IN THE STREAM OF LIFE
LIZ KOTZ

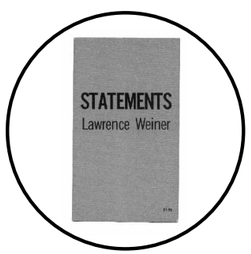
PUT WHERE IT WAS NOT
USED AS IT WAS NOT
LEFT WHERE IT IS
UNTIL IT IS.

WHAT DO WE COME UPON WHEN WE COME UPON A PROJECT BY LAWRENCE WEINER?

Weiner's works use words—a public form—and set them in public places: streets, buildings, walls, public squares. His statements often resemble other forms of public written inscription, such as signage, placards, or even advertising, yet they insist on being read differently: on being read as art, and even—perhaps perversely—as sculpture. Embracing the "universal common possibility of availability"[1] that language provides, and using visual formats designed for their utmost clarity, precision, and legibility, Weiner puts in public places phrases that appear perplexing and enigmatic if not downright cryptic. With their almost poetic precision and what I want to describe as "grace," the texts' sensual appeal draws us in even while an initial lack of comprehension may put us off.

Weiner's work with language has been changing and mutating for almost thirty-five years, since the publication of his book *Statements* in 1968. In *Statements*, a series of sculptures—many of which had previously been constructed out in the world—were transcribed into condensed linguistic propositions: A FIELD CRATERED BY STRUCTURED SIMULTANEOUS TNT EXPLOSIONS (cat.#030), ONE STANDARD DYE MARKER THROWN INTO THE SEA (cat.#022). ONE QUART EXTERIOR GREEN ENAMEL THROWN ON A BRICK WALL (cat.#002). A 2" WIDE 1" DEEP TRENCH CUT ACROSS A STANDARD ONE CAR DRIVEWAY (cat.#019).[2] Subsequently numbered and catalogued, each "piece" presents minimal verbal specifications, a set of "necessary and sufficient conditions," that define the work—and that would permit you, or any other "receiver" of the work, to produce it should you chose to. Weiner famously codified this status in his 1968 "Statement of Intent," which declared that "the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership," bringing a terminology associated with broadcast media to the discussion of what had been an object-based practice.

The early statements read like a catalogue of types of sculptural actions and materials found in "postminimal," "process-based," and "anti-form" projects of the late 1960s. These projects, associated with artists including Robert Morris, Barry LeVa, Richard Serra, and Robert Smithson, aimed to open sculpture up to everyday, pliable, and non-monumental materials and, more essentially, to time: to temporal processes of accumulation, placement, unfolding, decay, and dispersion that make material reality fundamentally unstable and impermanent. Weiner's decision to render the works as words (in Weiner's formulation, "language + the materials referred to") both complicates and simplifies this



situation: how can something be both language and sculpture? Historically, Weiner's move was controversial, and in many circles it still is—why would a museum or collector, for instance, buy "a work" that only exists in words, and that is thus equally available to anyone? In the late 1960s, when artists were investigating new production and distribution forms, from artists' stores to artists' books to magazines and posters and ads, words offered an almost limitless capacity to enter the culture. And, although we live in a very different moment from 1968, they still do.

Weiner's project assumes that his statements can potentially be understood meaningfully by whoever encounters them in a public context—engaging a rational communicative function to transfer and transmit information—while also working as sculpture within the contexts and conventions of contemporary art. In so doing, his texts present a strange contradiction: they are completely idiosyncratic and identifiable—you always recognize a Weiner when you see one—yet they can go anywhere, and insinuate themselves into all kinds of different contexts. Their distinctiveness comes not only from certain recurring typographic and design preferences—capital letters, blocky fonts, almost algebraically simplified renderings—but from how they operate, according to a quite distinct logic, as general linguistic propositions that permit unlimited realizations.

Weiner's statements characteristically use short, simple, quite "ordinary" words that describe some of the most basic materials and relations around us: BEACHED (cat.#192), 1970. BROKEN OFF (cat.#251), 1971. MADE QUIETLY (cat.#286), 1972. GREEN AS WELL AS BLUE AS WELL AS RED (cat#.289), 1972. This is not a specialized language or one that would appear hard to understand. So it is difficult to explain why Weiner's project often seems so cryptic. As work with language produced within the context of visual art, Weiner's statements defy many critical tools; they don't rely on preexisting genres or historical precedents. This makes it tempting to consult the artist's own comments, critiques, and interviews for elucidation. Not unlike the work itself, Weiner's comments are articulate, logical, perceptive, and informed, yet sometimes maddeningly opaque—as if you had wandered into a language system adjacent to, but slightly different from, your own. Fortunately, many people have found it worth the trouble to enter this world, and allow it to enter and reshape theirs as well.

How do these statements work, out in the world? Living with one over time helps give me a sense of this. In Minneapolis where I happen to live, the Walker Art Center has a Weiner piece mounted on the front of its main building which reads: BITS & PIECES / PUT TOGETHER / TO PRESENT A SEMBLANCE / OF A WHOLE (cat.#690), 1991. Because this work faces a major thoroughfare, I see it frequently, once or twice a week if not more.

What could this piece *mean*? Well, it's evident that it means pretty much what it says: BITS & PIECES PUT TOGETHER TO PRESENT A SEMBLANCE OF A WHOLE. There's nothing too complicated about that, right? One might know, from reading published interviews and statements by Weiner, that he would like his pieces to be very clear and precise and yet not so specified that their meaning is already filled up and closed down—in Weiner's terms, open enough that viewers can bring their own "metaphor" to the work. And by bringing their own metaphor—their own needs, concerns, personal feelings, and desires—thereby make the work useful: "Art is something that human beings make to present to others to understand their place in the world."[3] This is an astounding statement coming from a contemporary artist, particularly one whose works emphatically do not take the form of "messages" or easily recognizable "political art." In fact, Weiner has raised vehement objections to conventional message-based art, arguing that such work excludes its viewers:

> When art is a metaphor, whether in a gallery or on the street, whether it uses language or doesn't use language, whether the metaphor is about homeless people or brutality in former Yugoslavia, or brutality in the second world war, that metaphor leaves you out. It leaves out the people that come to see art to find their relation with materials and this is because it requires, in order for you to understand it, that you accept the value structure, the assumptions, everything that came from those people who committed those things that gave you that metaphor.[4]

This principled rejection of overt political content in art may seem hard to account for, particularly from someone like Weiner who has very strong political views. Yet his art arises from a set of conditions, rooted in the 1950s and 1960s, that led him to reject any art practice that is "authoritarian or "impositional." Informed by experiments in performance that occurred in the context of Happenings, Fluxus, and postwar music, Weiner shares an orientation to the rigorous "indeterminacy" advocated by composer John Cage. Like musical scores that make possible countless differing performances, each of which represents one instance of the larger "work," Weiner's statements serve both to record a structure and anticipate its production.

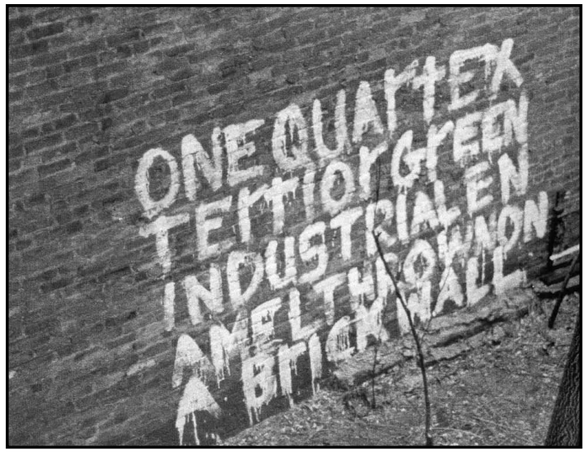
One could argue that the very concept of a "work" as a variously realizable template, notated in one medium and executed in another (Weiner's public projects, Sol LeWitt's wall drawings, or Douglas Huebler's various "location," "duration," and "variable" pieces) proceeds from a musical model. Yet this practice also resembles other notational forms in which a general plan permits multiple enactments or realizations—including architectural blueprints, fabrication instructions, and engineering or design specifications. In an industrial context, however, such mechanisms provide regularization and control, in order to produce a repeatable or replaceable form that remains the same despite vagaries of time, labor, and materials. A Donald Judd sculpture refabricated should not change perceptibly. But A 36" X 36" REMOVAL TO THE LATHING OR SUPPORT WALL OF PLASTER OR WALLBOARD FROM A WALL (cat.#021), 1968, cannot be the same twice—both because it is inscribed into a specific context each time, and because its verbal specifications call for generic, everyday forms and procedures. As Weiner notes, working with language permits "a general idea of materials rather than the specific"; by its very nature, language can indicate generally available forms, not a unique special stone or prophetic object.[5]

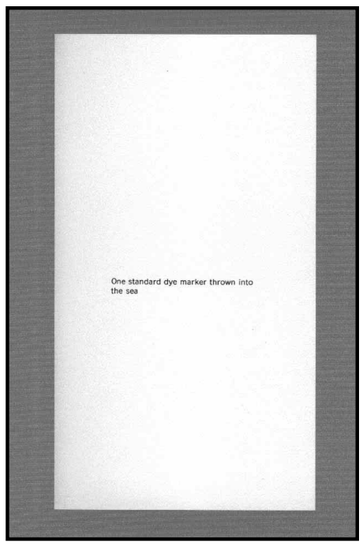
Weiner's work with language arguably draws on the short, instruction-like compositions or "event scores" that certain proto-Fluxus artists produced, adopting the form of the musical score for text-based works that could result in an object, performance, or simple mental awareness. These were works that the viewer/reader could realize or construct, such as La Monte Young's "Composition 1960 #10," which reads, "Draw a straight line and follow it"; or George Brecht's 1961 "WORD EVENT," "· exit."[6] Weiner, however, took pains to differentiate his project from the "impositional," "choreographic" character of these overtly participatory and performance-based works, and what he terms their "prescriptive" and "instructional" forms of language. Instead, he would insist: "My own work never gives directions, only states the work as an accomplished fact."[7] And: "There are choices to make but there are no directions. All of the pieces, if you read carefully, are stated facts."[8]

In its ambivalence toward overtly associational and participatory dimensions, Weiner's work extends certain principles of minimal art, particularly the minimalist desire to suppress the anthropomorphic qualities of an object in order to elicit a direct physical, phenomenological apprehension of the world: "Art is not a metaphor upon the relationship of human beings to objects and objects in relation to human beings but a representation of an empirical existing fact. It does not tell the potential & capabilities of an object (material) but presents a reality concerning that relationship."[9] Yet this "presenting a reality" occurs in words, moving Weiner's project outside the space of phenomenology and into the very workings of meaning. As Benjamin Buchloh notes, Weiner's statements "detached sculpture from the mythical promise of providing access to pure phenomenological space and primary matter by insisting on the universal common availability of language as the truly contemporary medium of simultaneous collective reception."[10] Unlike minimal art, you enter Weiner's work not through direct bodily perception, but through the much stranger materiality and temporality of language. The time involved is not phenomenological, but existential: the time of experience, encounter, working through over time. This situation is very unusual, since sculpture doesn't usually require that you develop this relation to the object that changes with your life.

Rendered in the past participle, and in prepositions, conjunctions, and dependent clauses, Weiner's statements present something that has been done, something that exists, "an empirical existing fact." Yet a structural peculiarity of the past tense is that it remains open to reenactment, to continual reuse: BROKEN OFF keeps happening, again and again. As Weiner insists, language is always here, in the present. It permits a direct experience: each statement is "an immediate happening," "something that is immediately realizable."[11] And while a memory of an object is no longer the object, a phrase remembered, repeated, or grafted onto a new context remains itself: "All you have to remember is the words."[12] As the curator Dieter Schwarz elaborates, "If a piece functions linguistically, each performance will draw its momentary significance from a specific context. The more abstract a piece, the greater its potential to reach beyond the present."[13]

And indeed, the statement BITS & PIECES / PUT TOGETHER / TO PRESENT A SEMBLANCE / OF A WHOLE describes any number of realities: I can read it as a theory of sculpture, a rumination on the art museum and its collections, a description of the country or the culture. It is also a model of language. The fact that I happen to come upon the piece on my way home from therapy, after a year of loss and upheaval, lends a different resonance, as a theory of the psyche. I think this is what Weiner means about each viewer being able to provide their own metaphor, and about each statement's capacity to take on new associations in new contexts while nonetheless remaining the same piece.





If we place BITS & PIECES ... in the context of Weiner's work, the statement takes on resonances from what feel like related pieces: MANY COLORED OBJECTS PLACED SIDE BY SIDE TO FORM A ROW OF MANY COLORED OBJECTS (cat.#462), 1979, or SMASHED TO PIECES (IN THE STILL OF THE NIGHT) (cat.#670), 1991. These are pieces that quite famously have tended to take on quite specific meanings or metaphors when installed in specific contexts—the former on the façade of the Fridericianum in Kassel at Documenta VII in 1982, where it offered a wry comment on the international art exhibition; the latter on the side of an abandoned antiaircraft defense tower in Vienna, where it referred quite directly to the events of the Second World War.

Those are very public, yet by no means definitive, examples of a work "finding its metaphor." Others may be more individual. Once you've gotten used to them, certain statements can take on the ubiquity of pop song lyrics or behave like a new word you've learned that suddenly is everywhere: ALTERED TO SUIT. PASSAGE TO THE NORTH. BROKEN OFF. It seems strange how such spare, seemingly modest formulations can accrue significance over time—can in fact come to describe our place in the world or a reality we encounter. Since I moved to Minnesota, TO THE NORTH really means something. And while I haven't yet found crucial uses for, say, A WALL CRATERED BY A SINGLE SHOTGUN BLAST (cat.#026), 1969, or THE ARCTIC CIRCLE SHATTERED (cat.#074), 1969, in a different life, you might. Often the simplest, most reduced structure becomes the most inclusive. During a 1989 reinstallation of BROKEN OFF, Weiner discussed the difficulty of finding the right situation for the piece, one he had been working on for nineteen years:

> If it stands so much for me it might just stand so much for another generation or for other people. That is my public part of it. But the real part of it is that "Breaking off Something" is one of the most important functions we can understand. It is something that anybody who works in any business understands: that you must learn to understand which of the things with materials that you break apart is for the society or against the society.[14]

Reading through catalogues of Weiner's statements, one encounters certain materials (water, stone, signaling devices like flares and markers) and procedural preoccupations (removal, breaking, accumulation) that return and recur. You can't quite assemble a narrative or a history, but certain moods and obsessions come through. Within a controlled set of procedures, one glimpses hope, anger, curiosity, and despair. Part of the impact of Weiner's work, though he might disagree, lies in the sense that a great deal of affect lingers just under the surface of what appear to be quite impersonal phrases. This is someone who has said, "All art is made from anger,"[15] but also insists, "my art does not require that you are upset by the same things I am upset by."[16]

Even in this context, PUT WHERE IT WAS NOT USED AS IT WAS NOT LEFT WHERE IT IS UNTIL IT IS (cat.#847), 2000, is an unusually emotional piece. It is "about striving," Weiner notes, about waiting and wanting, about making something that did not exist before: PUT WHERE IT WAS NOT / USED AS IT WAS NOT / LEFT WHERE IT IS / UNTIL IT IS. We could read these words as referring to sculpture. They describe a process of assembling or building where you have to work against or despite previous uses, where you have to put all the pieces together. Since "it" is such a flexible pronoun, one that can stand for almost any kind of noun or object, you don't know if "it" remains constant throughout the piece, or changes. With its peculiar temporarily, the work is not necessarily about the conditions in which you find it: it could be in any one of these states. And "until" is a very dense and old little word, like many Weiner is drawn to. Of Middle English or Old Norse derivation, "until" is both a preposition and a conjunction; it means something like "up to," "as far as," "so as to reach," "up to the time of," and "so long or so far that," and denotes motion to and/or reaching a person or place or moment. While the first three phrases are in the past tense, "until" implies the future or something that we are still moving toward. The statement renders a process of displacement and disruption, moving from description to the moment when something *takes place*. We should not be deceived by the brevity of many of Weiner's statements, which condense language to a set of concise, regularized formulations. Like tools honed over years of use, they provide a series of generalized principles for the most varied and unanticipated circumstances.

In a recent essay on Weiner's work, Alexander Alberro notes the "self-reflexive questioning of the role of monuments with regard to the public that has come to preoccupy Weiner in recent years."[17] Presented at Ohio State as a public installation and as part of a radio piece, UNTIL IT IS has a precarious relation to monumentality. The text is installed in two reddish brick circles in Mirror Lake Hollow, a large public clearing. People cross this space from all sides to get from one building to another; in nice weather, students gather and linger in it. Weiner's preparatory drawings called for "jet black bricks, set into the existing brick work *... not painted, not coated, ... black as coal, hard as rock*." Individual letters are cut from the bricks in a variation of Offline (a blocky font) "adapted to the nature of the black brick elements." The specification of hard black bricks, a durable public material, establishes a permanence of form that contrasts with the openness and indeterminacy of the statements. The phrases are laid into the existing brickwork, relatively unobtrusively, where they will be walked on and stepped on as people pass through—recalling a number of public projects Weiner has built using the flat surfaces of public plazas and walkways (and even, in New York City, a recent installation on nineteen manhole covers placed in lower Manhattan streets, which read IN DIRECT LINE WITH ANOTHER & THE NEXT [cat.#837], 1999).

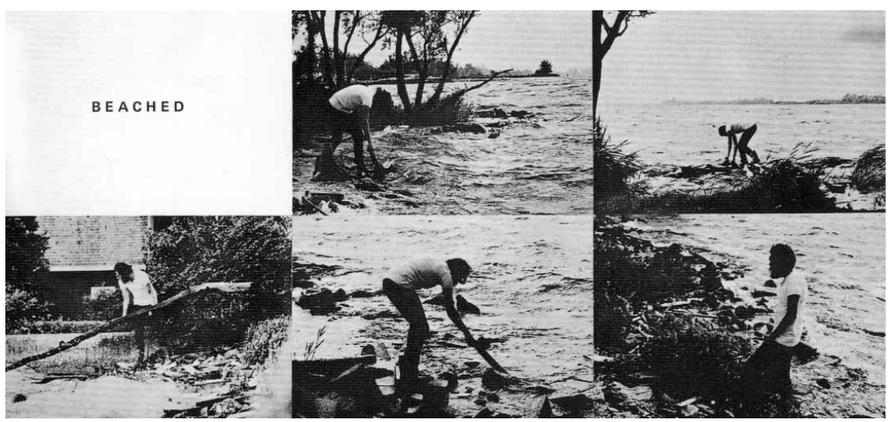
UNTIL IT IS also occurs as a refrain in the radio spot that accompanies the installation, in which a male voice (Weiner's) reads a second text: "IN AMERICA ... THERE WAS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY A PHILOSOPHY THAT BELIEVED THAT EACH GIRL WAS UNIQUE AND ALONE IN AN INDIFFERENT AND OFTEN HOSTILE WORLD." This statement is repeated five times, interlaced with a female voice reading each of the four phrases, PUT WHERE IT WAS NOT / USED AS IT WAS NOT / LEFT WHERE IT IS / UNTIL IT IS, which is restated in full at the end. Colored by the gender and texture of the voices, each statement possesses a distinct register: one is a complete sentence, a far more monumental statement about the twentieth-century girl, the other, an elliptic series of fragments.

Although the repeated long sentence seems an anomaly, Weiner has long used sound pieces and film soundtracks to present more theoretical pronouncements—often overlaid with background talk, instrumental music, or melodic noise—and to introduce personal and narrative resonances into the otherwise abstract, sculptural statements. In an interview with Benjamin Buchloh, Weiner suggests that "putting the work in the context of music cheapens it and at the same time heightens the fact that is has a relevance to our society."[18] Inter-cutting the two very different texts works analogously, perhaps, to Weiner's tendency to introduce his statements as dialogue in the feature-like films he made in the 1970s and early 1980s—efforts to put them to use, to place them, in a phrase Weiner adopts from Wittgenstein, "in the stream of life." Hearing these statements read aloud, by different voices, animates them unexpectedly, introducing subtle variations of phrasing, intonation, and emphasis, without anchoring them to a specific historical referent.

Even the "girl," which comes as a surprise, only flirts with the possibility of a historical subject. Typically, we might expect the subject of this second text—an emblematic statement of a post-WWII existential stance—to be paradigmatically male. After all, the subject that is "unique and alone," and yet free to make choices, seems posed in existential philosophy as implicitly or explicitly male; the female all-too-often appears merely as part of that background world that "man" differentiates himself against. Yet Weiner has performed an inversion, addressing this statement to women or to girls—a linked project, broadcast on German radio in the late 1990s, announced "every woman is unique and alone, in an indifferent and often hostile world."[19] Weiner explains his insistence on the existential subject as female as due to the fact that in the postwar era, men were subject to conscription, and thus not able to make certain choices. Yet in other comments, Weiner implicitly figures the (male) artist as female, as a kind of "woman"—so much so that I am tempted to read the "girl" "in the twentieth century" to be Weiner as much as his imagined listener. For despite Weiner's oft-cited aversion to the personal, somehow the whole piece feels like a highly abstracted rumination on his project—which is also our project, to the extent that we too are striving to make something, to do something, UNTIL IT IS.

The radio project thus gives us an alternate siting, and an alternate reading, of the statement's four resonant phrases. It puts them out into the world, for us to grasp if we choose. Such multiple stagings of a single piece offer us different points of access and identification—different ways in. This is a very curious form of public art, since it doesn't rely on, or aim to produce, a common history or shared set of meanings. Unlike any number of recent art projects that place language in public places to serve overtly memorial or commemorative functions, there is nothing in Weiner's project to hinge it to a specific event or historical reference that would overdetermine its resonance. Weiner's statements do not list Americans who died in the Vietnam war—as in Maya Lin's Washington D.C. memorial—or recite public pledges or juridical oaths—as in *Questions,* Barbara Kruger's 1989 installation at the Temporary Contemporary in Los Angeles. Yet this reluctance to invoke specific historical referents allows Weiner's statements to reflect all the more clearly on the workings of language—on language as a medium that communicates and that permits the very possibility of communications.

Since they don't refer to a shared past—or provide a preexisting "metaphor," to adopt the artist's term—Weiner's public projects can only become meaningful by entering into the present. If classical monuments typically invoke a model of historical memory that presupposes a linear concept of time, and a relatively unified collective subject, these resonant bits and pieces of language do something different. They call for forms of remembrance or recollection that remain fragmentary and unfinished, that continue to change depending upon the recipient and the context. To do so implies a different notion of audience, one that is always coming into being and changing rather than one that is ready-made or already existing. This decidedly anti-monumental form of public art curiously suits its location, at an American college campus whose public, by its very nature, is dispersed, transitory, and constantly recreated anew. We are used to thinking of these attributes of American culture—our lack of unity, permanence, or any shared sense of purpose or history—as faults or deficits. Part of the power of Weiner's art is that it assumes these cultural conditions as given—as structural and enabling conditions—to create "sculptures" that are made for dispersion and dissemination, rather than attempting to reestablish false and anachronistic forms of monumentality.



1 Lawrence Weiner, in "Benjamin Buchloh in conversation with Lawrence Weiner," *Lawrence Weiner* (London: Phaidon, 1998), p. 19.
2 In keeping with Weiner's format, statements are rendered in all capital letters. Listed after each statement is the catalogue number assigned to it as recorded in *Lawrence Weiner: Specific & General Works* (Villeurbanne, France: Le Nouveau Musée/Institut d'Art Contemporain, 1993) and its date.
3 Weiner, "Intervention" [1997] *Lawrence Weiner* (London: Phaidon, 1998), p. 132.
4 *Ibid.*
5 "Lawrence Weiner," Interview by Lynn Gumpert, *Early Work* (New York: The New Museum, 1982), p. 47.
6 I draw out this relation in a longer essay, "Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the 'Event' Score," *October* 95 (Spring, 2001).
7 "Lawrence Weiner, October 12, 1969," in Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art* (New York: Dutton, 1972), p. 218.
8 "Lawrence Weiner, June 3, 1969," in Alexander Alberro and Patricia Norvell, *Recording Conceptual Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 105.
9 Weiner, "Notes On & About Art" [1995], *Lawrence Weiner*, p. 124.
10 "Benjamin Buchloh in conversation with Lawrence Weiner," p. 19.
11 Weiner, in "A Conversation with William Furlong concerning 20 Works by Lawrence Weiner" (London: Audio Arts Studio, 1980) published in William Furlong, *Audio Arts: Discourse and Practice in Contemporary Art* (London: Academy Editions, 1994), p. 76.
12 Weiner, in David Batchelor, "*I am Not Content*: Lawrence Weiner Interviewed," *Artscribe, No. 74* (March/April 1989), p. 52.
13 Dieter Schwarz, "MOVED PICTURES: Film & Videos of Lawrence Weiner," in Bartomeu Marí, ed., *Show & Tell: The Films & Videos of Lawrence Weiner* (Gent: Imschoot, Uitgevers, 1992), p. 96.
14 *Öffenlich / public freehold* (Stuttgart: Edition Cantz, 1992), p. 12.
15 "Notes" [1995], *Lawrence Weiner*, p. 129.
16 "Intervention" [1997], *Lawrence Weiner*, p. 142.
17 *Lawrence Weiner*, p. 65.
18 "Benjamin Buchloh in conversation with Lawrence Weiner," p. 30. Along with the film soundtracks, other audio projects feature sound composed by musicians including Richard Landry, Peter Gordon, and Ned Sublette. NEED TO KNOW, a radio play aired on New York's WBAI in 1978, presented a semi-cacophony of voices and piano accompaniment whose juxtaposition of didactic statements and cabaret tunes oddly recalls the "epic theater" of German playwright Bertolt Brecht. Like Brecht's famed *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), Weiner's talk does not aim for psychological verisimilitude or audience identification, but a certain distancing. NOTHING TO LOSE, produced at the time of Weiner's first retrospective, at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, the Netherlands, in 1976, featured a toy music box playing the "Internationale," while a child (Weiner's daughter Kirsten) recites the alphabet, overlaid with male (Weiner) and female (the curator Coosje van Bruggen) voices reading texts and didactic statements in both English and Dutch. As in many Weiner sound pieces, the expected clarity or intelligibility of the theoretical statements is largely obscured by the intrusion of simultaneous and overlapping sound elements. The recurring male/female/child triad situates the statements within the cacophonous space of the family as much as that of the multilingual city or the bar.
19 Alice Zimmerman, "Not How It Should Were It To Be Built But How It Could Were It To Be Built," *Lawrence Weiner*, p. 67.

PUT WHERE IT WAS NOT
LEFT WHERE IT IS
USED AS IT WAS NOT
UNTIL IT IS