



## Re-stagings No. 1: choreographing LeWitt

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## PERFORMANCE REVIEW

***Re-stagings No. 1: choreographing LeWitt***, by Abigail Levine, performed at Fridman Gallery, New York, 23–27 July, 2017

Just over 200 days into the Trump presidency, and after another week with one event after another requiring that people take to the streets immediately and effectively, I am beginning to wonder how much longer we can go on. How does the work of protest train us to be better in the world? What do we learn from doing something over and over? What do we learn from watching something get done over and over? Watching Abigail Levine dance/draw (some of) the 3744 lines making up Sol Lewitt's "Wall Drawing 56," I was struck by the feeling that I was in a training camp for something essential toward fixing the present moment.

Tehching Hsieh's year-long performances of the late 1970s and early 1980s called our attention to the beauty of banality. A single time card signifies almost nothing; a year of time cards begins to demonstrate ongoing labor in a visually arresting way ("One Year Performance 1980–1981 [Time Clock Piece]"). One day of living outside is an adventure; a year is a test of integrity, innovation, and skill ("One Year Performance 1981–1982 [Outdoor Piece]"). A man and a woman tied together for a day are a spectacle. For a year, with no breaks, and yet no touching, this exertion breaks down the boundaries of intimacy in ways that are almost unimaginable ("Art/Life: One Year Performance 1983–1984 [Rope Piece]").

Abigail Levine is known for her own durational choreographic works, as well as for her reperformances of historic works by Marina Abramović (most notably during Abramović's 2010 retrospective *The Artist Is Present* at the Museum of Modern Art), Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A*, and Lygia Clark (during Clark's 2014 retrospective *The Abandonment of Art, 1948–1988*, also at the MoMA). Like Hsieh, Levine stresses time as an essential form of measuring labor. In the program notes for her 2017 durational performance *Re-stagings No. 1: Choreographing LeWitt*, she writes: "The 3,744 lines that comprise Sol LeWitt's *Wall Drawing 56* (1970) take Abigail Levine twenty-five hours to complete, five hours of movement each day for five days." A previous version of the text also positioned gender as central: "In moving these works from object-to body-based forms, Levine brings the female body in performance to the fore, raising questions about how different forms of labor are gendered and pushing against the historical understanding of conceptual and minimal art as male-dominated." The split is a little too clean: the Carl Andre School (monument) versus the Ana Mendieta School (performance). But the fact remains clear that visible labor enacted by a female body operates not as minimal yet monumental, but as somehow both invisible and excessive. A well-executed counter example against this excess is Mierle Laderman Ukeles' simple action of scrubbing the museum steps in

*Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Outside* (1973). Levine's work – the clean lines, the dedication, and even the exhaustion – owes a lot to Ukeles' maintenance art made every day.<sup>1</sup>

A Google search for “durational protest,” at least when the search engine is calibrated to me and my interests, turns up only references to artworks: Lisa Levy's toilet-based performance in protest of “bullshit in the art world” at Christopher Stout Gallery (“Artist is Humbly Present,” 2016) Marinella Senatore's 2017 solo exhibit, *Piazza Universale / Social Stages*, at the Queens Museum, and recent artistic protests at New York's Trump Tower, including the beautiful human wall formed by movement group Brick x Brick during June 2017's “Art Rising” event. There are many ways to make a stink about something, but time is of the essence: not *when* we start to speak out, but for how long. Repetitive training, whether for sports and dance, or protest and resistance, allows the body to enter into a kind of trance state: you keep going until materials run out. It's not a special occasion thing. It's a kind of doing the always.

LeWitt's complete instructions for *Wall Drawing 56*, neither intimate nor spectacular, are as follows: “A square is divided horizontally and vertically into four equal parts, each with lines in four directions superimposed progressively.” The visual impression of the original wall drawing emphasizes darkening: as lines are added, the cross-hatching grows denser, producing a closeness akin to shading. Over the course of five days, Levine followed LeWitt's instructions with physical integrity, although her resulting wall drawing bears little resemblance to the startlingly perfect minimal diagrams generally associated with this work. While some of the aesthetic of the original drawing is preserved, the imprecision of the wall work calls attention to a different darkening: the gradual exhaustion of the body, the charcoal impression left on the side of a hand as it slides down the wall, and, with Dave Ruder's use of contact microphones to collect the sound of Levine's pencil drawing each line, collecting and amplifying her work, an increasingly dense listening space.

Interpreting instructions as a score (process) rather than as a drawing (result) allows for a kind of complication that could benefit contemporary politics. Many of us are privileged enough to behave as though national political policies are a drawing: clear and simple actions that result in concrete, direct results in our everyday lives. However, a more nuanced read, and one that more closely mimics the movement from bill to law (or from election to presidential authority), invites us to look at policy as a process: a series of instructions that, when enacted, have the chance of turning out any of a number of ways, even if all of the procedural steps appear to be the same. Abigail Levine's 3744 lines were reminiscent of the final LeWitt work, but would never be mistaken for a copy. Instead, Levine's emphasis was on the line as movement: a single stroke that follows the controlled descent of the body, a gesture for us to watch her do – not an artwork that exists only when it's complete. Different lines told different stories as the day I watched wore on: some energetic, some fatigued, some at peak pencil sharpness, and others just before the lead was replaced. This act of natural ebb and flow (from sharp tip to nearly-gone) teaches a different story from the aim towards perfection that exists in the official LeWitt drawings.

Levine's source sentence from LeWitt's *Sentences on Conceptual Art* reads to me as much like a description of the process followed by the United States government as it does a process for producing creative work: “Irrational thoughts should be followed

absolutely and logically.” In other words: no matter what our minds invent on a whim, we must develop some kind of procedure to bring these thoughts into the world. Enacting an irrational thought with a process of physical relationality, whether it’s the whim of a ruler resulting in the march of an army, or the drawing becoming a dance, can have serious consequences not just for that which is done – upon (the barbarian country; the wall), but also for the doer. Levine’s work speaks to what happens if we follow irrational thoughts not logically, but relationally. By taking the work into her own body, she offers us a knowledge that becomes unavoidable – well beyond the flat political understanding of an empathetic self. Body knowledge, the feeling of directly enacting and being enacted upon, rather than the imagining of another’s emotional landscape, may be the only thing that really forces us to change.

Meanwhile, monuments to the United States Confederacy are coming down, pulled by our own hands in a call for the support of the state. Demonstrating that the drawing of our U.S. society retrains the effect of our bodies reminds us that we were really there. Resistance is not so much a single brave act as the ability to do something over and over, until the shape we are creating is complete – or at least as complete as our bodies can allow.

*Choreographing LeWitt* was performed at the Fridman Gallery from July 23–27, for five hours each day. The drawing was painted over the day after the performance ended.

#### Note

1. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*, 1969, accessed via Ronald Feldman Gallery, [http://www.feldmangallery.com/media/pdfs/Ukeles\\_MANIFESTO.pdf](http://www.feldmangallery.com/media/pdfs/Ukeles_MANIFESTO.pdf)

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