

The (Type)Faces of Lawrence Weiner

PHYLLIS REEVE explores the typographic choices of the seminal
American conceptual artist

WRITING ON WALLS IMPRESSES ME—when it warms like the Milton quotation “IN THE QUIET AND STILL AIR OF DELIGHTFUL STUDIES” on the McGill University Library and the brief manifesto “FREE TO ALL” on the Boston Public Library; or chills like Dante’s “ALL HOPE ABANDON YE WHO ENTER HERE” and Daniel’s “MENE MENE TEKEL UPHARSIN”;¹ whether it commemorates like the names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial or mocks like the graffiti “FRED HOW’S YOUR MOTHER” appropriated in Nomi Kaplan’s *Brooklyn Illuminations*,² or any proclamation on any wall in the Downtown Eastside.

The American conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner has to qualify as the most obsessive, prolific and precise wall-writer of them all; he is older and tidier than Banksy or Jean-Michel Basquiat. His thinking has roots among the Beatnik poets of San Francisco’s City Lights Books and the 1960s philosophers engaged in the analysis of linguistic structures, so I should have known about him all my adult life.

However, my personal acquaintance with his art dates only from 2007, when my son Charles, an associate professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design, alerted me to a graphic installation stencilled on a corridor wall at his college. The Ontario Gallery of Art, then undergoing extensive reconstruction, had lent OCAD Weiner’s work:

“CHAINS WRAPPED AROUND ONE THING
& ANOTHER BROKEN ONE BY ONE
WITH THE PASSAGE OF TIME (RUSTED
FREE) (BUSTED OPEN) (PULLED APART)
(MELTED LOOSE) (-----)(-----).”

The art is the title, and Weiner’s preferred medium is “language and the materials referred to”—“language” not “message.” The concept implies decay and destruction, but the pristine “sculpture,” with its blue and red lettering, invokes more Mondrian than McLuhan.³

My second encounter with Weiner’s art occurred in spring 2009, again in Toronto. The cavernous interior of the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery exhibited THE OTHER SIDE OF A CUL-DE-SAC, while outside, a specially commissioned work on the Plant’s smokestack declared with precision and without shouting:

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So Weiner writes, or sculpts, on smokestacks, streets, manhole covers, bridges, walls exterior and interior, and even in, or on, books. He makes books but insists they are not “artist’s books.”

Phyllis

ROYAL

FRANKLIN

OFFLINE

OUT OF THE BLUE

Some of the letterforms and typefaces used and created by Lawrence Weiner.

The book is not the work, but the book, like the wall, is a means of staging.⁵ A 1989 work borrows from Anthony Powell, books do furnish a room, or *kunst est lesbar*, because the venue is in Frankfurt and because Weiner wants his works to “glide unharmed from one language to another.”⁶ And just when we think he really means to dissociate his art from literature or story, he offers an obvious reflection, mirror, mirror on the wall and even once upon a time.

The magnificent volume *As Far as the Eye Can See*, published jointly by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the Whitney Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, to accompany a 2007 retrospective of Weiner’s work, presents page after page of glorious images and a number of essays by international art writers. The sheer visual beauty of Weiner’s words tempts one to ignore “concept” and focus solely on the word as sculpture and what I experience as an apotheosis of the typeface. Here, the retrospective book fails us, saying little about the fonts, although they have evidently been chosen and executed with extreme care.

I cannot blame this failure on the book’s editors and commentators. The artist gives guarded replies at best to queries about his choice of font, for instance, to David Moos:

“When the need for a means of presenting the work in language presents itself a typefont that carries the work & does not assume authority by association becomes the choice.”⁷ As for the puzzling name of his own font design, Margaret Seaworthy Gothic, he claims it is “just a name.” Any meaning that might exist behind the name is part of the artist’s process, and therefore “nobody else’s concern.” The viewer’s concern is the art; and details about decisions, choices and process should not distract from that concern. I do claim the right to curiosity, surely a vital aspect in the experiencing of conceptual art.

To date, my prying can offer only a probable chronology of Lawrence Weiner’s fonts, based on hints in the retrospective book and variably reliable gleanings from the Internet.⁸

First came handwriting, shown above as it appears in an inscription of one of Weiner’s books that I received as a gift.

Then, like the rest of us, Weiner progressed to a typewriter, a Royal something like the one which belonged to my father-in-law, although Weiner’s was probably sans serif.

As his work took on size and significance, aesthetically and conceptually, he adopted commercial typefaces, for many years employing Franklin Gothic Extra Condensed.

But after a number of years he began to worry that he would be associated exclusively with this specific font. For the 40-foot wall at the Power Plant he used FF Offline stencil.

This he favoured until he created his own typeface, Margaret Seaworthy Gothic.

One suspects he will create more when the time is ripe.

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- 1 W.M. Clow, ed., *The Bible Reader's Encyclopaedia and Concordance*, remarks of the appearance of this archetype for later writing on walls: "In Aramaic cursive the words would be difficult to understand" (London: Collins, [1934?]), 253.
- 2 (Vancouver: Charles H. Scott Gallery, 1988).

- 3 David Moos, e-mail interview with Lawrence Weiner in *Wallworks: Contemporary Artists and Place* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2007), 58.
- 4 Exhibition brochure, The Power Plant, Spring 2009.
- 5 Lawrence Weiner, *As Far as the Eye Can See*, ed. Ann Goldstein and Donna De Salvo (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 190 et passim.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 178.
- 7 Moos, *Wallworks*, 59.
- 8 *As Far as the Eye Can See*, 70, 122 et passim. Also various Web sites, including Limeshot Design, "Lawrence Weiner on Designers, Helvetica and the Universe," <http://limeshot.com/2010/lawrence-weiner-on-designers-helvetica-and-the-universe>; Typophile, "Lawrence Weiner Font," <http://typophile.com/node/57467>; and Artkrush, "Interview," <http://artkrush.com/155783>.

KEEPSAKE

THE CURRENT ISSUE OF *Amphora* includes a copy of *The Bookworm*, a keepsake originally prepared for the Alcuin Society at the Vancouver Antiquarian Book Roadshow on April 17, 1999.

Geoff Spencer, a founding member of the Alcuin Society, recalls that Martin Jackson prepared the keepsake at the show. The lettering is the work of Martin Jackson, a member of the Westcoast Calligraphy Society, which had a table at the show. Bookmarks and similar small things were penned and given to attendees. Spencer took Jackson's calligraphy and incorporated it into the design of the keepsake, which was printed later the same year.

Approximately 400 copies of the keepsake rested in the basement of the Spencer house until being passed to another longtime Alcuin Society member, Jim Rainer, who generously made the keepsake available for inclusion in this issue.

Keepsakes were a regular feature of *Amphora* during Geoff Spencer's tenure as editor. The first appeared in Summer 1997 (issue 108), and the practice continued through Spring 2001 (issue 123). The keepsakes were an opportunity to showcase the talents of local book artists and are always welcome.

A future issue of *Amphora* will include Leo Rosten's *Credo*, previously included with the Autumn 1999 issue (No. 117).