

LAWRENCE WEINER + CLAUDE RUTAULT

interview by ALEXIS DAHAN

ALEXIS DAHAN — Claude, could you tell us when you first heard about Lawrence Weiner?

CLAUDE RUTAULT — It was toward the end of the 60's or the early 70's, through the curator René Denizot, at a time when Conceptual Art was shown at Yvon Lambert on the rue de l'Echaudé. It was then I became interested in his work, especially in his well-known Declaration of Intent (1968):

1. The artist may construct the piece.
2. The piece may be fabricated.
3. The piece need not be built.

Later we would run into each other but it was because of his Declaration that I was more interested by Lawrence's work than the work of other conceptual artists.

AD — And you, Lawrence, when did you first see Claude's work?

LAWRENCE WEINER — It must have been in 1972 or 1973, in a conversation with other Parisian artists like Michel Parmentier and Daniel Buren. I remember having seen his work in a little gallery in the 6th arrondissement. It was a time when Paris was quite open, normally it's rather closed, each artist hangs out with his or her clique. But in the early 70's, perhaps because of the political confusion of that time, Paris was artistically wide open and I learned a lot about French art.

Claude talks about conceptual art, but for me at that time conceptual art did not exist. I was just beginning to create my sculptures, with their possibility of being read and written.

AD — How would you compare the art scene in Paris with the New York scene of that time?

LW — New York was stratified. It's different. There were many different kinds of artists, the abstract expressionists, etc. There were different groups but they were not closed off to other practices. Some abstract expressionists supported my work.

AD — Claude, you came to New York in the late 70's; what did you think of the scene here?

LW — I'm curious to hear his answer too!

CR — I had a painting studio at P.S.1 but the art being made there did not interest me in the least (except for some artists from the previous generation, like Carl André or Donald Judd. And younger artists such as Allan McCollum). There was a lot of "pattern painting", it took over the scene and reminded me of the French scene and the groups like Support / Surface.

LW — Absolutely, and of course Support / Surface was showing at Leo Castelli. At that time in New York in the 70's, it was possible to communicate with other artists. It was a more multilingual situation while today I would say it's monolingual, entirely limited to English.

CR — That openness in Paris you mentioned before – I experienced it more as a European openness. In Holland, Belgium, Italy – you could be in touch with a whole circuit of artists that were leaving painting.

AD — "Leaving painting?"

CR — Yes, leaving painting while still remaining true artists. The peak being in 1972, 1974, we actually had a lot of hope.

LW — But it didn't last, and now everything's changed.

AD — Lawrence, did you have a similar experience?

LW — I began in 1964 with a first show using painting on 56th Street in New York. I was friends with John Chamberlain and Donald Judd, from the generation before us. Claude, are we the same age? I was born in 1942.

CR — And I was born in 1941.

LW — So we're the same age. Daniel Buren was 4 years older but we started out at the same time.

AD — What were your influences Claude ?

CR — I was very influenced by the events of May '68 in France, and it was only at the end of all the work after that that I gave up on image, and my approach changed radically in 1973. But during this period, Daniel Buren ...

LW — And Robert Barry ...

CR — -- and Robert Barry -- had gotten started way before that. As if two completely different trajectories came together at a certain moment.

AD — Enough with the context. Let's talk more about the particularities of both your artistic practices. Lawrence, could you tell us what interests you the most in Claude's work?

LW — Don't misunderstand me but there is an arrogance in it that I find interesting. It means that people have to take the trouble to enter Claude's world.

CR — Yes, there are formal elements, but if you're really looking to grow an interest for my work, you have to make an effort. It is not a type of painting which opens itself up directly. Beginning with the object, you have to also consider the consequences of that object. And this requires attention and reflection.

AD — A little like when you want to read a serious philosophy book, you have to pay a sort of intellectual tax to get in.

CR — Absolutely. Even I had to wait while I figured out what I was doing.

LW — It's the difference between French-American existentialism and completely French existentialism. When a Frenchman gets up in the morning, he knows his own context, his history, his world. When a French-American wakes up, all that matters is what he makes. It's what I make, that's it, that's all I am. The other existentialist -- and this is why I used the word "arrogance" earlier -- he takes for granted that there is a world out there that understands Flaubert or Diderot. I don't take that for granted in my life. I'm aware of it but I don't take it for granted. And the work I make is placed in such a context that you don't have to know anything. You don't have to agree to anything.

AD — Does this have something to do with your three rules.

LW — When I said "You may construct the piece," and such and such, it really was all about opening it up to the fact that anyway you get it is fine with me. And if I'm careful, I make something that cannot be used for sexist or racist purposes. For Claude it's important how the work is used, which is fine. For Robert Barry too this is important. I personally would prefer that these things be just in the world, so that I can see what they do to it.

AD — I cannot help but noticing this apparent similarity in your work: the artwork exists before it is produced.

LW — But it's like that for all artists!

CR — Well, it depends on what "production" means.

AD — Okay, let's say material production as opposed to its simple formulation or enunciation.

LW — Formulating and enunciating IS an object!

CR — I agree with Lawrence.

LW — This is why it is stupid to say that some forms of art are "conceptual." All artists are conceptual!

CR — The instant the work is brought to our knowledge, it exists. I personally call that a "de-finition/method." The difference between us in terms of the use of text is that Lawrence's text is already the work, whereas for me the text is not the work.

LW — I know.

CR — But it is a significant difference. That is why I don't think it would be possible to confuse our two ways of using text. Lawrence's third rule ...

LW — "The piece need not be built."

CR — ... Yes. For me the work must be executed. What I produce is a painting. The work may be dictated with the intermediary of a text but that text is not yet the work. On the contrary, with Lawrence, the text contains all the possible work.

LW — For me it's the opposite. The object is foreplay, the text IS the orgasm. That being said, the two practices function in the same context with the same aspirations.

AD — Is this aspiration analogue to an effort of dematerializing the art object?

LW — Absolutely not. For myself -- and I think I also speak for Claude -- it's not a question of dematerialization, it is a question of objectification.

CR — I agree entirely.

LW — With Claude, the objectification takes place when an object is produced. But I create texts that are also objects, it is not the same thing. They are different decisions.

AD — All right, but there is nonetheless a difference of tangibility between a spoken text and a marble sculpture.

CR — I have often wondered if I should have been satisfied just writing the definitions, not actually painting my paintings, saying, "it can be done after I die," something like that. In fact I thought of that too late --- as soon as I started painting, I had to continue.

AD — Any regrets?

CR — I'm not saying I regret it! I have no idea. In any case, this question exists. In addition, what interests me most is that starting with the text, people are completely free to execute the painting, so it escapes me completely. I've never seen more than half of my own pieces!

AD — Another similarity in both your practices is the responsibility that is given to the "Receiver" for Lawrence, and to the "Charge-Taker" for Claude.

LW — Yes, the work only exists when it comes in contact with other people. And I think this applies to all art. All art exists with a Receiver. Why shouldn't Claude use the same words that I use? He should because he is part of the same society.

CR — What I go after is the painting itself, the finished work. I speak of the "Charge-Taker," because without that person my work does not exist as a painting. It is necessary for that person, the "Receiver," take actions in order for the painting to exist.

AD — He or she is an active receiver.

CR — Exactly. It's a problem of activity, and this is what makes it somewhat difficult because the Charge-Taker may completely betray my project, and if that happens it is probably because I didn't lay out my ideas clearly enough. The work is completely open. The fact that the work has no ending is a characteristic we have in common – at different levels because I am more about painting than sculpture.

AD — How about you, Lawrence, does the acquirer or the collector have an active function in the work?

LW — For me very simply, when the work is presented, it enters the world. It just has to be seen by more than one person. As far as responsibility goes, I have a different attitude with what you call "the collector" or the persons involving themselves, I'm not having an affair with them. They don't have to know anything about me. Basically I'm giving value for something and I don't think they assume responsibility for it until the cash arrives in my bank account. I'm sorry. But as far as use, there is no way that a person can own a work of mine and tell somebody that he or she owns it without saying what it is.

AD — So the responsibility is not in the realization of the work but in its communication?

LW — No, not in its communication, rather in its declaration.

CR — In some ways, over the years, Lawrence and I have continued a conversation in which it is not necessary to actually be in contact.

LW — In 2014, there is the possibility of having a work by Claude or a work by me. All in the same context: fabulous! Claude made a choice: painting. I made a choice: nomenclature and sculpture.

AD — Another major difference I am pointing out is how Lawrence's work lights up when it is installed in a public space, whereas your work, Claude, is more focused on the intimacy of a private space.

CR — Yes, the Public space is not my priority. Lawrence may accentuate the idea of entering the world, I think I am more about trying to leave it. My proposition is about exiting the pictorial context. Getting away from the painting. Going beyond the insignificance of the monochrome. For me, putting up paintings outside is a spectacle. But I could create posters with my "de-finition/method" texts and have them displayed outside.

LW — Painting requires rules. Sculpture in the 60's radically changed, they abolished the rules. I felt that I could work best when there were no rules, because I don't depend on Art history to dictate my existence. It was a personal choice. This is why when I first met Claude, whenever it was, we spoke as colleagues who had made different choices.

CR — Exactly.

LW — And that was considered a normal thing: two artists making different choices. It's the same with Daniel Buren: he made a choice about what the context of art is, and I made another choice. What happens is that all these different choices came together and built another kind of culture.

AD — And what about today's culture?

LW — We have a culture which is not related to 1960, but it does relate to Now.

AD — Are you characterizing the current period as one where artists do not maintain these friendly dialogues?

LW — There is no dialogue. The international art culture that we have now is a society. It has terrible people in it. It has people in it that are even too good.

CR — So now we are talking about political problems. We are dealing with a political moment in art, not in the partisan meaning, more in the economic meaning. There was some kind of gratuity in the actions of Lawrence Weiner with his words, or Daniel Buren with his stripes, but that's all gone now.

AD — Where do you place yourself?

CR — I feel closer to someone like Niele Toroni, as he is more an "inside" painter than an "outside" painter. We may summarize his approach as being the first and the last gesture of painting, at the same time.

AD — I have to ask this as you are both now part of art history: any thoughts on today's art world?

LW — We have a fairly healthy art world right now but the majority of the art is academic. And the academy exists by giving answers. At the very least it gives solutions. Art is not about having answers, it has to be about asking questions.

AD — Like Philosophy?

LW — More like commitment. My commitment is that I want to make my art make other art no longer be necessary. Like a medicine.

CR — A prescription medicine!

LW — It's romantic.

CR — Yes, very. But I am so not a country doctor, and I do not paint landscapes. Asking a certain number of questions in your artistic work about what existed before you – that is commitment. And it's one you cannot go back on. It is difficult to contradict yourself. You can explain Malevich's return to the figurative by examining the precise context in which it happened. In any case I have no intention of putting flowers on my canvases!