

Histories and Renditions of Sol LeWitt's Wall Drawing #118

Sol LeWitt, a pivotal figure in the conceptual art movement, challenged traditional notions of authorship and the role of the artist. His Wall Drawing #118, conceived in 1971, consists of the precise instruction: "On a wall surface, any continuous stretch of wall, using hard pencil, place fifty points at random. The points should be evenly distributed over the area of the wall. All of the points should be connected by straight lines." This exercise, seemingly mathematical, transforms into a sprawling web of connections, where the drawing's physicality on a wall contrasts its conceptual simplicity. The instructions require practitioners beyond LeWitt himself, including skilled artisans tasked with the laborious process of plotting points and connecting them, becoming integral to the piece's creation and its subsequent iterations across various walls worldwide.

On the opposite page, you'll find a rendition of Wall Drawing #118 executed with a pen plotter. Here, only 22 points are connected, providing a sample of LeWitt's concept but through mechanized drawing rather than human application. The pen plotter, programmed by a human operator, bridges the mechanical with the human, illustrating how different intermediaries yield varied outputs. Unlike the tactile application on a wall, this version transitions the work into a digital medium, offering a different essence but suggesting a shift in the artwork's materiality perspective—the machine becomes part-author, yet only through human instruction.

LeWitt's work exemplifies the complexities of authorship within the copyright system, where the artisans executing his instructions are often overlooked. The "mechanical reproduction" guideline cited by the copyright office does not adequately address the nuanced creative input by these workers who turn LeWitt's vision into tangible art. To democratize artistic authorship, my proposal suggests a percentage allocation system that would distribute ownership among involved parties: perhaps 70% to LeWitt for his overarching vision and conceptual framework, and 30% to the artisans for transforming abstract ideas into physical form. This allocation recognizes the essential roles that multiple contributors play and moves towards a fairer representation of joint creative endeavors.