



Sol LeWitt's *Unfilled Cube (6)*, 1968

The master of the grid

By DANIEL THOMAS

SOL LEWITT, a key figure in world art for the past 10 years, has been brought to Australia by John Kaldor, Sydney businessman and patron of avant-garde art. The visit is also assisted by the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council.

Minimal Art seemed in 1965 to be the extreme reaction against Abstract-Expressionism in New York. It emphasised intellect instead of emotion, contemplation instead of drama, and the impersonal or the collective instead of egoistic individualism. Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt then seemed to characterise the movement, but now, looking back, it is LeWitt who pushed it furthest — into conceptual art.

Conceptual art, the world's most irritatingly significant movement in recent years, was defined in 1967 by LeWitt: "It means that all of the planning and the decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes art." To pre-plan is to "eliminate the arbitrary, the capricious and the subjective as much as possible." If that sounds excessively inhuman it is important to note that LeWitt also said, "This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental process and it is purposeless."

In fact LeWitt's art is readily experienced romantically by the spectator. The variations within a repeatable structure can seem, like Bach's variations on a musical theme, to

symbolise the wonder of creativity.

Sol LeWitt himself can talk with romantic implication. He wants drawing to be seen as a major art, equivalent to painting and sculpture. He sees drawing as the intellectual content of art, as did Italian Renaissance theorists of *diseño* ("The inner design which precedes execution, and is independent of it . . . can be engendered by man in his mind"). *Diseño* is the intellectual equivalent of "prince, ruler, and governor."

Italy constantly enters LeWitt's conversation: "I like the clearest, smoothest, least romantic walls." But Italians seem to understand the concept of wall drawings best, because of their history (frescoes and other public murals in every town). So he has accepted very rough Italian walls, the roughest at Spoleto "in an old Romanesque church cloister, a defrocked church." That was for a version of the same *Arcs and Lines* piece done in Sydney, which is 190 systematic two-part combinations of arcs, straight lines, not-straight lines, and broken lines from the four corners and four sides of gridded squares.

The owner of the wall drawing *Arcs and Lines*, the man who has bought the concept, is an Italian, Count Giuseppe Panza di Buimo. He has an example of *Arcs and Lines* in his house at Varese, near Milan, but agrees to lend the concept back to LeWitt for temporary use elsewhere — and a year in Sydney would count as temporary.

In Sydney *Arcs and Lines* was drawn at the Art Gallery of New South Wales

by six art students from Alexander Mackie College of Advanced Education under LeWitt's supervision.

The Sydney wall, at 9.7m x 31.5m, has produced the largest of LeWitt's 300 or so wall drawings throughout the world. More important for him however is its location in the art gallery's entrance room, where drawing is obviously being presented as major art.

At the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, another LeWitt wall drawing was to be in the quasi-ghetto of the Prints and Drawings Gallery, but has now been completed instead in the broad corridor facing the Oriental Courtyard. It is not black on white, but white on the four primary colors of the printing trade: yellow, red, blue and black. Its title: *Lines to Points On a Grid*. From the centre of the yellow area; from the mid-point of the four sides of the blue area; from the four corners of the red area; from the centre, sides and corners of the black area.

The vast wall in Sydney cannot be comprehended all at once, and the pale lines are, in some lights, below the threshold of visibility.

Although some of LeWitt's wall drawings have chaotic programs ("ten thousand straight lines placed at random"; "50 randomly placed points connected by straight lines") they are all contained within the rectangle of a wall. Similarly, the drawings in his artist's books — his third medium after modular structures and wall drawings — are always contained within the rectangle of a page.

Grids are his obsession. As he tours a gallery store room an Instamatic camera flashes at a wire-mesh grid, and at grid paintings by Mike Brown and Robert Rooney. Driving round Sydney more grids in the landscape are photographed.

LeWitt communicates a sense of being profoundly stirred by the way a four-sided grid makes comprehensible the limitless, indefinite, chaotic space we all inhabit. There are other systems of order — spiral for example, or pentagonal — but though they might be deeply meaningful for molluscs, man has usually inhabited rectangles.

Perhaps his art expresses both a homage to centuries of mathematicians, engineers and architects and a fear that we might lose our grasp of their achievements and fall back into chaos.

* * * * *

P.S. Sol LeWitt says that "art really has to do with communication of ideas and books are one of the best ways to do this." So he makes his own artists' books and has set up an international distribution point for all the world's artists' books. Most cost about \$5. Send \$1 for a catalogue of all available titles to Printed Matter Inc, 105 Hudson Street, New York City 10013, USA.