

Sol LeWitt Wall Drawing #118: A Study in Collaborative Creation

Wall Drawing #118 is a seminal work by Sol LeWitt, a pioneer of conceptual art, first executed in 1971. The instructions for this piece are succinct yet open-ended: “On a wall surface, any continuous stretch of wall, using a hard pencil, place fifty points at random, followed by lines from point to point, drawing a straight line, the shortest possible, from each point while maintaining their position.” The work’s realization involves both creative and interpretive contributions from many practitioners. The practitioners include the artisans who physically draw on the walls according to the instructions, the institutional curators who administer the installations, and occasionally, art students who assist as part of the learning process. Each of these roles requires a high level of skill and interpretation, despite being constrained by the original instructions.

On the opposite page, you will find a rendition of Wall Drawing #118 with a slight variation: it has 22 points instead of 50 and is plotted by a pen machine rather than drawn by hand on a wall. This version, programmed by a human with specific code for the pen plotter, challenges the notion of mechanical versus human creation. While robotics lend precision, the human programmer’s role in defining the pen plotter’s instructions underscores a critical layer of authorship and creativity that mirrors the original artisans’ role in the traditional execution. This interplay of human and machine involvement emphasizes the distinction between the physical act of plotting and the creative decisions behind which lines get drawn—a dichotomy reminiscent of LeWitt’s concepts.

In examining copyright implications, it’s apparent that current guidelines, particularly the “mechanical reproduction” clause from the U.S. Copyright Office, may obscure the recognition of artisans’ contributions. LeWitt retains the majority of authorship under traditional rules due to his conceptual groundwork, yet this can be disengaging for those laboriously rendering the work. Our proposal suggests a reform in copyright attribution—allocating authorship percentages to all contributors. For instance, LeWitt might retain 70% authorship for his concept, while the artisans and facilitators could receive 30% for the labor and interpretation essential to its realization. This proposed system would acknowledge the collaborative nature of works like Wall Drawing #118, offering a balanced and equitable recognition of all creative inputs, whether human or mechanical, primary or supportive.