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a film by Chris Teerink



SOL LEWITT

A film by Chris Teerink

An Icarus Films Release / DCP / NR / The Netherlands / 72 mins

"A fitting and serious tribute."* – A. O. Scott, *The New York Times
U.S. Theatrical Premiere May 7, 2014 Film Forum, New York City

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SYNOPSIS

"Conceptual artists leap to conclusions logic cannot reach," Sol LeWitt (1928-2007) said in a rare audio-interview from 1974. Notoriously camera-shy, Lewitt refused awards and rarely granted interviews. In the first ever documentary about the artist, made by Chris Teerink with the blessing of LeWitt's estate, the pioneering conceptual American artist comes alive.

Sol LeWitt's artwork often involved simple ideas, communicated simply—he often simply faxed instructions to a museum or gallery as to how they were to create a piece—yet LeWitt's instructions generate astounding visual and intellectual complexity.

For example, to create *Wall drawing #801: Spiral*, a white line spiraled down the black wall of a cupola 3.2 miles long. *Sol LeWitt* documents the piece's 2011 installation in Maastricht, the Netherlands, which takes eight assistants 30 days to complete; when the painstaking work is done and the scaffolding taken away, the result is the transformative.

Using extensive interviews and documentation of artwork installed around the world, *Sol LeWitt* sensitively explores the artist's work and philosophy.

SELECTED FESTIVALS

Best Portrait, 2013 International Festival of Films on Art (ArtFIFA), Montreal
Best Documentary, 2013 International Book Fair and Film Festival, Perpignan
Official Selection, 2013 Haifa International Film Festival
Official Selection, 2013 Vancouver International Film Festival
Official Selection, 2013 Institute for Contemporary Art
Official Selection, 2013 Artecinema Napels
Official Selection, 2013 Bosch Art Film Festival
Official Selection, 2013 DocVille International Film Festival
Official Selection, 2013 Festival International de Programmes Audiovisuels, Biarritz
Official Selection, 2012 EYE Film Institute, The Netherlands
Official Selection, 2012 International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA)
Official Selection, 2012 Screening and performance, Bonnefanten Museum
Official Selection, 2012 World Premiere, Netherlands Film Festival

ABOUT SOL LEWITT

'A work of art may be understood as a conductor from the artist's mind to the viewer's. But it may never reach the viewer, or it may never leave the artist's mind.'

Sol LeWitt was a U.S. artist and a founder of both Conceptual and Minimalism art. LeWitt came to fame in the late 1960s with his wall drawings and "structures" (a term he preferred instead of "sculptures") but was prolific in a wide range of media including drawing, printmaking, photography, and painting. He has been the subject of hundreds of solo exhibitions in museums and galleries around the world since 1965.

According to the principle of his work, LeWitt's wall drawings are usually executed by people other than the artist himself. He would therefore eventually use teams of assistants to create such works. Writing about making wall drawings, LeWitt himself observed in 1971 that "each person draws a line differently and each person understands words differently".

Between 1968 and his death in 2007, LeWitt created more than 1,270 wall drawings. The wall drawings, executed on-site, generally exist for the duration of an exhibition; they are then destroyed, giving the work in its physical form an ephemeral quality. They can be installed, removed, and then reinstalled in another location, as many times as required for exhibition purposes.

Two important essays by LeWitt defined the new movement: "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" (1967) and "Sentences on Conceptual Art" (1969). The earlier text proclaimed: "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art."

ABOUT CHRIS TEERINK

Chris Teerink (Amersfoort, 1966) is a documentary filmmaker and editor. He studied at the AKI (Academy for Art & Industry) in Enschede. After three years trying several disciplines he decided to focus on film and went to the Film Academy in Amsterdam (NFTVA). The film he made for his final exam, CECI N'EST PAS UNE VOITURE..., was about the Citroën 2CV as a cultural phenomenon. Since then he works as an autonomous filmmaker. As an editor he edited many fiction films like THE POLISH BRIDE, and many documentaries of different directors. Among other films of Chris Teerink are: MOJAVE, about the inhabitants of the Mojave Desert in the American Southwest, and IN THE SHADOW OF THE LIGHT, about Jonas Mekas, pioneer of the American avant-garde and founder of Anthology Film Archives in New York.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

It is not an exaggeration to say that the work of Sol LeWitt changed my life. As an 18-year-old I saw his retrospective at the then famous Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Seeing his wall drawings there at that time (1984) forever changed my way of thinking about art. That same year I went to art school, and three years later to film school. The fact that a concept can lead to, or produce a work of art is still a powerful tool in my practice as a filmmaker. So when I learned about the installment of his wall drawing #801, 'Spiral' in Maastricht, in the south of the Netherlands, I immediately saw it as an opportunity to start thinking about a film on Sol LeWitt, to pay homage to the man who's work influenced me so deeply. But more than to pay homage I wanted to discover. How could such simple ideas, lead to such powerful and overwhelming works? The answer to that question turned out to be a surprise, also to me, so in that respect making film has been a journey, as in a way every film should be.

–Chris Teerink



IN THE PRESS

THE NEW YORK TIMES

By A. O. Scott, May 7, 2014

"An Artist Who Let His Ideas (and Others) Do the Work"

The central action in *Sol LeWitt*, Chris Teerink's eye-catching and informative new documentary about that great American conceptual artist, is the execution of one of his pieces — "Wall Drawing 801: Spiral" — on the interior wall of a vast, bell-shaped room at a Dutch museum.

LeWitt, who died in 2007, believed that an artist's work was primarily done not with the hands, but with the mind. "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art," he wrote in his manifesto-ish "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," and a large part of his oeuvre consists of instructions, at once precise and enigmatic, for making sculptures, paintings and drawings that are geometrically complex and visually powerful in ways that surpass understanding.

Mr. Teerink's film is attuned to the intellectual implications of LeWitt's work and to the aesthetic effects of its realization. We spend a gratifying amount of the film's compact running time looking at witty, building-block structures in the middle of urban parks and plazas; at rooms in the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art that buzz with undulating bands of color; at walls in private houses covered in faint pencil markings.

What we do not see much of is LeWitt himself, who was averse to publicity and resisted the celebrity status many of his colleagues were more than happy to cultivate. He is present in a few old photographs, some audio snippets from an interview and the recollections of friends. These include fellow artists, gallerists and museum curators and LeWitt's neighbors in Spoleto, Italy, where he and his family lived in the 1980s.

The on-camera absence of its subject and its overall indifference to matters of biography make *Sol LeWitt* a welcome departure from most documentaries about artists, as well as a fitting and serious tribute to his art. It is odd that people devoted to the remaking of forms and the renewal of imagination are usually subjected to the most conventional and literal-minded cinematic treatment. Mr. Teerink defies the formula, declining to speculate on the psychological or personal sources of LeWitt's art and focusing instead on the philosophy behind it.

The result is both an accessible introduction and a piece of advanced criticism. *Sol LeWitt* will help you understand the art it depicts and allow you to appreciate those aspects of it that surpass understanding. You also appreciate the labor and time that goes into turning LeWitt's instructions into visual facts:

"Wall Drawing 801: Spiral" involves scaffolding, several layers of paint, masking tape and the meticulous care of a large crew of artisans and students. The installation of the Mass MoCA retrospective, which fills cavernous spaces in an old textile mill (and is to remain up until 2033), was an even bigger project.

But there is also something refreshingly democratic about LeWitt's aesthetic, which was partly meant to subvert the commodification of art by making the work a series of ideas that anyone could, in principle, carry out. And there is something beautiful about the way he disappeared into it, even as he was making what proved to be an indelible mark on the world.

THE VILLAGE VOICE

By Chuck Wilson, May 7, 2014

"The Superb Sol LeWitt Documentary Charts the Work of the Late Artist"

Chris Teerink's superb film documents the work of artist Sol LeWitt (1928-2007), whose legacy lies not only in past accomplishments, but in the work he left for others to complete.

LeWitt made his name in the 1960s, creating cube-based sculptures and geometric paintings so revolutionary that they triggered the formation of the Minimal and Conceptual art movements.

But it is LeWitt's "wall drawings," as he termed them, which Teerink means to celebrate. While interviewing LeWitt's colleagues and admirers, Teerink keeps cutting back to a museum in the Netherlands circa 2011, where eight artists are installing LeWitt's "Wall Drawing No. 801: Spiral."

With LeWitt's measurement-filled sketches as their only guide, the eight stand on platforms in an enormous white-walled cupola and create steadily expanding, perfectly measured concentric circles, marked not with paint, but with blue masking tape.

By film's end, the purpose behind the blue tape is revealed in all its stunning simplicity and profound beauty. In the interim, Teerink paints a portrait of an intensely modest man who relished the idea of other artists carrying out his ideas, and, in the process, extending a given idea further than he himself had imagined. Art, LeWitt said, should be an "irrational leap into the unknown."

THE DISSOLVE

By Jordan Hoffman, May 06, 2014

Biographical documentaries of contemporary artists are legion these days, and even the good ones (like 2011's *Gerhard Richter Painting*, 2005's *William Eggleston In The Real World*, 2003's *Rivers And Tides: Andy Goldsworthy Working With Time*) fall victim to a familiar form. Oddly, *Sol LeWitt* benefits from the fact that its subject is dead and he eschewed interviews during his life. In the one audiotape of his voice that director Chris Teerink plays (wherein LeWitt has Woody Allen's vocal pitch and stammer, without the

thick Brooklyn accent), he says he lobbied to keep his photo out of his books, and blanched at the idea of appearing on panels.

His specific use of the word “panels” is funny, since panels of a different sort are how he made his name in the first place. LeWitt was one of the major forces in mid-20th-century minimalist art, but his early work crossed over considerably with the groovier Op Art. His work is theoretical and intellectual, but also bright and fun. Teerink opens *Sol LeWitt* with a wordless montage of his paintings and sculptures—set to a marvelous score by Dutch ambient composer Rutger Zuydervelt—in museums and public parks. In just a few perfectly framed moments, the LeWitt effect adjusts all perspective. New York is one enormous LeWitt work—the blocky buildings and criss-crossing buses are merely planes, squares, and cubes on every conceivable axis. All it takes is a moment to look.

Once Teerink successfully sets the stage, with none of the usual boring biographical or theoretical exposition, he dives into the specifics of LeWitt's most conceptual period. Famously, LeWitt was among the minimalists who would forgo canvas or even paper, working directly on the elements of a given space. He created an enormous series of wall drawings that could be reproduced by anyone who had a pencil, time, and some room. Where other artists would sell work at auction to be crated away to collectors' homes, LeWitt would fax a list of instructions.

This may sound like a goof, but Teerink shows just how meticulous and technical the creation of these installations could be. Throughout the film, as he examines more work and features a few talking heads, the film observes the slow, arduous creation of LeWitt's “Wall drawing #801” in a Dutch museum's enormous cupola. The workers use tape, paint, precision, and a lot of backbreaking labor. The deceased LeWitt, on the other hand, just had the idea.

Tom Wolfe's short book on modern art, 1975's “The Painted Word,” is in part a buildup to the argument that if an unknown, impoverished artist with a brilliant inspiration dips his finger in a glass of water, outlines his masterpiece on a napkin, then drops dead of a heart attack as his work evaporates before he can alert anyone, he has still created a major work of art. This may seem like just another tree-in-the-forest fallacy, but after enough time among these works—especially when they're photographed this well—such heady notions of ideation-as-art begin to make sense. “[Discussions of] art taken out of the objects itself always sounds pretentious,” jokes Lawrence Weiner, an artist and friend of LeWitt's, in the film's lone moment of levity.

Teerink's reserved, spare form mirrors LeWitt's work, which gives it tremendous impact. A walk through the Italian village of Spoleto, where the New York-based artist lived for much of the 1980s, shows old tile and bricks that, without much effort, take on a LeWitt-like resonance. Elsewhere, Teerink shows LeWitt's site-specific work at the Columbus Circle subway station in Manhattan—colored floor tiles no different in size and shape from what's found at every other platform, but manipulated just enough that some busy commuters will notice them. These quiet passages are cut together with only minimalist soundtrack music. Teerink clearly approached his biography with a What Would Sol Do attitude, a subtle approach that demands a little work from viewers. The rewards are abundant.

FILM CREDITS

Film title: "Sol LeWitt"

Written and directed by Chris Teerink

With:	Flip Bool	Jan Dibbets
	Alexander van Grevenstein	John Hogan
	Franz Kaiser	Janet Passehl
	Lina Proietti	Gianfranco Luzi
	Fausto Scaramucci	Leonardo Scaramucci
	Susanna Singer	Lawrence Weiner

Photography: Jacques Laureys, Chris Teerink

Sound: Wouter Veldhuis, Mark Wessner

Editing: Chris Teerink, Jan Wouter van Reijen

Music: Rutger Zuydervelt / Machinefabriek

Sound design & re-recording: Boon & Booy, Alex Booy

Production assistants: Sharis Coppens, Suzanne Meijer

Commissioning editor AVRO: Marijke Huijbregts

Produced for Doc.Eye Film by Frank van Reemst, Joost Verheij

Thank you:

Marilena Bonomo

Maurizio Cancelli

Hans Janssen

Fransje Killaars

Mirjam Meisen

Roy Villevoye

Ton Quik

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Lester Burg, NYC

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Marien Schouten

Kyra van Hulzen

Sophie Clarke

Cecilia Metelli

Luisa Camoglio

Oscar Payton

Sarah Payton

Sol LeWitt's wall drawing #801 'Spiral'

was installed by

Takeshi Arita

Andrew Colbert

Thomas Dietz

Norbert Grunschel

Petra Herzog

Yvonne Klasen

Keetje Mans

Sol LeWitt

Jack Reubsæet

The work of Sol LeWitt was filmed at:
Boniefantenmuseum, Maastricht
MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts
City Hall Park, New York City

Gemeentemuseum, The Haque
Koninklijke Schouwburg, The Haque
Albaroz Palace Hotel, Spoleto
Palazzo Collicola Arti Visive, Spoleto
ABN-AMRO Head Office, Amsterdam
New York City Subway Columbus Circle
Parco per l'Arte, Cancelli di Foligno

Audio interview with Sol LeWitt 1974 by Paul Cummings courtesy of Smithsonian Institution.

Italian interpreters: Matteo Gioacchini, Simone Duranti
Italian production assistance & translation transcript: Maria Barbieri

Subtitling: Erik Pezarro CS
Post-production: Filmmore Amsterdam
Video-grading: Martin Klein
Titles: Wouter Betting
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<http://icarusfilms.com/new2014/lew.html>

www.sollewitfilm.org

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