

Sol LeWitt Wall Drawing #118: A Collaborative Tapestry

Sol LeWitt, a pivotal figure in the conceptual art movement, revolutionized the artistic process with his Wall Drawings. Wall Drawing #118, executed in 1971, is emblematic of his philosophy. The instructions for this piece are straightforward yet profound: “On a wall, any continuous stretch of wall, using a hard pencil, place fifty points randomly. All of the points should fall within the fifteen lines that are one inch from the edge of the wall. The points should be evenly distributed; that is, there should be the same number of points in each square inch of wall surface. Connect all of the points with straight lines.” This work, like many of LeWitt’s pieces, involved multiple practitioners in its realization. The process typically started with LeWitt drafting the instructions, followed by a group of artisans who physically executed the drawing on-site. This collaborative process blurs the lines of authorship, raising questions about ownership and artistic contribution.

On the opposite page, you can see a rendition of Wall Drawing #118, using only 22 points instead of 50. This version was created using a pen plotter, a modern device that precisely reproduces drawings by following coded instructions. However, a human was involved in programming the pen plotter, translating LeWitt’s conceptual art into a physical form once again. This rendition diverges from the wall version both materially and conceptually. While the wall version harnesses the tactile interaction of markers on a surface, creating an authentic, labor-intense atmosphere, the pen plotter version represents an interpretation through digital transformation. The mechanical precision lacks the human nuances of hand-drawn lines, yet showcases the adaptability and timelessness of LeWitt’s instructions.

The current copyright system does little justice to the artisans who bring LeWitt’s vision to life. The “mechanical reproduction” guideline outlined by the U.S. Copyright Office provides a hazy boundary that often disenfranchises these individual creators. Under traditional copyright structures, LeWitt is viewed as the sole author, disregarding the significant creative contributions of artisans. In proposing a revised authorship system based on percentage allocations, one could imagine 70% of authorship attributed to Sol LeWitt for conceptualizing the work, while the remaining 30% would be distributed among the artisans responsible for its physical execution. This adjusted attribution model acknowledges the collaborative nature of art-making, ensuring equitable recognition for every contributor in the creative process.