theory of Colour", published in Argencolor. 1994. Buenos Aires. Grupo Argentino de color, 1996. He guides us on this new use of colour. "If colour is considered as a sign, several aspects must be included because a sign is the consequence of several factors and the context in which it is used as a sign colour functions as a three-fold sign: as a physic phenomenon, physiologic mecanimn or as a psychologice association.

⁷ "Cesia: Appearances its relation with colour based on The Three- chromatic theory", an article by J. L. Caivano, also included in Argencolor 1994. Buenos Aires. G.A.C. 1996.

Francisco Pérez, translator