

Written between 1991 and 2017, this selection of 35 essays is a perceptive commentary on the art and issues of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, examining aspects of the transitional period from the end of postmodernism to now. Levin's incisive prose is lucid, courageous, and suffused with an unconditional love for art that goes to extremes.

# ELSEWHERE

**THE TAINTED GARDEN AND OTHER ESSAYS ON ART,  
LIFE, AND THE ANTHROPOCENE - 1991-2017**

by KIM LEVIN

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The Tainted Garden and Other Essays  
on Art, Life, and the Anthropocene



KIM LEVIN

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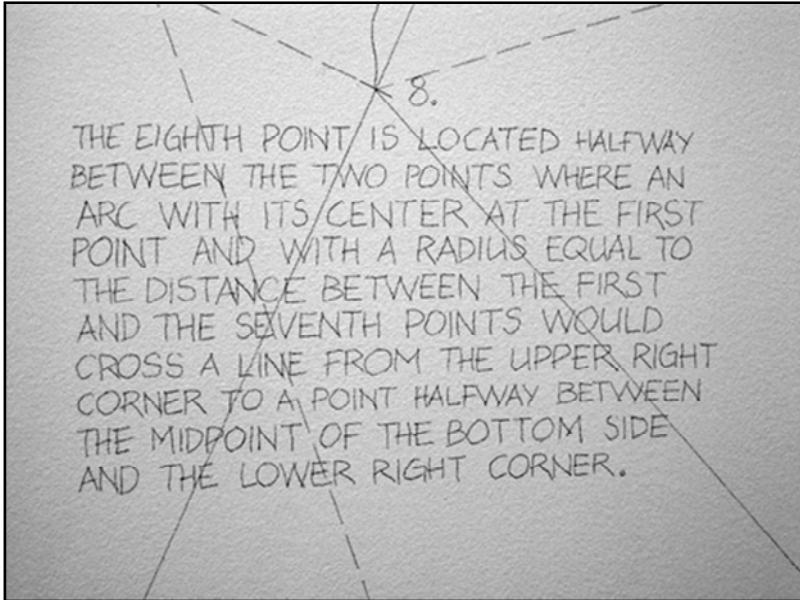
**Cover: Doris Salcedo, *Shibboleth*, 2007, concrete, metal,  
548' long. Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London. Photograph  
courtesy Anya von Gosseln.**

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# ART THAT MAKES ITSELF: An Essay on Sol LeWitt and Jean Tinguely (1991)\*



1. Sol LeWitt, *Wall Drawing #305*

## I THE DRAFTSMAN'S CONTRACT

**\*Catalogue essay for "Counterbalance," an exhibition at The Hans and Walter Bechtler Gallery in Charlotte, North Carolina. September 6, 1991 - March 20, 1992.**

*“Within four adjacent squares each 48” (120 CM) four draftsmen are employed at four dollars per hour for four hours a day and for four days to draw straight lines four inches (10cm) long randomly, using four different colored pencils. Each draftsman uses the same color throughout the four day period, working on a different square each day.”*

*Wall Drawing #48, Sol LeWitt*

This isn't a joke, although at the time of Sol LeWitt's 1978 retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art, parodies of LeWitt's convoluted yet utterly simple titles made the rounds. The titles are the essence of LeWitt's art. They generate the work. They double as instructions for whoever executes the drawing and explanations to viewers of the processes involved. They guide both the maker's actions and the spectator's response. What could possibly be more practical, more logical, more literal? Or, when LeWitt first proposed an art work that was nothing more than a set of instructions, more radical?

“The idea becomes a machine that makes the art,” he stated in 1965, at a moment when Pop, Op, and minimalist art—involved in reductions to banal materiality, thoughtless opticality, and basic geometric form—were ascendant in the New York art world.

LeWitt took minimalism literally at its word. He took the basic cubic forms, serial structures, and modular grids of minimalist sculpture and broke these components down until all that was left was the repeatable unit of a skeletal cube. And he went even further until all that remained to art was the artist's idea. This idea manifested itself in the form of a set of decisions—verbalized instructions that could be followed by almost anyone, nearly anywhere. It was a concept that led,

with perfect circularity, from the verbal to the visual and back to the mental while bypassing material physicality. And it was a system of deconstructive logic—rigid yet fluid, orderly yet random—by which the artist also distanced himself from the execution of the work of art. LeWitt's capricious use of scientific procedure was also a supremely democratic gesture that ran smack up against the romantic modern myth of the artist as godlike genius, absolutely original "creator."

His paradoxical concept collided too with the notion of the work of art as a unique object, an irreproducible masterpiece. In the mid 60s in New York, it seemed to demand nothing less than a redefinition of art.

*"A straight line is drawn, another straight line is drawn at a right angle to the first, lines are drawn at right angles to each preceding line until the draftsman is satisfied. The lines may cross."*

Wall Drawing #35  
1970 by Sol LeWitt

*"Ten thousand random straight lines."*  
Wall Drawing #60  
1970 by Sol LeWitt

*"Ten thousand seven hundred and nine straight lines."*  
Wall drawing #64  
1970 by Sol LeWitt

*"Ten thousand random not straight lines."*  
Wall Drawing # 128  
1972 by Sol LeWitt

LeWitt reduced modernist logic almost to its vanishing point. His best known three-dimensional structures are the



white open frameworks that he began to make in the mid-sixties: elegant skeletal renditions of minimalist cubes. Sometimes they divide to outline partial cubic forms in space. Sometimes they multiply into lattice-like grids. And yet in his ambivalently postmodern concept there lurk ironic residues of the modernist paradigm at its purest: his work is abstract, idealistic, geometric, and quasi-scientific in an eccentric way. Despite all its ground rules designed to distance the artist from his work, the godlike mystery of artistic genesis hasn't quite been eradicated from LeWitt's art.

*"Four draftsmen each superimpose a band of parallel lines 36" (90cm) wide in a different direction on a different wall on each of four days. On the fifth day they paint out the drawing."*

Wall Drawing #25  
1969, by Sol LeWitt

His classic wall drawings of the late '60s and '70s are webs of faint pencil or crayon lines: wayward grids, radiating clusters, meandering tangles of short or long, straight or "not straight" lines that arc, wiggle, or line up in random yet orderly, allover formations on the wall. They can resemble Agnes Martin's pencil striped canvases, Cy Twombly's scribbled works, or Piet Mondrian's right-angle calibrations. Or they can suggest the geometrical notations of a mad mathematician, the structural doodles of a capricious architect, the latitudinal efforts of a dizzy mapmaker. Art, however, isn't always what it seems. What LeWitt's works look like has little to do with what they are: manifestations of art as idea, exercises in the dematerialization of the work of art. They are also pragmatic attempts to come to terms with an absolutely basic fact of life and art: location, or, in other words, the potential— and necessity— of physical existence in a particular place.

"I wanted to do a work of art that was as two-dimensional as possible," explained Sol LeWitt in *Arts Magazine* back in 1970. "It seems more natural to work directly on walls than to make a construction, to work on that, and then put the construction on the wall."

"Different kinds of walls make for different kinds of drawings."

Those statements weren't simply an artist's published remarks. They were part of an actual artwork whose material existence was located nowhere else but on the pages of that particular issue of *Arts*. As Gregory Battcock, who was involved in the project, explained at the time, "The pages that follow are works of art. There are no more reproductions. There is no more criticism. No more aesthetics. Only art." French artist Daniel Buren, who also participated in that unusual magazine project, stated in his own work of verbal art: "This form is the object questioning its own disappearance as object."

By 1970, in the aftermath of the social upheavals and disillusionments of the late sixties, many artists had begun to question the nature of art. Sleek minimalist objects had been superseded by purely conceptual artworks that were little more than their own documentation. Art— as an exhibitable, salable, physical object— was threatening to disappear. LeWitt wasn't the only advanced artist working with the concept of art as information. But as one of the earliest conceptualists, he was instrumental in the shift from object to idea. His innovations were influential among both his contemporaries and younger artists in New York. In fact, it has been claimed that LeWitt's work was the bridge between minimalism and conceptual art. On that shaky bridge, LeWitt's immaterial geometries hover – random repeatable copies without originals that are

independent of their author – between modern and postmodern ground.

Sometimes in his early work he followed his own instructions and executed the wall drawings himself. But it wasn't necessary. The list of those who executed wall drawings for LeWitt reads like a Who's Who of the international art world. Adrian Piper, whose own body of conceptual work is just beginning to get the attention it deserves, drew at least one of LeWitt's wall drawings back in 1969. Swiss artist Marcus Raetz, known in Europe for his own explorations of immaterial perception, drew another. Matt Mullican, whose encompassing private cosmology is based on an eccentric system of repeating signs, also worked on LeWitt's wall drawings in the early '70s. So did English artist Allan Davies.

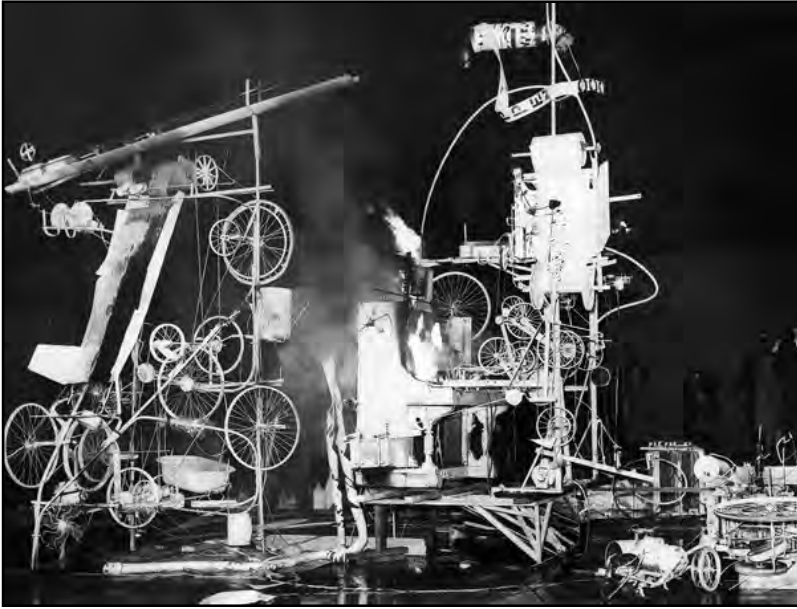
In the seventies, Daniel Buren (whose own conceptual art involves striped surfaces) and the late Andre Cadere (whose performance objects—striped sticks—followed rigorous mathematical rules) executed wall drawings for LeWitt in Paris. Sculptor Peter Shelton did one in California. Pat Steir and Christian Marclay, both represented in the 1991 Whitney Biennial, assisted LeWitt in 1976, and speaking of the Whitney Museum, pattern painter Kim McConnel executed a LeWitt wall there in 1979. The list of makers isn't limited to fellow artists and a few perennial assistants. Curators, collectors, and art dealers sometimes executed the pieces they exhibited or purchased. Gallery owners Max Protech, John Weber, Yvon Lambert, Konrad Fischer, and Peder Bonnier all lent a hand at one time or another to actualize LeWitt's drawings on their walls. By way of explanation, a simple musical analogy suffices: LeWitt's works are like a composer's musical scores. They are designed to be executed by surrogate performers.

By 1973, LeWitt's instructional titles had become more elaborate and absurd.

*“...the first point is found where two lines would cross if the first line were drawn from a point halfway between a point halfway between the center of the wall and the upper right corner and the midpoint of the top side to a point halfway between the center of the wall and the midpoint of the right side and the lower right corner....”*

His repertoire expanded to include grids of arcs and bold radiating lines. And by the second half of the seventies his lines began to commandeer basic geometric shapes: circle, square, triangle, trapezoid, parallelograms. They lined up in formation to fill those outlined figures with parallel stripes. And then, during the eighties, the triangles and squares solidified into pyramids and cubes— simple isometric projections. Platonic ideals. Basic geometry blossomed into five, six, seven, or eight-pointed stars. Solid color washes replaced stripes, diagrams replaced words, and titles became descriptions rather than instructions. Color, still limited to the primaries (red, yellow, and blue plus black) took on an increasingly important role and— through the use of superimposed washes— unexpected richness of tone.

LeWitt may leave certain details to chance and to the interpretation of those who perform his work, but he nevertheless retains supreme control. He even specifies the proportion of ink to water. His wall drawings have evolved into works that are richly coloristic, grandly monumental, and unexpectedly decorative. It's easy to forget that the origins of LeWitt's wall drawings are conceptual and behavioral. Their glowing color and blocky form can recall instead an unlikely ancestor from the start of the Renaissance: Giotto. In an ironic way, these new murals bring full circle the individuation process at the core of western art. ♦



2. Jean Tinguely, *Homage to New York*, 1960

## II CLOCKWORK ORANGE

In Europe, ten years before LeWitt's statement that "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art," Jean Tinguely was exploring the possibilities of an actual union between machines and art: a mechanical, kinetic, behavioral art. For Tinguely, a Swiss artist only three years older than LeWitt, but from an older culture and an earlier artistic generation, the dematerialization of art was also an issue. But he dematerialized art in a totally different way. Having moved from his native Basel to Paris (where Brancusi was his neighbor) in 1963, Tinguely was much closer than LeWitt was to early modern traditions; futurism, constructivism, Dadaism (born in a Swiss café) and Surrealism still lived. In the mid-fifties in Europe, dematerialization tended to mean movement. Tinguely began making kinetic art, work with moving parts,

whose visible form seemed to dematerialize as a result of their mechanical motion.

By the end of the fifties Tinguely had made not only motorized paintings but music machines, percussive sound reliefs, “meta-Malevich” reliefs, sculpture that was set in motion by tokens, and “meta-mechanical” drawing machines that produced their own works of inhuman art. At first he called them “automata.” Like Pol Bury and Agam, he was working with the surrealist notion of automatism and the mechanics of chance action. But Tinguely’s hyperactive and sometimes literally explosive “action sculptures”—made from junk metal, scrap objects, fur, feathers, balloons, bicycle wheels, watch-springs, cowbells, garden sprinklers, buckets of gasoline, beer cans of paint, with time-delay relays and intricate systems of gears, wires, and wheels—always had very human behavioral problems. They were capable of unpredictable irrational acts. And they often looked like the skeletal twisted remains of something once alive and functional that had been blown to dysfunctional, unrecognizable bits.

What could be more different in form from LeWitt’s pre-considered art? Tinguely’s anarchic machines—kinetic rather than static, noisily aggressive as opposed to quietly methodical, and comically apocalyptic instead of wryly intellectual—have an improvised, jerry-built look. Their jerky flailing motions, which seem the result of some desperate spastic malfunction, can be horrifying as well as hilarious. They appear to obey no laws. They’re random mechanical forms that are capable of random motion, with built-in slippages ensuring the unlikelihood of any exact periodicity or repetition. These existential antidotes to machine-age technology have been described as “relativity in action,” and “anarchy in its most beautiful form.” It has also been pointed out that they’re as “meaningless and aimless as human existence.” Tinguely’s twitching sculptures are agents of

irrationality as well as freedom, demolition as well as dematerialization. "They are more extreme than anything else made in the same period," curator Pontus Hulten remarked, in his monograph *Jean Tinguely: A Magic Stronger Than Death*.

Here's an eyewitness description, Pontus Hulten's, of a machine Tinguely made for the 1<sup>st</sup> Paris Biennale in 1959. "*Meta-matic No. 17* can move about independently and draws fluently and elegantly on a moving roll. The drawings are cut off one by one from the long roll of paper, while the machine continues on its graceful, dignified way. A fan wafts the drawings to the spectators. The exhaust gases given off by the engine are caught in a large balloon, which gradually fills up and can be emptied in the open air if the machine is working indoors. The smell created by this exhaust was overcome by the scent of lily of the valley released by means of a special mechanism. Total art, the dream of 1954, became reality." *Meta-matic No. 17* was bought by the Moderna Museet in Stockholm in 1965 with the money earned by Tinguely's earlier and smaller *Meta-matic No. 8*, a coin-operated work which produced drawings for visitors at the museum's entrance.

Some of Tinguely's other machines haven't been quite that graceful or obliging. In 1960, in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, he made a now legendary work: an enormous and elaborate self-destroying machine, *Homage to New York*, whose innumerable parts included eighty bicycle wheels, a piano and a go-cart. "It was a machine that committed suicide," Tinguely has said. It managed to self-destruct, with the help of the artist, amid a chain of unplanned malfunctions ('paroxysms of junk in motion,' 'like a ballet dance by invalids'). A fireman doused its flames. This piece and other of Tinguely's early works bear affinities to the Happenings that Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg and other artists were doing at the time. Chance has continued to be an element in the performance of his pieces.

*Study for an End of the World No 2*, which included the explosion of a refrigerator full of feathers, took place in the Nevada desert near Las Vegas in 1962. In photographic documentation it resembles one of Yves Tanguy's paintings in real space. "It is not to be expected that the end of the world will be exactly as it's been imagined" commented Tinguely after that event. After producing radio sculpture, fountains, balloon sculpture, and a work called *Pop, Hop and Op & Co* that was a wry comment on the early sixties art world in New York, Tinguely began painting his sculptures black. By the later half of the sixties, when LeWitt was doing his earliest pale pencil wall drawings, Tinguely's work was expressing a frenetic tragicomic rage: he exhibited a vicious dissecting machine in New York and a chariot in Paris that moved across a gallery and smashed repeatedly into the walls.

In 1970, Tinguely's *Rotozaza III*, a machine that was more than twenty-five feet long, methodically destroyed 12,000 plates in the window of a Swiss department store. That same year, as part of a tenth anniversary celebration of the *Nouveau Realist* movement, Tinguely secretly constructed (in the Piazza del Doumo in Milan) a gigantic gold phallus that emitted smoke and exploded on cue. Ever since 1967 Tinguely has been working secretly on *The Head*, a gigantic unfinished monument, some seventy feet high, in the forest of Fontainebleau. *The Head* is a collaborative meta-architectural "folly" in the best sense of that word. Its tongue is a slide for children. Its one naturalistic ear is by another artist. Inside *The Head* are various entertainment areas, including a theater with moving seats, and large installations by Daniel Spoerri, Arman, Cesar, Ben Vautier, and Larry Rivers. In the eighties, Tinguely's inventiveness didn't abate: one of his sculptures—all smoke and demonic wheels—took part in a car race in memory of a racecar driver friend. Other works became almost stately and monumental. The series known as the Mengele



sculpture, made from charred parts, is a complex investigation on the subject of death.

Tinguely, who in 1959 dropped 150,000 copies of a manifesto (for *Static Being*) over a suburb of Dusseldorf, and who used men wearing sandwich boards to advertise his 1959 exhibition in Paris (in which *Meta-matic Machine #12* produced 3800 kilometers of painting), is heir to an entire modern tradition. Arp, Duchamp, Noguchi, Man Ray, Matta, and Tristan Tzara all came to see his 1959 show, and Tzara, the original Dadaist, declared it to be the finish of painting. Tinguely, using the machine as a metaphor of artistic creation, parodies dada absurdity, surrealist automatism, constructivist rationality, and the French abstract-expressionist style called *tachisme*. With their spinning wheels, cogs, and found objects, his moving reliefs and spindly machines might be described as an unlikely hybrid of Duchamp's roto-reliefs, Calder's mobiles, David Smith's welded constructions, Rube Goldberg's contraptions, Giacometti's angst-ridden figures, and—last but hardly least—the delicate “twittering machines” drawn by fellow Swiss artist Paul Klee. The curious relation of Tinguely's objects with Klee's images remains to be explored.

As for connections to more recent art, Tinguely has collaborated with Yves Klein and Rauschenberg, as well as with his long-time companion Niki de Saint-Phalle. Tinguely's sculpture anticipated Dennis Oppenheim's “thought factories” (including, at Artpark in the early eighties, an enormous head by Oppenheim that was rigged with exploding fireworks) and Vito Acconci's self-erecting inflatable phalluses attached to the roofs of cars and driven through the streets of Spoleto in 1982. Tinguely's work appears to have influenced the improvised chain reactions of inanimate objects in the film and photo collaborations of the young Swiss artist team of Fischli & Weiss. It also can be seen as a precursor of the mechanical-monster demolition derbies of the California performance art

group called Survival Research Laboratory, and the hybrid mechanical installations—which evoke the madness of medical military experimentation—of the collaborative group TODT.

What do Tinguely and LeWitt—the intuitive hands-on tinkerer and the cerebral originator of ideas—really have in common? Apart from the fact that Tinguely's mechanical contraptions can create surrogate artworks and LeWitt's words relegate the making of his works to surrogate creators, the answer would seem to be: not much. Together they make a neat opposition. One made his reputation in the European 1950s with wildly eccentric kinetic work. The other became known in the American 1960s for his logical, geometric site-specific and absolutely static work. One was heir to the whole European tradition of early modernism. The other conceived his pragmatic American art as if starting from scratch.

And yet both artists have been crucial to the development of contemporary art. Together they sum up the beginnings of the end of an era in which the game was played according to the logic of science, technology, mathematics and machines. They share a fascination with profound randomness and equally profound impermanence. They share a skepticism about causality and utopian progress. In the work of both, rationality and irrationality collide. They share the desire to redefine the artist's role in relation to creation and destruction, and to reformulate the nature of the art object. And they share a performative view of a behavioral art that can be choreographed. Tinguely's meta-mechanical constructions and Le Witt's para-logical ideas are two profound metaphors of our time.

The concepts of these two artists intersect in a number of unexpected ways. A reliance on Duchampian chance and chain reaction is at the core of the work of both. If human

surrogates produce LeWitt's work, Tingely's sculpture is itself a mechanical surrogate, able to produce paintings, propel itself through a gallery, or throw a tantrum. If LeWitt's work is static, for Tingely movement itself is stasis.

"Movement is the only static, final, and permanent thing," said Tingely during a deliberately incomprehensible lecture in London in 1959 that may well have been the first Happening in Europe. Accompanied by taped echoes and a "super-meta-ultra-matic" machine (powered by two bicyclists) that spewed two miles of paper into the audience, Tingely called that event "Static. Static. Static" and said he was dealing with "things, ideas and works in their state of ceaseless change."

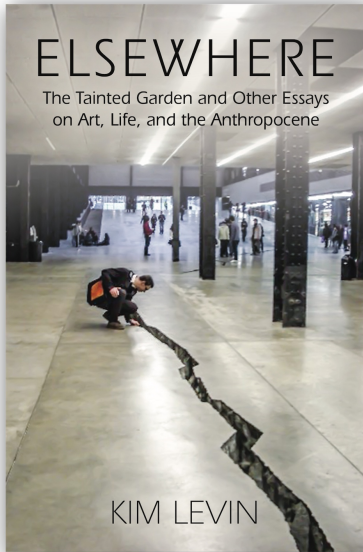
But let's end with a few truly strange coincidences. Oddly enough, the experimental filmmaker and artist Robert Breer assisted both artists. Even odder, the title for a work that Tingely did in 1958 could easily be mistaken for a LeWitt: *My Stars. Concert for Seven Pictures. Variations for Two Points*. And strangest of all, the catalogue of a museum exhibition of Jean Tingely's work in Krefeld, Germany in 1960—eight years before LeWitt did his first wall drawing—included precise instructions for making a meta-mechanical relief. Wrote the artist: "I invite you to use the plan to construct this picture and I acknowledge the results, if accurately executed, as an original work of my own. Tingely."

Tingely and LeWitt aren't nearly as different as they look. Both are precursors of our current post-structuralist, postmodern, deconstructive artistic climate, in which artists are involved in questioning origins, distancing themselves from the actual making of art objects, attempting authorlessness. If Tingely's work can summarize the ending of the machine age, LeWitt's can sum up the failing of the era of scientific rationality. In the waning years of the modern century, their

concepts have collided in Charlotte in this two-person exhibition. We can finally see that these two artists may be too close for comfort. What they are telling us is virtually the same thing. ❖



3. Jean Tinguely, *Study for the End of the World* #2, 1962



Written between 1991 and 2017, this selection of 35 essays is a perceptive commentary on the art and issues of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, examining aspects of the transitional period from the end of postmodernism to now. Levin's incisive prose is lucid, courageous, and suffused with an unconditional love for art that goes to extremes.

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