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June 3, 2009

"Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read" -James Joyce[1]

A Violent Shift in Perspective: An Analysis of Lawrence Weiner's Conceptual Ideology

There is a contradiction between Lawrence Weiner's conceptual ideology and his practices as an artist. Weiner's conceptual aesthetic theory can be considered a genre of artistic existentialism insofar as, purportedly, his work itself contains no essential meaning as "[a]rt is always a presentation. It is never an imposition".[2] In this respect, art is an alleged canvas for the viewer to [super]impose his own meanings. However, this is a rather paradoxical assertion given the materials of Weiner's art: language. As Donna de Salvo delineates, "Lawrence Weiner names "language + the materials referred to" as his medium, a strategy that makes it possible for him to insinuate his sculptural practice into the world, the arena he sees for his art".[3] 'Insinuate' is a very choice word insofar as in addition to being a term meaning "to introduce oneself, make one's way, or penetrate, by sinuous or subtle ways ",[4] it also means "to infuse or instill subtly or imperceptibly".[5][6] As

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[1] James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 45.

[2] I Am Not Content: Interview by David Batchelor," reprinted in *Having Been Said: Writings & Interviews of Lawrence Weiner 1968-2003*, ed Gerti Fietzek and Gregor Stemmrich (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2004): 187

[3] Donna De Salvo, "As Far As The Eye Can See," *Lawrence Weiner: As Far As The Eye Can See 1960-2007*. eds. Ann Goldstein and Donna De Salvo (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art; New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2007) 59.

[4] "Insinuate," Oxford English Dictionary Online, http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/cgi/entry/50118051?query_type=word&queryword=insinuate&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=2&search_id=YvEg-nCwKJe-1320&hilite=50118051

such, Weiner's sculptural practice does more than merely present, he imposes meaning as well. Moreover, in employing language as his choice material, Weiner abides by the pre-existent structures that grammar demands (for, his use of language is far from hermetic); and, in turn, it is also understood that the viewer knows how to read and has a pre-existent capacity with language. Therefore, Weiner invariably imposes meaning, whether he is aware of it or not. In this essay, I will attempt to navigate through the polemics of Weiner's aesthetic ideology using the theories of Jean-Paul Sartre, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Friedrich Nietzsche as guides to explore the paradoxical positioning of Weiner's purported modernist/conceptual autonomy. In addition, I will also use the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Lacan, and Slavoj Zizek to further elucidate the convolution inherent in Weiner's conflicted aestheticism.

In the 2009 Power Plant Catalogue, Curator, Gregory Burke, asserts that "Lawrence Weiner's language based sculptural works have made him a pioneer of conceptual art; here he shows a new installation of text-based works in "THE OTHER SIDE OF A CUL-DE-SAC".[7] Conceptual art is art in which the concept(s) or idea(s) involved in the work take precedence over traditional aesthetic and material concerns. According to Therese Tierney, "Conceptual artists who participated in the discourse of the late 1960s concluded that what was most intrinstic to art was not its object-status, but, first, the inherent cognitive concept and second, the open-ended exploratory process of expressing the concept".[8] Moreover, "[c]onceptual artists determined that there were no

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[5] Ibid.
[6] I am unconvinced as to whether Salvo is being intentionally ironic in deploying the term "insinuate."
[7] *Lawrence Weiner, The Other Side Of A Cul-De-Sac; Carey Young, Counter Offer.* exh. cat. (Toronto: The Power Plant, 2009)
[8] Therese Tierney, "Formulating Abstraction: Conceptual Art and the Architectural Object*," Leonardo*, 40.1 (2007): 51.

clear boundaries between the artist, the art expression and the audience".[9] This sentiment

echoes Weiner's aesthetic principles in his 1968 "Statement of Intent" whereby he

proclaims that:

> (1) The artist may construct the piece.
> (2) The piece may be fabricated.
> (3) The piece may not be built.
> [Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision as to
> condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.][10]

Loosely interpreted, the first point suggests that the artist is able to construct the work;

the second implies that, by following instructions, anyone can build the work; and the

third that the building of the work is not necessary. Even when the three strides contained

in his 'Statement of Intent' suggest that the artist might execute the draft himself, to quote

Stefan Beyst, "Weiner increasingly comes to stress that it is the beholder who should

bring the work of art to life, be it in his mind or in the real world".[11] Weiner's famous

"Statement of Intent" lays out a "post-Warholian and post-Minimalist strategy to

deconstruct the conventional divisions between authorial production and spectatorial

participation".[12]

Weiner foregrounds an existentialist aesthetic. Jean-Paul Sartre's mantra,

"existence precedes essence," can be projected onto Weiner's art: the work exists, first, as

a material construction, and later, through interpretation, comes to life. In "Why Write?,"

Sartre states that "[e]ach of our perceptions is accompanied by the consciousness that

human reality is a 'revealer,' that is, it is through human reality that 'there is' being, or to

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[9] Ibid., p. 51.

[10] Lawrence Weiner, *Barry, Huebler, Kosuth, Weiner,* exh. Cat. (New York: Seth Siegelaub, 1969), n.p.

[11] Stefan Beyst, *Lawrence Weiner: And The Flesh Became Word…*, (November 2002) http://d-sites.net/english/kunstenaars.htm (accessed May 10 2009)

[12] Benjamin H D Buchloh. "Lawrence Weiner." *Artforum*, December 1, 2008, 256-257. http://www.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/ (accessed May 27, 2009)

put it differently, that man is the means by which things are manifested"[13]; moreover, "if

we know that we are the directors of being, we also know that we are not its producers".[14]

As Weiner composes conceptual/linguistic art, one can liken him to Sartre's figure of the

writer/author; and, by extension, the viewer to Sartre's figure of the reader. As such,

Sartre notes that

> "reading seems […] to be the synthesis of perception and creation. It posits the essentiality of both the subject and the object. The object is essential because one must wait for it and observe it; but the subject is also essential because it is required not only to disclose the object (that is, to make it possible for there to be an object) but also so that this object might exist absolutely".[15]

Therefore, "from the beginning, the meaning is no longer contained in the words, since it

is [the reader], on the contrary, who allows the significance of each of them to be

understood".[16] Weiner echoes this sentiment in an "Artist Talk stating "as an artist, you

don't form the world. You set up a logic to present to people that allows them to form the

world, because how can you form the world for somebody when you have absolutely no

idea what their life is?"[17] As such, "the [artist/]author guides [the viewer/reader], but all

he does is guide him. The landmarks he sets up are separated by the void. The

[viewer/]reader must unite them; he must go beyond them. In short, [viewing/]reading is

directed creation".[18]

Accordingly, Weiner states that "art is not a metaphor upon the relationship of

human beings to objects and objects to human beings but a representation of an empirical

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[13]   Jean-Paul Sartre, "Why Write," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. ed. Vincent Leitch. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc, 2001), 1336.
[14]   Ibid, 1336.
[15] Ibid, 1338-9.
[16] Ibid, 1339.
[17] Lawrence Weiner, "Artist Talk: Lawrence Weiner." Lecture at NICC in collaboration with Extra City, Antwerp, Belgium, March 18, 2009, www.nicc.be / www.extracity.org.
[18] Sartre, "Why Write?," 1339.

existing fact. […] [I]t does not tell the potential and capabilities of an object (material) but presents a reality concerning that relationship"[19]: "art is always a presentation. It is never an imposition".[20] In other words, these statements suggest that art is a creative forum whose intention is not to be didactic. Meaning is imposed upon art, not the other way around. As such, art presents a reality whereby our own violent tendencies become manifest: in trying to decipher/interpret art, the viewer is the one who creates the meanings, not the artist. Weiner emphatically draws on this polemic in using language. Insofar as the viewer unconsciously tries to decipher an abstract/objective work of art, in using language, Weiner brings this process of translation and interpretation to the fore, to one's immediate consciousness. In using language, the viewer is literally forced to translate/interpret its meaning. Weiner makes this process of interpretation visible: in order for something to become intelligible to someone, they must place it within their own stratum of intelligibility. This process of personalization is fundamentally transformative as the work of art itself has now been imbued with "meaning." As such, Weiner's work is intimately subjective, demanding that the viewer engage with it. In this sense, Weiner merely gives his viewers the material to construct their own meanings. According to Gregory Burke, Weiner's "works rely on language as a sculptural material to indicate the relationship between people and objects. [They] are not reliant upon singular metaphors for meaning, therefore, the viewer cannot help but interpret the work

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[19] Lawrence Weiner, "Notes from Art (4 pages)," ed. Clive Phillpot, "Words and Word Works," *Art Journal* 42. 2 (Summer 1982): 122.

[20] "I Am Not Content: Interview by David Batchelor," reprinted in *Having Been Said: Writings & Interviews of Lawrence Weiner 1968-2003*, ed Gerti Fietzek and Gregor Stemmrich (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2004): 187.

from their own point of view",[21] a statement which Weiner emphatically parallels:

"[p]eople who are using your work are making their own metaphors. That's how we use

art. […] You can see something and you don't get it; but, you don't get it for that

moment. You have to stand still […] [and] think[…] how does this relate to me? The

minute you do that, you've made a metaphor".[22] This [super]imposition of meaning leads

me to Friedrich Nietzsche.

Nietzsche, in "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," asserts that the

"creator of language" "designates only the relations of things to human beings, and in

order to express them he avails himself of the boldest metaphors".[23] A metaphor is a

highly suggestive construct and can tell us nothing about the world as it really is: it is a

trope which substitutes one concept for another. Moreover, "[h]uman beings build with

the […] delicate material of concepts which he must first manufacture from himself",[24]

ultimately suggesting that there is no essential truth to anything. Everything itself is a

matter of construction. In other words, meaning is not primarily a matter of propositional

logic: meaning is use.

Ludwig Wittenstein states that "[f]or a *large* class of cases — though not for all

— in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word

is its use in the language".[25] Interestingly, "[t]raditional theories of meaning in the

history of philosophy were intent on pointing to something exterior to the proposition

[21] *Lawrence Weiner, The Other Side Of A Cul-De-Sac; Carey Young, Counter Offer*. exh. cat. (Toronto: The Power Plant, 2009)
[22] Lawrence Weiner, "Artist Talk: Lawrence Weiner." Lecture at NICC in collaboration with Extra City, Antwerp, Belgium, March 18, 2009, www.nicc.be / www.extracity.org.
[23] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. ed. Vincent Leitch. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc, 2001), 877.
[24] Ibid., p. 879.
[25] Lugwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2001) 43.

which endows it with sense. This 'something' could generally be located either in an objective space, or inside the mind as mental representation".[26] Wittgenstein challenges this premise stating "if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign, we should have to say that it was its *use".*[27] In this sense alone, Wittenstein's theory supports Weiner's aesthetic ideology.

However, Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, puts forth the idea that language and/or discussion is rule governed and is only intelligible if everyone is on the same page. He uses the term "language-game" to designate forms of language simpler than the entirety of a language itself "consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven"[28] invariably to "bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or a form of life".[29] Within this context, everything that is said only makes sense within this dynamic of exchange/context. For example, Wittgenstein delineates how

> "[i]n the practice of the use of language (2)[30] one party calls out the words, the other acts on them. In instruction in the language the following process will occur: the learner names the objects; that is, he utters the word when the teacher points to the stone—and there will be this still simpler exercise: the pupil repeats the words after the teacher—both of these being processes resembling language".[31]

In other words, the pupil repeats, the pupil learns, but the pupil does not *create* meaning, nor does the teacher/speaker. Rather, the teacher/speaker becomes intelligible to the pupil through an acculturation via language.

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[26] "Ludwig Wittgenstein," Standford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wittgenstein/ *3.3*
[27] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books (*Oxford: Blackwell, 1958) 4.
[28] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 7.
[29] Ibid, p. 23.
[30] Wittgenstein gives the example of language (2) as the communication between a builder and an assistant: what he considers to be an example of a primary language.
[31] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 7.

Just as we cannot escape our skin, we cannot escape language. While there is always an element the person beholding interprets, he can only interpret what he behold through the means/tools of interpretation given to him. Therefore, Weiner provides the beholder with materials for interpretation and directs his gaze by trying to remove himself entirely from his work, but this is impossible. To ignore that part of the equation is to misconstrue the reality of language because language is essentially an interplay. As such, this raises the questions: how much is the beholder really interpreting on his own? And, to what extent is Weiner being didactic? To attempt to approach/answer these questions, it is pertinent to examine the structural element of language. In which case, I turn to the linguist, Saussure.

As delineated in *A Course in General Linguistics*, the basic unit of Saussurian linguistics is the sign, defined as a physical entity consisting of a signifier (an acoustic image) and a signified (concept). According to Saussure, "the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary"[32] "in that [the signifier] actually has no natural connection with the signified".[33] Moreover, "language must be self contained, which means it can tell us nothing about the world outside of itself, and we can only have thoughts that are 'trapped' inside of it".[34] This brings me to the title of the Power Plant exhibition, "THE OTHER SIDE OF A CUL-DE-SAC" (Figure. 1). Firstly, a cul-de-sac is a dead-end street with only one inlet/outlet. As such, a cul-de-sac is an insular, fixed, tight, familiar space. Employing this definition in reference to Saussure, a cul-de-sac delineates the strictures of Saussurian linguistics; namely the parameters of intelligibility within a language. Also,

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[32] Ferdinand de Saussure, "Course in General Linguistics," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. ed. Vincent Leitch. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc, 2001). 964.
[33] Ibid., 965.
[34] Dave Robinson, *Nietzsche and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Totem Books, 2001), 36.

it gestures towards the presumption of demanding a concrete answer from an artist for

that would limit the work of art to his/her definition through naming and fixing meaning.

However, Weiner states

"How are we supposed to determine how the universe is supposed to function? We each have no reason to determine how the universe works. We have a reason to determine how the universe presents itself. What's set upon the table sits upon the table. That one I'll go with. That stone upon the table can be used to crack your bones, or it can be used to build a house. It's still the same stone on the same table. That's where I stop as an artist".[35]

Thus, against the Saussurian reading of the cul-de-sac metaphor, the *other* side of a cul-

de-sac points to a space that is open for interpretation, and hence invites, even

necessitates, external meanings. The aforementioned passage echoes how Weiner

welcomes interpretation as he refuses to go any further, as an artist, than to simply

present the materials from which people can create their own meanings. As such,

meaning lies on the outside in the creation of the beholder. However, it should be noted

that insofar as that meaning itself is far from fixed, it still remains structured.

Interestingly, within the exhibition, these works run parallel to one another

BUILT TO REFUTE THE OUTER EDGE OF A CUL-DE-SAC (2009), (Figure .2)

which is juxtaposed with BUILT TO MAINTAIN THE INNER EDGE OF A CUL-DE-

SAC (2009) (Figure.3). This juxtaposition suggests that while language, being Weiner's

professed material, is open for interpretation, it is still reliant on structures. Language

itself is still, as a material, a system of signs. Accordingly, language needs to follow some

laws (i.e. is rule governed) in order for it to be intelligible; language is a contrived system

of signs fabricated by man in order to make sense of the world and communicate within

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[35] Lawrence Weiner, "Artist Series: Lawrence Weiner" (Brooklyn: Hillmancurtis Inc, 2008), 00:50- 1:18. http://www.hillmancurtis.com/index.php?/film/watch/lawrence_weiner

it. Moreover, experience is largely mediated through language; as such, our experience is translated into signs of signification and thus language places limits on "AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE" (Figure 4). Language is the lens of intelligibility: we see things insofar as we can identify them through language—the sign[ifer] precedes the signified. This picture of language suggests that everything we experience is mediated through language itself. In other words, language is the means whereby reality becomes present to us; therefore, reality is subsumed and made intelligible only through language. As such, in light of Lacan, Vincent Leitch neatly summarizes how "we follow the signs. Language speaks us"[36]; therefore, we are still trapped.

Jacques Lacan, in "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious," states that "the unconscious is the whole structure of a language".[37] In other words,

> "the unconscious is *structured*, not amorphous, and it *speaks* rhetorically through the dreams, mistakes, and symptoms of the subject. In the case of psychoanalytic symptoms, it is the body itself that provides the raw material that the unconscious uses to express itself and that the analyst, like a literary critic, must 'read'".[38]

Projecting this statement onto Weiner's work, despite the fact that he reconceptualizes the typical structure of objective art itself, and as ingenious as it seems, it is still reliant on the mechanics/grammar of language itself to make sense. So, Weiner, in working with language, is more structured than he might like to admit.

Furthermore, Lacan rewrites Saussure's model of the linguistic sign i.e. S[ignifier]/s[ignified]. As Vincent Leitch explains:

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[36] Vincent Leitch, "Jacques Lacan," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent Leitch. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc, 2001), 1282.
[37] Jacques Lacan, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent Leitch. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc, 2001) 1290.
[38] Vincent Leitch, "Jacques Lacan," 1281.

"The signifier 'S' marks the spot where the signified 's' has been struck by the bar of repression, which is indistinguishable from the structuring function of civilization. Signs thus systematically and unconsciously constitute all social codes, conventions, and prohibitions. We are constituted and acculturated by signs. Even before we begin to speak, we are spoken".[39]

In the words of Lacan, "the signifier, by its very nature, always anticipates meaning by unfolding dimensions before it".[40] Therefore, as the signifier dominates the signified, the signified's meaning is hampered and imperiled as it only means what the signifier designates. In other words, the signifier has a radical autonomy. Moreover, meaning may only have a place in what Lacan calls "the signifying chain".[41] As such, the signifier has primacy over the signified, which means that meaning is generated not by the normal meaning of a word but by the place the word has in a signifying chain. Therefore, we can rearrange signifiers at will, creating a vast multifarious protean, heterogeneous mass of signifiers strung to more signifiers. This concept brings me to Weiner's piece titled FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE (2001) (Figure 5).

Projecting Lacanian analysis onto FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE, we have "ENOUGH + , + MORE" as signifiers pointing/gesturing in many directions. However, all one can do is simply rearrange the signs themselves to attempt to create meaning; for in the end, all one is left with is signs, the material of Weiner's work itself, FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE. Moreover, according to Lacan, "we fail to pursue the question further as long as we cling to the illusion that [the] signifier answers to the function of representing the signified, or better, that the signifier has to answer for its

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[39] Ibid., p. 1282.
[40] Jacques Lacan, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious," 1296.
[41] Ibid., p. 1297.

existence in the name of any signification whatever[42]." There is no inherent meaning in the signifier. The signification lies in the chain of signifiers—in discourse, in play, in gesturing. As a result, this spawns a plurality, a heterogeneity, as there is no essential meaning to be found within signification, only a direction. In our dance of meaning making, we put into it play, we activate it by projecting violence onto it.

As Lacan maintains, language is the mediator, the lens through which we perceive and understand the world; however, this lens is not transparent: it is tainted, coded with hidden predispositions and prejudices. According to Zizek, "there is a 'symbolic' violence embodied in language and its forms".[43] In Lacanian theory, the symbolic is the register of language. Rules, prohibitions, hierarchy, roles, these are all inherent in language: as "tradition, long before the drama of history is inscribed in it, lays down the elementary structures of culture[,] […] these very structures reveal an ordering of possible exchanges which, even if unconscious, is inconceivable outside the permutations authorized by language".[44] To learn a language, to internalize it, one is impressed with the assumptions/prejudices latent within it. And, one could argue, that this can be seen as a form of violence. To clarify, the internalization of a foreign language vicariously lends itself to the internalization of the ideas and ideologies couched within the language itself. As such, language, by definition, is a violent imposition on the self, as the self is largely formed and constituted by language and can only manifest itself through the strictures said diction affords.

Language is more than a linguistic form of communication. It is the coded way in which we perceive/take hold of the world. In addition, it is also the means by which the

[42] Ibid., p. 1293.
[43] Slajoj Zizek, *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008) 1.
[44] Jacques Lacan, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious," 1291.

world becomes intelligible to us. As such, according to Zizek, "this violence is not only at work in the obvious—and extensively—cases of incitement and of relations of social dominion reproduced in our habitual speech forms: there is a more fundamental form of violence still that pertains to language as such, to its imposition of a certain universe of meaning".[45] Therefore, the universe of meaning imposes its values on the self. There is no such thing as a neutral language. In this vein, violence is inflicted on the self even in the means through which it can be intelligible: language. As such, we are limited to play within the precincts that language affords. It distorts our vision, as exemplified quite nicely within Weiner's piece AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE (2000) (Figure 6). The architecture of the building in the image fragments and interferes with the viewer's ability to see the piece in its entirety. Therefore, as the architecture is constructed into the building and fractures the viewers line of vision, language, too, operates in this violent way on the self. Grammar and syntax are means of constricting meaning. However, thought itself is bound within this structure, and for the most part, we are not aware of it.

As Zizek notes in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*,

"[t]he most elementary definition of ideology is probably the well-known phrase from Marx's Capital: 'they do not know it, but they are doing it.' The very concept of ideology implies a kind of basic, constitutive naïveté: the misrecognition of its own presuppositions, of its own effective conditions, a distance, a divergence between so-called social reality and our distorted representation, our false consciousness of it".[46]

As people naively subscribe to an ideology without fully, or even vaguely, understanding the rationale behind it, language too can have this effect. Zizek continues:

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[45] Slajoj Zizek, *Violence,* 2.
[46] Slavoj Zizek, "Cynicism as a Form of Ideology," *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London; New York: Verso, 1989), 28.

"that is why such a 'naive consciousness' can be submitted to a critical-ideological procedure. The aim of this procedure is to lead the naïve ideological consciousness to a point at which it can recognize its own effective conditions, the social reality that it is distorting, and through this very act dissolve itself. In the more sophisticated versions of the critics of ideology -that developed by the Frankfurt School, for example — it is not just a question of seeing things (that is, social reality) as they 'really are', of throwing away the distorting spectacles of ideology; the main point is to see how the reality itself cannot reproduce itself without this so-called ideological mystification. The mask is not simply hiding the real state of things; the ideological distortion is written into its very essence".[47]

Returning to language, as ideology can blur people's vision, distort, even obscure the real state of things, language has a similar effect; and, it is in this sense that language's violence is most insidious. Like most people don't question their ideological values and subscribe blindly to them, even fewer people distrust their language. Therefore, in reflecting upon this image, AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE (Figure 6), if we were constantly held at this distance, we would not know that this was not the full picture. Like Plato's allegory of the cave, we are naively fastened to the ground, watching the shadows flutter around on the wall, mistaking them not only for real people, but for reality itself.

Returning to Zizek's analysis of violence, "the underlying premise is that there is something inherently mystifying in a direct confrontation with [violence]: the overpowering horror of violence acts and empathy with the victims inexorably function as a lure which prevents us from thinking".[48] In this way, a confrontation with violence is akin to trying to turn around and catch a glimpse of the sun within the cave. There are no words to explain this experience, as it is not like anything one can register within the familiarity of a vocabulary limited to shadow and images. In other words, instead of confronting violence directly, we only catch glimpses, intimations of it and these glimpse

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[47] Ibid., p. 28.
[48] Slavoj Zizek, *Violence*, 3-4.

dumbfound us. They shock us to the core, and fundamentally shift our perceptions.

Taking a step back, as thinking subjects, we have a desire for knowledge, and are

ultimately violent beings. Our drive for knowledge is demonstrative of our thirst for

power. Borrowing from Nietzsche, in Foucaultian terms, the will-to-knowledge is a will-

to-power. Therefore, in looking upon something, we, in a sense, try to dominate it. As

such, when we gaze upon violence, we are almost struck dumb because there are no

words to translate this experience. Being beyond words, we are left mystified by the

confrontation with violence because there lies something 'farther than the eye can see'

(Figure 7) but the eye cannot see it. However, when violence cracks through and erupts,

sometimes it is overwhelming to the point of silence.

As such, it can be argued that Weiner wants to make us confront violence. He

wants to give us the tools to see. His art provides the materials for unconcealment. In a

2009 "Artist Talk," he states

> "I don't want to fuck up someone's life when they are on their way to work, but I
> want to fuck up their whole life! And that's allowed as an artist. To set up a
> structure and culture that allows people to start to think in a manner that maybe
> isn't the way they were supposed to think. And that fucks up their life. And it
> might work. That's the only reason for art, that's the only reason you exist".[49]

As such, he attempts to make visible our usually invisible tendencies. As he deals in

language, in concepts, he provides the tools to mentally equip us for this journey. We

need to strain to make sense, as he does not readily provide the answers. And, in this

strain, in this bewilderment, we are called to stop and ponder. In this pause, something

fundamental shifts, alters. In the work MORE THAN ENOUGH (1998) (Figure 7),

Weiner gives us the following: MORE YELLOW THAN BLUE, ENOUGH BLUE TO

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[49] Lawrence Weiner, "Artist Talk: Lawrence Weiner." Lecture at NICC in collaboration with Extra City,
Antwerp, Belgium, March 18, 2009, www.nicc.be / www.extracity.org.

MAKE IT GREEN (Figure 8). The concept of 'blue' is the object of concentration.

'Yellow' is the predominant colour. Weiner, his art, is the blue element that infiltrates the

main colour, and, in infiltrating it, it changes. It becomes something other. That shift in

perspective is violent and irrevocable. And, after seeing it that way, there is no turning

back. The purity of the primary colour yellow has been tainted (by another primary

colour). However, through their blending, they create a new colour all together, 'green.'

And, if I have read Weiner correctly, that is enough to change us—to change our

perception and perspective.

　　　　As such, Weiner's position that art is not an imposition is absurd. If wanting to

'fuck up someone's life'[50] is not an imposition, then what is? While it might be argued

that art can be a mere presentation, Weiner's anarchical motivation obscures such an

innocent gesture. He is the controversy in his aesthetic ideology, the anarchist in his own

revolution. Given Weiner's material, language, what better way than to spell it out for us.

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[50] Lawrence Weiner, "Artist Talk: Lawrence Weiner." Lecture at NICC in collaboration with Extra City, Antwerp, Belgium, March 18, 2009, www.nicc.be / www.extracity.org
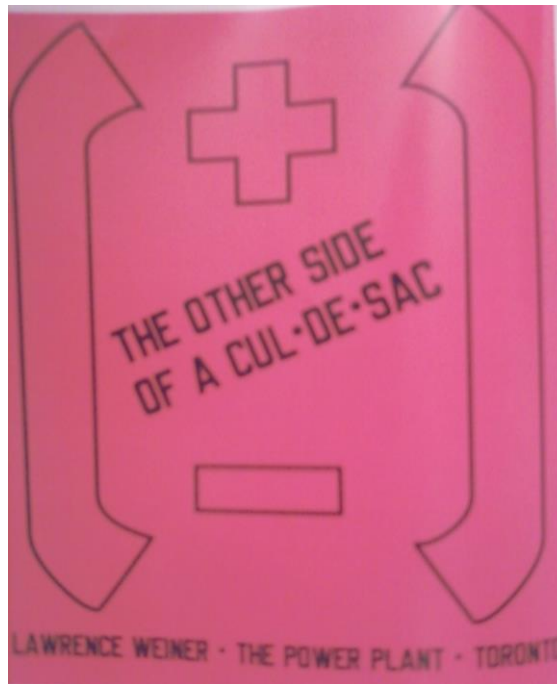
Illustrations

Figure 1. Lawrence Weiner, catalogue cover design for *The Other Side of a Cul-De-Sac*, 2009, The Power Plant, Toronto, Canada.
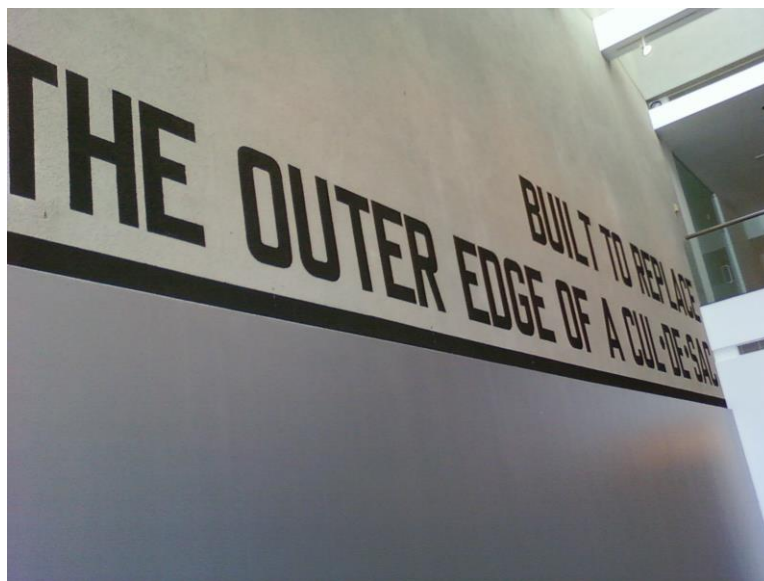

Figure 2. Lawrence Weiner, *Cul-De-Sac*, 2009, The Power Plant, Toronto, Canada.

Figure 3. Lawrence Weiner, *Cul-De-Sac*, 2009, The Power Plant, Toronto, Canada.

Figure 4. Lawrence Weiner, *As Far As The Eye Can See*, 1988, language + the materials referred to, dimensions variable, installation at the Kolnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, Germany, 2000; c 2009 Lawrence Weiner/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

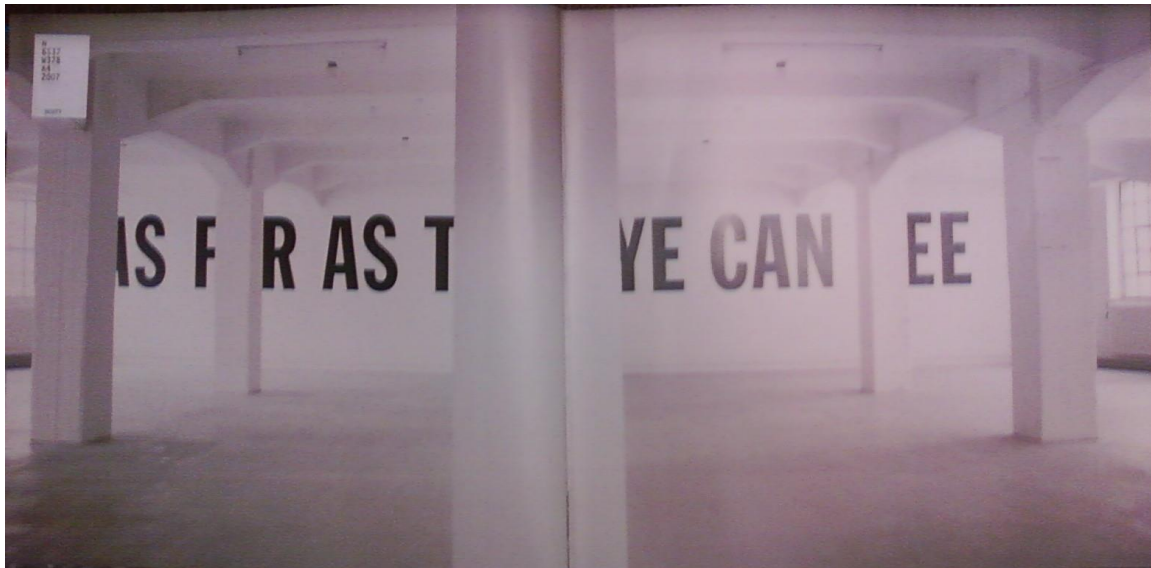Figure 5. Lawrence Weiner, *For Better or For Worse*, 2001, The Power Plant, Toronto, Canada.

Figure 6. Lawrence Weiner, *As Far As The Eye Can See*, 2000, Kunstverein Heilbronn, Heilbronn, Germany. Published by Goldstein, Ann, and Donna De Salvo, eds. 2007. *Lawrence Weiner: As Far As The Eye Can See 1960-2007*. (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art; New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2009)

Figure 7. Lawrence Weiner, *More Than Enough*, 1998, The Power Plant, Toronto, Canada.

Figure 8. Lawrence Weiner, *More Than Enough*, 1998, The Power Plant, Toronto, Canada.

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