Weiner’s formulation, “language + the materials referred to”) both complicates and simplifies this reality fundamentally unstable and impermanent. Weiner’s decision to render the works as words (in the world, and allow it to enter and reshape theirs as well.)

Temporal processes of accumulation, placement, unfolding, decay, and dispersion that make material slightly different from, your own. Fortunately, many people have found it worth the trouble to enter this sculpture up to everyday, pliable, and non-monumental materials and, more essentially, to time: to yet sometimes maddeningly opaque—as if you had wandered into a language system adjacent to, but with artists including Robert Morris, Barry LeVa, Richard Serra, and Robert Smithson, aimed to open elucidation. Not unlike the work itself, Weiner’s comments are articulate, logical, perceptive, and informed, “postminimal,” “process-based,” and “anti-form” projects of the late 1960s. These projects, associated precedents. This makes it tempting to consult the artist’s own comments, critiques, and interviews for Weiner’s statements characteristically use short, simple, quite “ordinary” words that describe some of the 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 generalizations.

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 signs, placards, or even advertising, so they tend on being read differently: as being read as art, and even—perhaps permanently—as sculpture. Embracing the “universal common possibility of availability” that language provides, and using visual forms designed for their almost clarity, precision, and legibility, Weiner puts in public places phrases that appear perplexing and esoteric, but not downright cryptic. With their almost poetic precision and what I would like to describe as “given,” the texts annual appeal draws in even while an initial lack of comprehension may put us off.

Weiner’s work with language has been changing and maturing 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 COVERED BY SUBTLELY SIMULACRISSTIC TNT EXPLOSIONS (cat.#003), ONE STANDARD DYE MARKER THROWNED INTO THE SEA (cat.#022), ONE QUART EXTERIOR GREEN ENAMEL THROWN ON A BRICK WALL (cat.#022). A 2” WIDE 1” DEEP TRENCH CUT ACROSS A STANDARD ONE CAR DRIVEWAY (cat.#012). Subsequently numbered and catalogued, such “pieces” present 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 Le Va, 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 available 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 so easily 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 generalizations.

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 explanations. 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 set off and reshape them as well.
associations in new contexts while nonetheless remaining the same piece. This means about each viewer being able to provide their own metaphor, and about each statement's capacity to take on new resonance, after a year of loss and upheaval, lends a different meaning, as a theory of the psyche. I think this is what Weiner was after, elaborates, "If a piece functions linguistically, each performance will draw its momentary significance from a specific context. 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 Walker Art Center, or a statement about the importance of a given art practice. The more abstract a piece, the greater its potential to reach beyond the present."

As the curator Dieter Schwarz reiterated, or grafted onto a new context remains itself: "All you have to remember is the words." And while a memory of an object is no longer the object, a phrase remembered, 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." These were works that the viewer/reader could realize or construct, such as Weiner's "Composition 1960 #10," which reads, "Draw a straight line and follow it"; or George Brecht's 1961 "WORD EVENT," "• exit." 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 "perscription" and "instructional" forms of language.

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 repeatable or replaceable, it 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 virtual specifications call for generic, everyday forms and procedures. As Weiner notes, working with language permits "a general idea of materials rather than the specific." It's by its very nature, language can indicate generally available forms, not a unique special status or prophetic object.

Weiner's work with language arguably draws on the short, instruction-like compositions or "event scams" that certain proto-Fluxus artists produced, adapting the form of the musical score for lost-worlds 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." 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 "perscription" and "instructional" forms of language. Instead, he would insist: "My own work never gives directions, only states the work as an accomplished fact." 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 arose 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 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 seem both to record a structure and anticipate its production.
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. These 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—as in fact came 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."

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 reoccur. You can't quite assemble a narrative or a history, but certain realms 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 good deal of affect happens just under the surface of what appear to be quite impersonal phrases. This is someone who has said, “Art is made from anger,” but also insists, “my art does not require that you are upset by the same things I am upset by.”
Even in this context, PUT WHERE IT WAS NOT USED AS IT WAS NOT LEFT WHERE IT IS UNTIL IT IS (Jul/Aug), 2003, is an unusually emotional piece. It is about "striving," Weiner notes, about wanting and 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. He 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 use, where you have to put all the pieces together. Since "it" is such a flexible one, one can stand for almost any kind of noun or object, you don't know if "it" is used to refer to the poem or the words. With its peculiar temporality, this work is not necessarily about the conditions in which it finds you. It could be one of a series of statements. And "until" is a very dense and slow 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," "so far as," "so as to reach," "up to the time of," and "so long as or so far final," and denotes necessity, tends, or results from, or occurring from a 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 beauty of many of Weiner's statements, which contain language to a set of concise, regulated formulations. Like beads strung 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 Mauro notes the "self-reflection questioning of the role of monuments with regard to the public that has come to preoccupy Weiner in recent years." Powered at Ohio State as a public installation and as part of a radio piece, UNTIL IT IS has a peculiarity related to monumentality. The text is installed in two public brick circles in Weiner Lake Park, a large public plaza. People cross this space from side to side, are gone from another to another. In nice weather, students gather and linger in it. Weiner's preparatory drawings called for "jet black bricks, set into the existing brickwork...not painted,...not coated,...not cold as rock,...hard as rock," individual letters are cut from the bricks in a variation of Off-Broadway's (loosely held) "adapted to the nature of the black brick elements." The specification of 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—a number of public projects Weiner has built using the flat surfaces of public plazas and walkways (and once, in New York City, a recent installation on nineteen manhole covers placed in lower Manhattan streets, which read IN DIRECT LINE WITH ANYONE & THE NOB [Jul/Aug], 1989).

The radio piece that gives us an alternate sitting and an alternate reading, of the statement's four noun phrases. It puts them out into the world, far as we as a group of if we choose. Such multiple stagings of a single piece offer us different points of access and identification—different ways. This is a very common 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 countermand its resonance. Weiner's statements do not list American who died in the Vietnam war—as in Maya Lin's Washington D.C. memorial—or rectify public pledges or political oaths—as in Question. Barbara Kruger's 1989 installation at the Temporary Contemporary in Los Angeles. Yet this resistance to invoke specific historical references allows Weiner's statements to reflect the most 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 presentist "reception" to adopt the artist's term—Weiner's public projects can only become meaningful by entering into this 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 nouns linked phrases are laid into the existing brickwork, relatively unobtrusively, where they will be walked on and stepped on as people pass through—resulting in semantic paradox of a post-WWII existential stance—to be paradigmatically male. After all, this subject is "unique and alone," and yet free to make choices, seems posed in existential philosophy as implicitly or explicitly 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, referring to sculpture. They describe a process of assembling or building where you have to work against or despite previous use, where you have to put all the pieces together. Since "it" is such a flexible one, one can stand for almost any kind of noun or object, you don't know if "it" is used to refer to the poem or the words. With its peculiar temporality, this work is not necessarily about the conditions in which it finds you. It could be one of a series of statements. And "until" is a very dense and slow 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," "so far as," "so as to reach," "up to the time of," and "so long as or so far final," and denotes necessity, tends, or results from, or occurring from a 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 beauty of many of Weiner's statements, which contain language to a set of concise, regulated formulations. Like beads strung over years of use, they provide a series of generalized principles for the most varied and unanticipated circumstances.

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