



## **Art history: modern and contemporary**

### *Abstract Expressionism in New York 2*

#### **MICHAEL CORRIS:**

I'm going to have a conversation with Lawrence Weiner. Lawrence Weiner emerged as an important member of the group of conceptual artists that began working in New York in the mid-1960's. I'm interested in the early part of Lawrence's career but, even before he became an artist, how he managed to meet and become familiar with the figures of abstract expressionism that were living and working in New York during the fifties and early sixties; in other words, what his relationship was to this prior generation of significant artists.

#### **MICHAEL CORRIS:**

Okay, so there, there you are, you're in New York ...

#### **LAWRENCE WEINER:**

Yes.

#### **MICHAEL CORRIS:**

When did you first realise that there are these people called the abstract expressionists?

#### **LAWRENCE WEINER:**

Er I sort of discovered the abstract expressionists the same way as everybody else, er through popular culture. It was this strange thing of 'Jack the Dripper'...

#### **MICHAEL CORRIS:**

Right.

#### **LAWRENCE WEINER:**

...where you saw it in a magazine, people were laughing or making jokes, er it didn't look funny. That's where it all sort of started. Then it registered back a little bit, and I was working on the docks when I was quite young, and it was eight o'clock at night till four in the morning, but sometimes they would finish work at two, 'cos a ship was empty, and I found bars; I'd grown up in jazz bars and in other places, er and I found this bar where the abstract expressionists went. I was very involved in civil rights and, and politics so, in fact, there were people there, lawyers and things, who knew me.

#### **MICHAEL CORRIS:**

When Lawrence Weiner encountered the abstract expressionists around 1956 or so, he did so during a time of tremendous social and political upheaval in the United States. This was the beginning of the modern civil rights movement when African Americans struggled to attain equality in all walks of life with white citizens in the United States.

#### **LAWRENCE WEINER:**

You met these people and they brought you in, and then I began to go and look at things, and got interested as much as I possibly could, and they were very nice to me. But remember, in those days anybody who was involved in any kind of civil rights and things, was all part of a large group. It all tied in with normal rebellion, but remember abstract expressionism didn't look like rebellion, to me. Being outside was quite normal, this was your culture.

**MICHAEL CORRIS:**

Imagine if you will a condition of being an artist, who believes that his or her job is to disaffirm the dominant culture within which they live and work. This was the situation of the abstract expressionists during and immediately after World War II. By the time Lawrence Weiner encounters the abstract expressionists in New York in the mid to late 1950's, they have already become part of the establishment of art. They seem to be part of the problem, rather than outside of the culture that they wish to critique.

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

I do remember going up to like French & Company for a Barnett Newman show. They wouldn't let you in. You were not who they wanted there. Eventually somebody would come along and bring you in. They were not happy. They were not trying to spread this culture. They were looking to make it into a viable economic thing.

**MICHAEL CORRIS:**

A lot of them were quite anxious about this, particularly Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, and Clyfford Still. But for them they felt still if you had this one to one encounter with a work of art you would understand what they were trying to say. For them it was really a way to recover what they imagined was the original impetus for making this work - individual artist in the studio, with no support in society, railing against the values that that society had in terms of art and culture.

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

Well remember abstract expressionism as well is a celebration of the New World Culture. Hmm. It's a total celebration; it's one on one with a canvas, one on one with a piece of clay. They had been through the Second World War. This was the beginning of building a new culture and they were not going to bend.

**MICHAEL CORRIS:**

Were you visiting some of these figures in, in their studio? Or were invited?

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

You didn't visit; you sometimes followed somebody home to their place, where everybody went after the bar closed. (Okay) You couldn't make it across by yourself; it was a little too dangerous.

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

It was a time when people were driving in from the suburbs, and the white people were coming in with chains and beating up on everybody because of the Vietnam War.

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

So everybody hung out in coffee shops unless some artist said let's go to the studio.

**MICHAEL CORRIS:**

Did you spend much time in Cedar Tavern?

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

Yes.

**MICHAEL CORRIS:**

What was that like?

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

I don't know, I sat at the bar most of the time; er they let me in, that's about all I know. In the Cedar I was more of a voyeur, as well as a participant, yes, I spoke and, and obviously somebody would listen to me every once in a while, but in Max's you, you forced yourself sometimes to go out, because there would be people out there and you really wanted to keep talking about what you were trying to do. There was no other forum. Barnett Newman did this, everybody did that, you sort of got your jokers out and everything else. It was not unpleasant. It was people you basically liked even if you were fighting with them.

**MICHAEL CORRIS:**

I'm interested; I'm trying to get to how erm the presence of earlier generations impacted on your generation of artists.

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

Let's say that er the major thing that attracted me to the American experience of bringing art into, in that time, the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was the fact that there was a kind of a celebration of the fact that you might be unloading ships or working on unloading trucks, but you had a core and a soul. And that was learnt by the abstract expressionists, by the European artists who had to leave and then you didn't lose your masculinity, and that's the one thing probably that I learnt from them. You have to remember there was a generosity going on at the time. There was not a camaraderie, because in fact yes, you were another part of a society, but it came up recently in, in Britain, er when I was in Middlesbrough, somebody said what's, you know, the difference of growing up in New York City, how it must have made a difference, and I realised what the difference was. It wasn't that you were more sophisticated, it's that amongst eight or nine million people it's a hell of a lot easier to find somebody who agrees with you, than in a small place. It was a special time because people began to understand quantum mechanics, and they began to understand there was a problem with Aristotle.

**MICHAEL CORRIS:**

Lawrence Weiner raises some very interesting and profound issues. What is he talking about here? Well, in one sense quantum mechanics gives us a new picture of the world where the indeterminacy of things that we took for granted all of a sudden becomes the major feature of our understanding of the world. We don't know what things are, where they are and they transform from one thing into the other. The problem with Aristotle is that Aristotle was the one who develops this hierarchical sequence. Categories of matter and thought, separating everything in the world into neat little packages.

**MICHAEL CORRIS:**

Recently I discovered that you had given a presentation at the club...

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

Yes, we were invited... we were so proud ...

**MICHAEL CORRIS:**

...and I'd like to hear a little bit about this.

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

Seth was invited to bring us and it was about...

**MICHAEL CORRIS:**

And this is Seth Siegelaub?

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

Yes, Seth Siegelaub, er and Douglas Hubler, and Rick Bartlemay. I just remember that we went in and we were spreading, and none of the people on the panel agreed with each other about what constituted art, so we were

certainly not spreading a party line, but we were spreading logic, another way of looking at the making of art. It didn't go down very well with the people that were there. That was the first time I began to see people acting the way I had seen them act in Europe in '63, where they were protecting their turf. In New York there was no turf. There weren't that many places. I remember my first show, er that night; er Bob Ramin had his first show. People were leaving cos Chamberlain would come up; he was taking people from one to the other because we were not even getting that many people, so there was not a turf protection. You were really quite happy to put the work out. You were hoping you could make money.

**MICHAEL CORRIS:**

Hmm. Was 57<sup>th</sup> Street still really a nexus?

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

Then it was really something, 57<sup>th</sup> Street that was, and Madison Avenue,

**MICHAEL CORRIS:**

We're talking the mid-19, mid to late 1960's or...?

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

Yeah, mid to late 1960's.

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

And then there was the Fuller Building.

**MICHAEL CORRIS:**

That's right, that's the building that Betty Parsons was in and erm, yeah...

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

That was the basic centre but remember that was something else. That was like you, you almost didn't even aspire to it because you didn't think they'd have you.

**MICHAEL CORRIS:**

It was out of reach.

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

Yeah.

**MICHAEL CORRIS:**

By the mid 1960's Lawrence was busy producing small, irregularly shaped monochromes, generally dark grey or black. They were part of a general trend of reduction, of all of the things about painting that would seem to be unnecessary, being removed.

**MICHAEL CORRIS:**

When did you start to realise that painting wasn't going to be something that you were necessarily going to follow?

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

I never realised that...

**MICHAEL CORRIS:**

Aha, so, so...

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

It just got to a point in my existence, which er, it was not capable of dealing with the aspects of making art that interested me. (Okay) I don't see anything wrong

with it; I never saw what I did as the end of painting, nothing to do with it. The first book of sculpture that I put out had to do with painterly things, that was my gesture towards the fact that I'm not against you but I ain't you.

**MICHAEL CORRIS:**

Okay well erm, yes okay...

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

There is a difference and that's something that most people don't quite understand with each succeeding aspirations of younger artists or musicians, you're not against something, it just ain't you.

**MICHAEL CORRIS:**

That's really important because this is really the core of what I want to get at here.

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

I can't tell anybody how to make art. I can tell you what art is supposed to do, and art is supposed to change the logic structure of the people who see it, not force them, it's supposed to be presentational, whammy presentational, but presentational that when, if you want to participate you have to change some of your basic logic structures. You cannot accept lead and silver being equal in order to make a certain sculpture work, and at the same time accept racism. It's not possible. (Okay) This is why I'm saying it's an anti-Aristotelian problem.

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

Why can't you make art without a hierarchy? And why can't you be the best person making non-hierarchical art? (Right) That's an aspiration, why not? (Yes) That's my aspiration.

**MICHAEL CORRIS:**

This is very similar to what people like Newman and Rothko discussed when they were talking about what they hoped for their art, but the first thing was the point of encounter, that you had to allow yourself, open yourself up to that experience, and let the art take over that experience for that moment. If you can't do that, the art fails, or you are not receiving the art in a way that is going to make it a significant experience for you. It'll just be like any other kind of commodity.

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

It's the Ad Reinhardt, if you turn off the, the lights and you walk through and you trip over a sculpture.

**MICHAEL CORRIS:**

Yes.

**LAWRENCE WEINER:**

And when you, when you see works of mine and some works of some of my colleagues they really, you trip over them because you cannot even accept their existence without accepting some of its logic pattern.