

Sol LeWitt Wall Drawing #118

Sol LeWitt, a pioneering figure in the conceptual art movement, created Wall Drawing #118 as part of his extensive series of wall drawings that challenged traditional notions of authorship and artistic process. The instructions for Wall Drawing #118 are characterized by their simplicity yet infinite possibility for variation: “On a wall surface, any continuous stretch of wall, using an evenly spaced grid of fifty points. Each point is then connected by straight lines.” This deceptively simple directive requires practitioners to rigorously plot and connect ten distinct sets of lines according to the guiding rule, manifesting in various permutations depending on the interpreters’ decisions regarding color, line thickness, and surface. The execution of these works was generally not undertaken by LeWitt himself but by a group of artisans trained to interpret and carry out his instructions faithfully, showcasing how the essence of his work resided not in his hand but in the conceptual framework and instructions.

The artisans tasked with bringing Wall Drawing #118 to life play a crucial role in the physical realization of LeWitt’s conceptual framework. On the opposite page of this zine, you will see a rendition of this work, albeit reduced to an “evenly spaced grid of twenty-two points” rendered by a pen plotter. This version invites contemplation on the interaction between human hands and mechanical processes; while the pen plotter precisely executes the connecting lines without deviation, it lacks the intuitive and experiential input of the human artisans who physically draw on walls. However, the programming of the plotter was undertaken by a human, introducing another layer of authorship. This interplay between human and machine highlights the nuanced translation of instruction to art and begs the question of authorship beyond the creator of the instructions.

The current copyright system predominantly favors original conceptual frameworks, often attributing authorship singularly to individuals like Sol LeWitt while disenfranchising those responsible for the artwork’s tactile realization. The “mechanical reproduction” guideline by the U.S. Copyright Office is essential yet unclear when considering the layered authorship within conceptual art. My proposal to break apart copyright authorship into a percentage allocation allows a fairer reflection of all contributors’ roles. For example, in the case of Wall Drawing #118, an allocation might attribute 70% of the authorship rights to Sol LeWitt for creating the instruction set, while the artisans executing the work could receive 30%, recognizing their essential contribution in translating the conceptual to the corporeal. This approach acknowledges the multidimensional nature of artistic creation that emerges from collaboration between visionary impetus and skillful execution.