

AMNESIA AT PLAY

FREE SOL LEWITT by SUPERFLEX at the
Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven

by Wouter Davidts

“In the automated state power resides less in the control of the traditional symbols of wealth than in information.”

– Jack Burnham¹

“Banal ideas cannot be rescued by beautiful execution.”

– Sol LeWitt²

“In my view, this is [...] the essence of the social task facing the museum:

to relate the conceptual world of individual creativity, that is art, with that of collective creativity, in which in principle everyone participates and which thus enables everyone to feel himself to be its creator. This points to the emancipatory influence, which such an approach on the part of the museum can have in a cultural and political sense.”

– Jean Leering³

1 Jack Burnham, “Systems Esthetics,” *Artforum* (September 1968). Reprinted in *Open Systems: Rethinking Art c. 1970*, ed. Donna De Salvo (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), 165.

2 Sol LeWitt, “Sentences on Conceptual Art, 1968,” *Art-Language* 1, no. 1 (1969). Reprinted in *Conceptual Art*, ed. Ursula Meyer (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1972), 175.

3 Jean Leering, “Against the Cast-Iron Positions (Tegen de ingegraven stellingen),” *Hollands Diep* (June 19, 1976). English translation, as cited in “Interview met Jean Leering / Interview with Jean Leering,” in *Museum in ¿Motion?: The Modern Art Museum at Issue / Museum in ¿beweging?: het museum voor moderne kunst ter diskussie*, ed. Carel Blotkamp et al. (’s-Gravenhage: Govt. Pub. Office, 1979), 78.

Visitors who entered the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven in Spring 2010 met with a steady flood of noise. The museum sounded like a factory. It is for certain no longer exceptional, in the present-day era of large-scale art installations and room-sized video projections, to encounter loud clamor, ranging from voices, blares, purrs, buzzes, or drones in art museums. Yet the rattle and hum that gushed out of the central gallery in the back of the Van Abbe sounded all too real. As part of the exhibition “In Between Minimalisms,” the second episode of the two-year-long program “Play Van Abbe,” the Danish artist collective SUPERFLEX had installed a fully operating metal workshop. Entitled *FREE SOL LEWITT*, professional welders reproduced for the duration of the exhibition a specific work from the collection: *Untitled (Wall Structure)* from 1972 by American artist Sol LeWitt, acquired by the museum in 1977.

The program “Play Van Abbe,” which ran from November to July 2011, was made up of four parts, consisting of exhibitions, projects, performances, lectures, and publications.⁴ The collective SUPERFLEX participated in part 2, entitled “Time Machines,” and was one of the group of artists, curators, and critics who were invited to “do something” with the collection and the past of the museum. The principal ambition of “Play Van Abbe” was to question “the function of the museum in the 21st century.”⁵ Departing from the fact that the past two centuries each produced their own museum programs, respectively the fine arts museum and the modern art museum, the Van Abbe set itself the task to play out the possibilities of a new museum type. “Play Van Abbe” was set up to “ask topical questions about the identity and objectives of museums and cultural heritage organizations more generally.”⁶ The aim was to explore the present-day conventions and the future roles of an art museum in the twenty-first century, that is, to make the latter playfully visible and ultimately to juggle with them. The rich history of the Van Abbemuseum, embodied by its superb collection and rich archives, were brought into the game. The stakes were set high: with “Play Van Abbe” the museum in

4 “Part 1: The Game and the Players” focused on the stories of artists and exhibition makers. “Part 2: Time Machines” focused on museum models from the past. “Part 3: The Politics of Collecting/The Collecting of Politics” put the spotlight on the act of collecting. “Part 4: The Tourist, the Pilgrim, the Flaneur (and the Worker)” investigated the pleasure of being a visitor to the museum and how to intensify that experience. For a more extended description of the project, please see <http://www.vanabbemuseum.nl/>.

5 *Ibid.*, (accessed May 30, 2011).

6 *Ibid.*

Eindhoven wanted to investigate “how to position a museum as a knowledge institution that tries to preserve a ‘collective cultural memory.’”⁷

Free Information

When the members of SUPERFLEX started researching the collection of the museum they showed immediate attention for the impressive assembly of Minimal and Conceptual Art of the 1960s and '70s. The Van Abbemuseum indeed to boast a representative selection of works by many of the protagonists of the latter two major developments in post-Second World War art, with major works by LeWitt, Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Andy Warhol, John Baldessari, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Lawrence Weiner, Stanley Brouwn, to name but a few.⁸ Given their own interest as artists in the creation and valorization of information in present-day culture and society, SUPERFLEX was intrigued by the disjunction between idea and object on the one hand and between information and production on the other, introduced by minimal and conceptual artists. With the radical attack that the latter carried out on the traditional status of the art object, its visibility, market value, and modes of distribution, an artwork could merely exist as an idea or concept. The realization, let alone the *métier* or skills for making a work, became obsolete. Many artists in the late 1960s and early '70s invested their energy primarily in the development of ideas and often had the work executed by professional workmen or industrial fabricators. A work could subsist as a piece of information, in either handwritten, printed, or xeroxed form, that is, as loose instructions, a set of rules, a plan, or a precise certificate. The moment of actual production was consciously suspended—a decision most famously summed up by Lawrence Weiner as: “The artist may construct the piece. The piece may be fabricated. The piece need not be built. Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.”⁹

7 Ibid.

8 For the history of the Van Abbemuseum and its collection, I refer to the exhaustive and insightful study by René Pingen, *Dat museum is een mijnheer: De Geschiedenis van het Van Abbemuseum 1936–2003* (Eindhoven/Amsterdam: Van Abbemuseum/Artimo), 2005.

9 Lawrence Weiner, “Statement of Intent,” in *January 5–31, 1969: o Objects o Paintings o Sculptures* (New York: Seth Siegelau, 1969): n.p. Reprinted in Meyer, *Conceptual Art*, 175, 218.

The artists of SUPERFLEX, however, took their cue from the equally notorious 1967 *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* by LeWitt, in which the artist stated that “the idea becomes a machine that makes the art.”¹⁰ The actual execution of a work, LeWitt intimated, was merely “a perfunctory affair.”¹¹ All planning and decisions were made in advance and embedded within the description, or “formula,” of the work. Conceptual artworks, and the work of LeWitt in particular, thus possess the inherent potential for infinite repetition, reproduction, and distribution. SUPERFLEX, however, judged this potential as an open *invitation*. When LeWitt was accused of stealing ideas from other artists and copying their work, he responded in *Flash Art* magazine in 1973 that he regarded art to be mere information that could be collectively shared and built upon. “I believe,” LeWitt wrote, “that ideas, once expressed, become the common property of all. They are invalid if not used, they can only be given away and cannot be stolen.”¹² This freedom of use also applied to his own work: “If there are ideas in my work that interest other artists, I hope they make use of them. If someone borrows from me, it makes me richer, not poorer. We artists, I believe, are part of a single community sharing the same language.”¹³

Intended as an homage to LeWitt, SUPERFLEX eagerly, even most literally, took on the invite.¹⁴ Sol LeWitt’s *Untitled (Wall Structure)*, the collective argued, could be regarded as a piece of information waiting to be

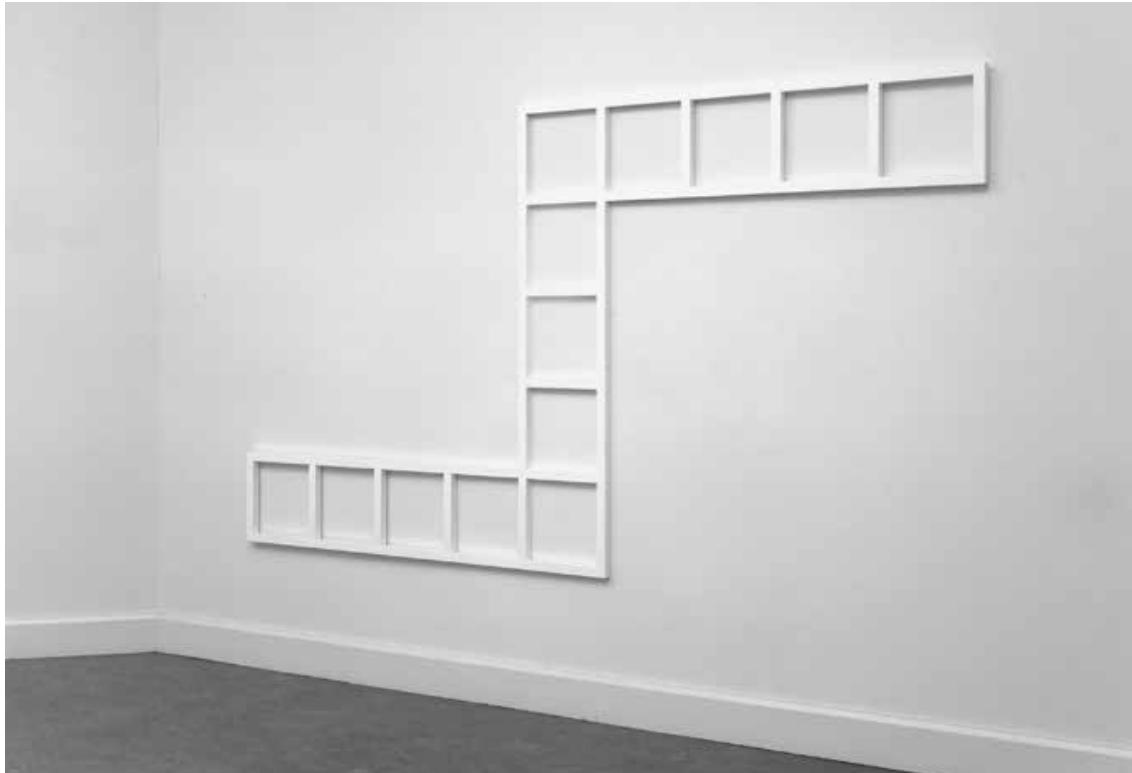
10 Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art (1967),” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 12.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Sol LeWitt, “Comments on an Advertisement Published in *Flash Art*, April 1973,” in *Flash Art*, no. 41 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, June 1973), cited in Daniel McClean, “FREE SOL LEWITT: SUPERFLEX’s Copy Machine,” in *FREE SOL LEWITT*, ed. Christiane Berndes, SUPERFLEX, Daniel McClean, and Kerstin Niemann (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2010), 41.

13 *Ibid.*

14 It remains a mystery on what “information” SUPERFLEX has based its reproduction of *Untitled (Wall Structure)*. In contrast to LeWitt’s wall drawings—of which the museum moreover owns one exemplar and the certificate of which was shown in “In Between Minimalisms” as well—*Untitled (Wall Structure)* is not the prototype of a preexisting formula.



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distributed: “information which can be used and adapted by the public.”¹⁵ To that end they only needed to deduct “the source code.”¹⁶ That very code served as the basis for *FREE SOL LEWITT*, a copy machine that had to provide an answer as to “how this form of information [can] be shared and valued in a wider network socially.”¹⁷ The main aim of the project was to raise questions about the ever-changing status of authorship, authenticity, and originality of the artwork and the ensuing copyright laws and terms of usage. Such notions have indeed shifted over the past forty years, and not in the least in the case of the work of those very minimal and conceptual artists that wanted to challenge them. With *FREE SOL LEWITT*, Daniel McClean writes in the catalogue of the project, SUPERFLEX hoped to reflect as well “upon the failure of such works ... in their promise to overcome the fetish of the original, auratic art object, and connect the production of art to its wider social distribution.”¹⁸ Many conceptual

15 Daniel McClean, “FREE SOL LEWITT: SUPERFLEX’S Copy Machine,” 43.

16 Ibid., 43.

17 Ibid., 38.

18 Ibid., 38.

artworks, such as printed certificates or written instructions, are indeed often treated as unique objects with an accordingly high market value.¹⁹

Dive Into the Archive

To “extend” the potential within the work of LeWitt, however, as the title of the project suggests, *Untitled (Wall Structure)* first needed to be liberated from its haunted situation. For this, Van Abbe curator Christiane Berndes writes in the introduction, the museum was to blame. By urging the Van Abbe to “set free” the work by LeWitt, Berndes argues, the artists conveyed to the institution that it acted as “a prison in which the artwork is locked away like a criminal.”²⁰ The comparison of the fate of *Untitled (Wall Structure)* within the museum collection with that of a criminal in a prison and the subsequent demand to “free” the work from its imprisonment sounded like a catchy punch line at first. But upon closer scrutiny both the basic assumptions and the ensuing materialization of the project *FREE SOL LEWITT* were highly problematic, if not outright scandalous. The project suffered from a twofold predicament. It was marked by an outdated account of the function and importance of a museum’s collection and, above all, by a one-dimensional understanding of the presence of an artwork—conceptual or other—within such a collection.

SUPERFLEX based its approach on the familiar portrayal of the museum as a hermetic institution that needs to be assaulted and from which the art needs to be rescued to come to full fruition. Such artists’ claims might have sounded radical in the 1960s but are by now resolutely obsolete. Museum institutions have devoured the critique directed at them to such an extent that the latter has become a permanent part of the former’s program—*Play Van Abbe* being a good case in point. The invitation to play around with the collection was in itself the direct outcome of the self-inflicted institutional desire to have its own modes of production, reception, and distribution questioned by artists: nothing less than controversy on demand.

In portraying the inclusion of *Untitled (Wall Structure)* within the collection of the Van Abbe as a tragic fortune to be remedied, SUPERFLEX failed to acknowledge that the work’s inclusion, and that of conceptual

19 For a thoughtful discussion of the curatorial issues this implies, I refer to Nathalie Zonnenberg, “FREE SOL LEWITT & In-Between Minimalisms,” *Manifesta Journal*, no. 10 (2010): 103.

20 Christiane Berndes, “Foreword,” in Berndes et al., *FREE SOL LEWITT*, 8.



II

artworks in general, is not merely a matter of deprivation. Artworks are never “locked up” on their own in the museum—neither spatially nor conceptually. They are at all times in the company of others—be it in the depot or in the galleries—and even accompanied on another level. Next to the collection, the museum holds another major asset: the archive. Traditionally, a museum not only collects and presents artworks, but also provides the necessary resources to study them. To that end, the institution gathers supplementary information that contextualizes those very objects it acquires and shows. An archive abounds with documentation about the works of art the institution owns and with material evidence of the very position and significance of these works, and of the artists who made them, held within the institution’s history.

If the artists of SUPERFLEX truly wanted to pay homage to the conceptual work of LeWitt, it might have been rewarding to dive more deeply into the archive. If the artists (and the responsible curator) had effectively done so, they would have come across “information” that put their project in a remarkably different perspective. *FREE SOL LEWITT* is a bland example of the exacerbated hollowing-out of the old notion of the museum as a site for the mnemonic reanimation of visual art, or the present-day trend to split the mnemonic from the visual, while claiming

to perform historical labor all the same.²¹ Positioned as the key piece of an exhibition which pretended to revive a period represented in the museum's collection—the era “in between minimalisms”—*FREE SOL LEWITT* employed (art) history as a mere alibi to stage their own spectacular intervention. Any in-depth consideration of the particular historical relationship among the artwork, the artist, and the museum involved, that is, between *Untitled (Wall Structure)*, Sol LeWitt, and the Van Abbe-museum in Eindhoven, remained absent.

Sol LeWitt in Eindhoven

Untitled (Wall Structure) by LeWitt was acquired by the museum in 1977 by then director Rudi Fuchs. Two years earlier, Fuchs had orga-

nized a show at the Van Abbe with 122 variations of the *Incomplete Cubes* by LeWitt. The Van Abbe also happened to be the first museum in the Netherlands to show work by LeWitt. The artist was represented with a version of the work *Serial Project (ABCD)* in the 1968 exhibition “Three Blind Mice,” which gathered works from the collections of the private collectors Visser, Peeters, and Becht. What's more, *Serial Project (ABCD)* was made in the Netherlands. In December 1967 LeWitt went together with his Cologne dealer Konrad Fischer to the small industrial factory Nebato in Bergeijk, a small town in the vicinity of Eindhoven. LeWitt went on the advice of his friend and artist Carl Andre. Two months earlier Andre had gone to visit Nebato to speak about the production of a work for a show at the Konrad Fischer Galerie in Cologne, following the advice of the collector Martin Visser. Visser, a renowned designer, had worked with Nebato for years for the production of Spectrum furniture. When Visser saw a floor piece by Andre in the gallery in Cologne in the fall of 1967, and consecutively wanted to buy one, he convinced the artist to come to Bergeijk to have it fabricated by Nebato. The head engineer Dick van der Net turned out to be a highly skilled welder with openness and understanding toward the artist, hence Andre sung his praise upon his return to New York. It was the beginning of a long and fruitful, yet little known, collaboration between Nebato and many famous American artists, such as Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Walter De Maria, Robert Smithson, and Donald Judd. American dealers John Weber, Virginia Dwan, Heiner Friedrich, Leo Castelli, and Ileana Sonnabend worked with Nebato and even came to Bergeijk

21 I have based my argument here on: Hal Foster, “Art and Archive,” in *Design and Crime (And Other Diatribes)* (London: Verso, 2002), 82.



III

personally, as it turned out to be cheaper for them to have work executed in the Netherlands and then shipped to the States. Nebato produced works by LeWitt for important exhibitions such as “Minimal Art,” at the Haags Gemeentemuseum in 1968; “The Art of the Real: USA 1948–68,” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1968; and “Prospect” at the Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf in 1969. Both Robert Morris and Bruce Nauman instructed the factory to produce major pieces for their solo exhibitions at the Van Abbe in 1968 and 1973, respectively. Nebato, so it seems, was a worthy Dutch equivalent of the American firm Lippincott in the late 1960s. “[I] had a fabricator in the States,” LeWitt recounted in 2002, “but I thought that Nebato was better.”²²

22 Sol LeWitt, telephone conversation with Paula Feldman Sankoff, October 8, 2002, as cited in Paula Feldman Sankoff, “Sol LeWitt,” in *In & Out of Amsterdam: Travels in Conceptual Art, 1960–1976*, ed. Christophe Cherix (New York: Museum of Modern Art New York, 2009), 100. For a discussion of the work of the firm Lippincott, see: Jonathan D. Lippincott, *Large Scale: Fabricating Sculpture in the 1960s and 1970s* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010). On contemporary equivalents such as Carlson & Co. or Mike

III SUPERFLEX, *FREE SOL LEWITT*, 2010. Installation view, Van Abbemuseum. Photo: Peter Cox. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2016

To this day, little is known about Nebato's groundbreaking work. One of the few sources consists of an article written in 1969 by Jean Leering, director of the Van Abbe from 1964 to 1973, in the Dutch art magazine *Museumjournaal*. "So far," Leering admitted, "only a very few 'insiders' have known about it: a handful artists, only some dealers, a sole collector and a museum director." Yet to the museum director it deserved "the attention of a wider public because of its unique character."²³ *FREE SOL LEWITT* would have been a great opportunity to finally expose this remarkable episode within post-Second World War art history in the Netherlands, yet both the artists and the museum curators neglected to do so.²⁴ It is disappointing that, within a project that claims to position

Smith Studio, see: Michelle Kuo, "Industrial Revolution: The History of Fabrication," *Artforum* (October 2007). For a description of the relationship between LeWitt and the Dutch collectors Martin and Maria Visser, see: Paula van den Bosch, *The Collection Visser at the Kröller-Müller Museum* (Otterlo: Kröller-Müller Museum, 2000). For a short interview with Dick van der Net by Geert Bekaert, discussing the production of a work by LeWitt, see: Jef Cornelis, *Three Blind Mice*, BRT (Belgische Radio & Televisie), June 18, 1968, <http://www.argosarts.org>.

23 "In het Zuiden van Nederland vindt sinds het najaar van 1967 een activiteit plaats, die om meerdere redenen verdient in het *Museumjournaal* vermeld en besproken te worden. Tot nu toe weten alleen enkele insiders ervan: enige kunstenaars, een paar galeriehouders, een enkele verzamelaar en een museum-man. En toch is deze activiteit vanwege haar uniek karakter waard een groter publiek te interesseren." Jean Leering, "Kunst Maken in Bergeijk," *Museumjournaal* 14, no. 2 (April 1969): 80

24 "Like the works of many of the Minimal artists in the Van Abbemuseum's collection, a factory fabricated LeWitt's structure." Daniel McClean, "FREE SOL LEWITT: SUPERFLEX's Copy Machine," 38. One even starts to suspect that the absence is rather a matter of ignorance than of neglect. When Daniel McClean refers in his essay to the industrial production of LeWitt's *Untitled (Wall Structure)*, he omits any further specification. Valuable resources were nevertheless close at hand. A special folder with documents, donated by van der Net to the museum archive, contains no less than two original, remarkably factual, letters by LeWitt with instructions for pieces to be made by



IV

the Van Abbe as a knowledge institution actively engaged in the preservation of collective cultural memory that very institution failed to play out the artistic project of SUPERFLEX against its own institutional history.

Collective Creativity

The Van Abbemuseum has a rich tradition of questioning the role and significance of the modern art museum, most notably during the directorship of Jean Leering from 1964–1973. Leering was indisputably the most progressive of the four predecessors to the current director Charles Esche.²⁵ Trained as an architectural engineer, he took prime interest

Nebato, dated February 4, 1969, and May 17, 1969. These letters can be consulted via the website of the Van Abbemuseum; <http://www.vanabbemuseum.nl/>.

²⁵ “Just as Sandberg personified the progressive museum of the 1950s, so Leering has been characterized as a typical representative of progressive forces in the 1960s.”

IV Bettina Lelieveld leaves the museum with her *FREE SOL LEWITT* copy. In the background the original work by Sol LeWitt from 1972. Photo: Bram Saeys. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2016

in the role and significance of art and the art museum within society as a whole. He shared, so he admitted in a late interview in 1999, with the historical avant-garde the ambition to connect art with life.²⁶ While Leering had a keen interest in the contemporary avant-garde, he was anxious that the museum, due to the hermetic character of much recent

Carel Blotkamp, "The Van Abbemuseum 1964-73: In Practice," in Blotkamp et al., *Museum in ¿Motion?*, 36. The book *Museum in ¿motion?*, was published upon the occasion of the departure of director Jean Leering from the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. Leering's direction of the museum was considered so influential that it merited review. The book gathers an impressive array of contributions by some of the most crucial voices of the postwar museum discussion, such as Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Pontus Hultén, Willem Sandberg, and Harald Szeemann. The collection of documents renders a lively insight in the animated and vibrant character of the museum discussion in the 1970s, graphically represented by the double question mark in the title. Although it may be regarded as a mere typographical joke, it represents the then "disputable" state of the museum issue. In November 2004, I organized a conference in Sittard and Maastricht to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the book and to restate the questions that prompted its initial publication. For the proceedings of the conference, see: *Museum in ¿Motion? Conference Proceedings [12-13 November 2004]*, ed. Wouter Davidts (Maastricht/Sittard/Gent: Jan Van Eyck Academie/Museum Het Domein Sittard/Vakgroep Architectuur & Stedenbouw Gent, 2005).

26 "Naast die actuele tendensen wilde ik ook historische ontwikkelingen tonen, niet als historisch fenomeen maar vanwege het belang dat het werk van Moholy-Nagy, El Lissitzky, Duchamp en Theo van Doesburg had voor de actuele kunst. Die kunstenaars wilden kunst en leven met elkaar verbinden, en die verbintenis was ook een van mijn idealen. Welke functies kan kunst in de maatschappij vervullen, de inzetbaarheid van kunst in het leven, dat waren essentiële kwesties voor mij." Jean Leering, in *Een collectie is ook maar een mens: Edy De Wilde, Jean Leering, Rudi Fuchs, Jan Debbaut over verzamelen*, ed. Jan Debbaut (Eindhoven/Rotterdam: Van Abbemuseum/Nai Uitgevers, 1999), 61.



V

art, would lose contact with the broader public. He held to the belief that the museum served as the preeminent platform for contemporary art, yet he equally advocated the institution's educational responsibilities. The museum, Leering argued, was an apt device for visitors to orientate themselves within present-day culture and society.²⁷ "Cultural activity, in particular museum work," he wrote in 1971, "should be considered as an aspect of preventive mental health care."²⁸ Key to his exhibition policy was the ambition to deal with what Leering termed "collective creativity." Whereas the museum traditionally focused rather exclusively on individual creativity or the genius of the single artist, Leering also wanted to discuss broader socio-cultural developments and issues, that is, *alongside* the usual program of exhibitions.²⁹ The public needed to become aware

27 Jean Leering, "De Functie van het museum," *Museumjournaal* 15, no. 4 (1970): 1–18.

28 Jean Leering, "Doelstelling Van Abbemuseum, February 1971 (stencil)," as cited in, Frank van der Schoor, "The Van Abbemuseum 1964–73: The Ideas," in Blotkamp et al., *Museum in Motion?*, 31.

29 *De gebruiker en de vormgeving van het leefmilieu* (Eindhoven, NL: Van Abbemuseum, 1973), n.p., as cited in *ibid.*, 33.

of the communal potential to imagine a better world and a promising future. His main ambition, so he admitted in an interview in 1979, was “to make the public more critical.”³⁰

His appreciation of the activities in Bergeijk must have been a direct result of his wish to fit the conceptual work of the younger artists within this framework. Leering warmly welcomed the collaborative efforts between artworld and industry, between artists and engineers. “[While] the DAF orders bodywork for their trucks, Philips commands cases for computers,” he mused in the essay in *Museumjournaal*, “van der Net can be seen to totally engross himself in the construction of a complicated ball-and-socket-joint for a profile rolling mill. He invests an equal amount of energy in these kinds of (precise) orders as in his art assignments.”³¹ Leering applauded the primacy of idea over execution, as the factory-made objects questioned the traditional forms of individual creativity and brought about a radically new experience of self-awareness for the viewers.

The artwork’s objecthood causes the illusionist qualities, the reference to an imaginary world exterior to the artwork itself, to retreat and to give way for the direct effect on the viewer of the concrete characteristics of the “thing” in itself, such as the form, the color, the used material, etc. Precisely these characteristics of this type of art demand industrial fabrication, as it were, while the artistic vision of the executor plays an essential role.³²

Provided with this historical perspective, it is virtually impossible not to raise stern questions in return about at least two major aspects of

30 “Interview with Jean Leering,” in Blotkamp et al., *Museum in ¿Motion?*, 80.

31 Jean Leering, “Kunst maken in Bergeijk,” *Museumjournaal* 14, no. 2 (April 1969): 82.

32 “Vanzelfsprekend heeft deze wijze van werken ook te maken met het feit, dat een groot deel van het proces, dat wij kunst noemen, aan de toeschouwer wordt overgelaten. Vandaar ook het object-karakter van het kunstwerk. Door het object-karakter van het kunstwerk immers treden de illusionistische eigenschappen, het verwijzen naar een verbeeldingswereld buiten het concrete kunstwerk zelf, terug, om plaats te maken voor de directe werking op de toeschouwer van de concrete eigenschappen van het ‘ding’ zelf, zoals de vorm, de kleur, het gebruikte materiaal etc. Juist deze karaktereigenschappen van dit soort kunstwerken vraagt als het ware om industriële vervaardiging, waarbij echter het artistieke inzicht van de uitvoerder een essentiële rol speelt.” Ibid. (my translation)



VI

FREE SOL LEWITT: first, the literal installment of a fully-fledged industrial workplace within the spaces of the museum, second, the alleged involvement of the viewers.

Play Bingo

Artists in the 1960s, as Leering rightly indicates, borrowed industrial materials, machines, and procedures because the anonymity, seriality, and standardization allowed them to question notions of authorship, singularity, and authenticity. Today artists face a radically different apparatus of industrial production and a shifting culture of popular consumption. Contemporary design procedures, production processes and distribution mechanisms allow for commodities to be mass-produced yet awarded an exclusive form. The Internet allows you to custom design

your own sneakers and to have them delivered at home, or to sketch and print your own wallpaper. “Western society,” artist Joshua McElhenny recently argued, “promotes the idea of consumer choice itself as a kind of de facto authorship.”³³ In an era when industrial standardization is exchanged for the illusion of unlimited consumer choice, exclusivity, and custom design, artists thus face the major task to invent new tactics and procedures to act within the global regime of commodity production, distribution, and consumption.

While SUPERFLEX’s *FREE SOL LEWITT* at first sight pretended to partake in this contemporary challenge, it failed in many respects. The focus of the project’s discourse on copyright laws and terms of use obscured the appalling mode of public address that went along with it. “The museum,” Berndes writes in her introduction, “is the quintessential place [...] where the artwork stimulates the visitor’s imagination and prompts him or her to imagine the world differently.”³⁴ Yet a closer look at the actual manner in which visitors were addressed and engaged by the project, reveals that her claim was a direct sham, nothing less than double fraud.

FREE SOL LEWITT produced copies of *Untitled (Wall Structure)* as long as the show lasted. The resulting works were “donated” to the public. Visitors could sign up for a free copy by filling in a form at the museum. At the end of the show, copies were distributed through a random system of selection, the process of which rested “within the VAM’s sole discretion.”³⁵ The project *FREE SOL LEWITT* blindly reversed the promise of reproducibility inherent in LeWitt’s conceptual work: an idea no longer served as the virtual engine for the (eventual) production of an artwork by any person who responded to the challenge, but an utterly physical workshop that was installed to replicate an existing, most material and specific wall sculpture for the benefit of a few lucky recipients. Visitors were merely allowed to gaze from the sidelines at the mechanical production of the replicas in a carefully designed setting: a fully aestheticized and staged version of a metal workshop—witness the neat pictures of the duties in the catalogue. Visitors were hence addressed as numb and passive beneficiaries that were not capable of making any sovereign choice but signing a contract that clearly stipulated that what they received, was “not an artwork by Sol LeWitt.”³⁶ Every visitor, whether they filled in a form or

33 Josiah McElhenny, “Readymade Resistance,” *Artforum* (October 2007): 328.

34 Christiane Berndes, “Foreword,” 8.

35 Form application for “FREE SOL LEWITT by SUPERFLEX,” as reproduced in Berndes et al., *FREE SOL LEWITT*, 28.

36 Form Receipt of “FREE SOL LEWITT by SUPER-



VII

not, nonetheless met with the promise to become a proud owner of one of the copies. Yet the grounds upon which future owners were selected, yet remained as obscure as the outcome of a *tombola*, or lottery—a game most popular in homes for the elderly and all too often made up of prizes that are the remainder or the surplus of consumerism. Only the slogan “You may be our lucky winner today!” was missing.

A press release in April 2010 proudly announced that the first person came to pick up “her” duplicate. Two pictures show how a woman, dutifully singled out in the press release as being “Bettina Lelieveld from Krimpen at the IJssel,” and presumably her husband carries the replicated sculpture by LeWitt out of the museum.³⁷ The second picture, to be found on the website, is however nothing less than baffling.³⁸ Husband and wife, assisted by a member of the museum, try in vain to shove the work (without any wrapper or protective plastic whatsoever) into a hired freight

FLEX,” as reproduced in *ibid.*, 34.

37 “First FREE SOL LEWITT Copy by SUPERFLEX Leaves the Museum,” press release, Van Abbemuseum, April 2010.

38 Website of the Van Abbemuseum, <http://www.vanabbemuseum.nl> (accessed September 25, 2010).

VII The *FREE SOL LEWITT* copy on transport.
Photo: Bram Saeys. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2016

wagon attached to their car—the popular Dutch *boedelbak*.³⁹ Looking at the pictures, which also feature in the catalogue and on the website, it is hard to decide whether to laugh or cry. The situation is undeniably funny, but in a profoundly perverse sense: it is a shameless but institutionally sanctioned candid camera. The museum proudly shows that it grants free copies of an artwork to naive visitors, yet it at once mocks these very visitors by revealing that they do not really know how to properly handle the gift. The other pictures that the museum posted on the website have nothing but the similar effect. The most mind-boggling one shows an elderly man in an electric wheelchair, overseeing two people that shove the sculpture in the back of a van (again without any covering or protective plastic whatsoever). One cannot but wonder in total exasperation as to what the museum is trying to convey here.

Tiebreaker

In a text from 1966 on his *Serial Project No. 1 (ABCD)*, LeWitt formulated how he understood that viewers read his work. He acknowledged that it could be difficult to comprehend his work at once, given the complicated serial constitution. “The aim of the artist,” LeWitt nevertheless asserted, “would not be to instruct the viewer but to give him information. Whether the viewer understands this information is incidental to the artist; one cannot foresee the understanding of all one’s viewers.”⁴⁰ LeWitt’s departure point, and that of many of his fellow conceptual artists, was one of respect and generosity, of a sincere esteem for the intelligence of the viewers of his work. He realized that it would meet many degrees of understanding and modes of imagination, but there was no need to be condescending, let alone patronizing.

39 A comment by Miss Lelieveld is shamelessly posted on the website as well: “They call me when I am on the train. I have won. My husband looks at the computer with me and says: ‘what a kind of work is that? I don’t think it’s beautiful. It is too big. Why couldn’t you win a painting?’ Now the work decorates my sister’s garden.”
Van Abbemuseum website, [http:// www.vanabbemuseum.nl](http://www.vanabbemuseum.nl) (accessed September 25, 2010).

40 Sol LeWitt, “Serial Project No.1 (ABCD),” *Aspen Magazine*, nos. 5–6 (1966). Reprinted in *Conceptual Art*, ed. Peter Osborne (London: Phaidon, 2002), 211.