

Cabinet Press

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Berkshire Eagle, February 11, 2011

REVIVING THE SPIRIT OF AN ART EXCHANGE

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NORTH ADAMS -- It was a way to snare a work by a famous artist -- for free.

Or almost free.

All it required was sending a drawing (or painting or sculpture) of one's own to the conceptualist Sol LeWitt and he'd return the favor with a work of his. He didn't have to know you. It was almost better if he didn't.

LeWitt, known for his geometric wall drawings, now installed long-term at Mass MoCA, had a reputation for generosity to other artists, particularly young ones. And the exchange of pieces, common among art colleagues, was something he did consistently, as part of his art philosophy, until the end of his life in 2007.

"Sol was interested in what other artists were doing, and that's what he was after when he traded," said Janet Passehl, the curator of his collection in Chester, Conn., in an e-mail exchange.

She said the archive contains about 4,000 works by 800 artists "who were friends, acquaintances and/or exhibitors with the same dealers he showed with." But she added: "Some works were gifts to Sol (occasionally from artists with whom he was not even acquainted), to which he responded in kind."

LeWitt is gone, but the spirit of his trading lives on in a dual exhibition, "An Exchange with Sol LeWitt," on view through March 31 at Mass MoCA and through March 5 at the headquarters of Cabinet magazine in New York. It consists of about 1,000 artworks submitted by artists around the globe.

Regine Basha, a Brooklyn-based independent curator and arts writer, came up with the idea.

"It's a good time to be thinking about artists' networks and communities that are formed through the world of making -- especially in the disassociated

age of Facebook and Twitter," Basha said in an e-mail. "Sol LeWitt's role as an artist and as a friend/confidant to other artists hopefully re minds a new

See more on "An Exchange with Sol LeWitt" [here](#).

generation that its not all about competition.

Basha initially planned the show at Cabinet, but to expand its reach, she contacted a graduate school classmate, Denise Markonish, a curator at Mass MoCA about partnering in the project.

The two women organized a call for submissions through Cabinet and e-Flux, an art news website, as well as other artist networks. Entries poured in from students, admirers and friends of LeWitt, even a class of fourth-graders from LeWitt's hometown of Chester, Conn. The curators decided none would be rejected.

But there lay a problem.

"We had an unjuried show with a ton of stuff," Markonish said. "We had to make it matter; not just lump it together."

At MoCA, the pieces, limited in size to 8 1/2 by 11 inches, are tacked on the wall with push pins at eye level or arrayed on simple rail shelving. Others are in glass display cases. Some play as videos. Only the artist's name is given.

What that does, Markonish said, is "democratize" the artworks, "putting the unknown next to the known ... and that's really nice."

At Cabinet, which, Basha said, "has more books, sound and instructional like proposals as well as more 'curio' like objects. The installation has been organized in and around perfect cube cardboard boxes."

"Both shows have an array of hi-concept, kitsch, traditional art and experimental art," said Basha. "We didn't want to divide it thematically. It was meant to show how many different parts of the art world came together for this."

Among the works at MoCA is a boxed wisdom tooth from Joelle Hotaling, a ceramic bone from Edith Abeytan, a holograph of "The Last Supper" by Peter Max Lawrence with stick-ons for the faces of the saints; packets of sugar stamped with the name of the artist -- Diane Sugar.

Most of the works at Mass MoCA appear to be homages to LeWitt -- resonating pictorially with the geometric lines and color patterns that characterized his wall drawings or else laying out instructions or plans for an artwork, as LeWitt typically did.

Among these is a small jar filled with remnants of a scraped-off LeWitt wall drawing from Max Goldfarb and Allyson Straffello, who had worked as LeWitt's assistants; a pencil sharpener made of felt by Hope Ginsberg in reference to all the pencils sharpened for LeWitt's drawings; and all manner

of line grids, geometric patterns and instructions for creating pieces of art.

This was not the case with the art LeWitt got in trades in his lifetime.

"A scant few of the works appear to be homages," Passehl said. "Most often the works are in the style of the maker. He wanted the collection to be a vehicle for showcasing the work of others."

With LeWitt gone, the curators confronted an additional problem: What to send back to the hundreds of artists to honor up the spirit of an LeWitt's art trades.

The solution? Give them their own and everyone else's artwork back as a newsprint "catalog" of all the entries in the exhibition.

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