

## Generative Grammar

By Elizabeth Fasolino  
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Lawrence Weiner may be considered the most important living conceptual artist, but he prefers just to be called an artist. And his work may be the subject of a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in November, but beginning this weekend, a major new piece, “A Means to an End,” will be on display at Salomon Contemporary on Plank Road in East Hampton.

Mr. Weiner, who will be on hand for the kick-off reception tomorrow, works in a variety of mediums, frequently incorporating text into “structures” on paper, in sculpture, in film, and on video. He even writes lyrics, and his songs have been recorded by such groups as the Persuasions.

In his work, Mr. Weiner explores material context in the physical world, which sounds complicated and highfalutin, but is, in fact, much simpler when he talks about what it means to him.

“Art doesn’t need a historical context to be understood,” he said last week at his temporary studio in a brownstone in the west Chelsea neighborhood in New York City. “What you’ve made helps people find their place in the world. Art is like a map.”

Mr. Weiner’s installations are not conceived to be site-specific, but they become site-specific by virtue of their interaction with their audience.

Mr. Weiner said he doesn’t generally spend much time on the East End — he splits his time between New York City and a houseboat in Amsterdam — but he enjoys showing his work in smaller venues.

“I show in alternate spaces all over,” he said, as he reached around a manual typewriter on his desktop for a pouch of tobacco, and then began rolling a slim cigarette. “It’s part of my mandate. I love little spaces. I want to see if the art works outside the museum.”

He continued, “This is one big piece. It’s line as language, language as line.”

Mr. Weiner was born in 1942 in the South Bronx. He grew up working part time in his parents’ candy store and newsstand; the family lived in the back. He went to Stuyvesant High School and along the way became fascinated with French New Wave cinema, Beat writers, and the linguistic theories of Jean Piaget and Noam Chomsky. “I tripped onto people,” he said. “I didn’t have any special vocation. As far as my parents knew I was going to be a teacher, work for the government, or go into the merchant marines.” And, he added, “Marx and Engel were normal in the world I inhabited.”

After graduating from high school, Mr. Weiner enrolled at Hunter College. “I was smart enough to know I wanted to be an artist,” he said. “I was smart enough to know no goddamned 16-year-old had anything to express as an artist.” He studied philosophy, literature, and languages while working on the docks at night. But, he said, his youthful destiny was determined by his romantic liaisons more than anything.

Mr. Weiner left college and hitchhiked to San Francisco, where he again found work on the docks. He played semiprofessional rugby, too. “When you have girlfriends named Maureen with six brothers you learn to play rugby,” he said with a shrug. “But I don’t like sports. I played for money.”

He began making art as soon as he arrived on the West Coast, and presented his first show the “Cratering Piece” in Mill Valley in 1960. He altered the landscape with explosions of dynamite and then documented it in a statement, transforming the event into a sculpture.

He went on to show his sculpture and text installations and to make films. And, of course, there was his lyric-writing enterprise for the Persuasions. He has been represented by the Marian Goodman Gallery since the 1980s.

“You are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” he said of his prolific and independent career. “A universal theme is about a value structure. My work is about a material structure. I see the art as a really important part of society. It’s not utopianism. I use language to represent materials. It allows the material to be transformed into other cultures.”

The piece that will be on view starting tomorrow has particular relevance to the East End. For the text component of the work, Mr. Weiner said that he chose a word that he thinks has a connection to the area. “This piece uses a normal word,” he said. “On Long Island most people’s children have been forced to become nail pounders. There are no jobs anymore, just the service industry.”

“Many artists who were coming out of the 1950s used to say ‘There’s no bad artist, just bad art.’ If it sucks, it sucks. If it flies it flies,” he said. “You have to see yourself as an entity at a certain age. I see myself in the mirror and it’s not complimentary. James Salomon has a tradition of showing young artists who aren’t at the top of the pops. It’s a chance for an older artist to maintain dignity. Empowerment can no longer be translated as entitlement. Entitlement is a given.”

The installation will be on view by appointment through July 29, and will open tomorrow with a reception from 5:30 to 7 p.m. The retrospective at the Whitney will be on view from November 15 through February 8, 2008.