

## Building collections The poetic language of sculpture

A work of art by Lawrence Weiner, on permanent public view, is inspiring new interpretations for our changing times, writes Elizabeth Fullerton

Although the South London Gallery (SLG), like all British galleries and museums, remained closed at the beginning of 2021 due to the third coronavirus-imposed lockdown, local residents have been able to enjoy a new public work of art in the form of a dash of poetry on the side of the SLG's Fire Station annexe. Unveiled in February, this new version of a work, which was originally conceived in 1999, by the American conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner, comprises the text in bold blue font on a white background: **AT A DISTANCE TO THE FOREGROUND.**

The work, acquired with Art Fund support, is the result of a conversation SLG director Margot Heller began two years ago with Weiner, whom she has known since the 1990s. 'This was before lockdowns and social distancing, so the poignancy of the work and its contemporary relevance to the global pandemic wasn't there at the time we were first discussing it,' Heller notes. 'As things developed in 2020 I felt a renewed sense of urgency about wanting to see this acquisition come to fruition, and so took the conversation to the next level.'

Born in the Bronx, New York, in 1942 and self-taught, Weiner is considered one of the forefathers of conceptual art, alongside Robert Barry, Joseph Kosuth and Sol LeWitt. His work shifted the responsibility for interpretation onto the audience in a radical redefinition of the artist-viewer relationship and challenged conventions around the role of the artist. Since the late 1960s, language has been his primary medium, ranging from the provocative to the melancholic, from ready-made aphorisms and slogans to fragments of poetry and conversation.

The SLG has had a long and fruitful relationship with Weiner, whose pithy texts have appeared all over the world,

on walls, in posters, as tattoos, in lyrics – but, surprisingly, this is his first major public work of art in London. Weiner's collaborations with the gallery have occurred at important transitional moments in its history. In 2003 he presented works on paper as part of a group exhibition titled 'Independence', marking the SLG's separation from Southwark Council management to become an independent charity; he participated in the group show 'Nothing is Forever' in 2010, celebrating the opening of the gallery's extension into the neighbouring house and a new education studio; and in 2014 Weiner had a solo show at the gallery, which included a temporary work, **ALL IN DUE COURSE**, on the side of the then recently donated derelict fire station. 'We would have loved to acquire that at the time but it wasn't possible. However, it sowed the seed of thinking it would be wonderful to have a work by Lawrence Weiner in the SLG's permanent collection,' Heller says. Knowing the Fire Station building well, Weiner proposed the specific typeface, colours and location of **AT A DISTANCE TO THE FOREGROUND.**

The SLG has more than 5,000 works in its eclectic permanent collection, which began in the 19th century, including approximately 145 that are contemporary, defined by the gallery as post-1970. For the past 30 years acquisitions have focused on works that have geographical or site-specific relevance to the institution, such as a gold-leaf mural by Paul Morrison in its double-height atrium, originally created for the show 'Nothing is Forever', and a permanent garden designed by Gabriel Orozco (also created with Art Fund support) mapping pockets of space in a series of swirling, interlinking brick circles.

Each of Weiner's texts, which he regards as sculptures, forms a distinct relationship with its environment.



At the SLG in the context of the coronavirus, one immediately thinks of masks and the lack of touch and human proximity. But **AT A DISTANCE TO THE FOREGROUND** has gained quite different meanings in previous iterations. In 2008 it was presented in bright-orange gloss paint on the brick façade of a decrepit former silk mill in Frome, Somerset, for example, where the words functioned literally, only being fully viewable from a distance, while also encompassing figurative ideas about power hierarchies in the development of public spaces. The work was also displayed at the Newlyn Art Gallery in Cornwall in 2009, extending both forwards and backwards in black

outlined capitals across a spectacular window onto the sea, throwing open questions about perspective and inside versus outside. At the SLG the work has the advantage of being on view to the public around the clock and boasts a highly visible spot on a busy road that in pre-Covid times was passed, according to Heller, by around 25,000 vehicles every day. Once the pandemic subsides, the work will doubtless acquire a wealth of intriguing new meanings.

● [southlondongallery.org](http://southlondongallery.org), free to all, 10% off in shop with National Art Pass. Please check website for the latest information on exhibitions and opening times

Below: Alberta Whittle, *Celestial Meditations*, 2018 (British Art Show 9)



### British Art Show 9 new commissions

The latest iteration of the British Art Show, the UK touring exhibition of contemporary art, held every five years, will open on 10 July in Aberdeen, before travelling to Wolverhampton, Manchester and Plymouth. The show, presented across galleries and exhibition spaces in each city, will include new Art Fund-supported commissions that will be acquired by local museum partners in each city. The Whitworth, Manchester, will acquire work by Simeon Barclay; Wolverhampton Art Gallery, work by Helen Cammock; The Box, Plymouth, work by Alberta Whittle, and Aberdeen Art Gallery, work by Florence Peake.

### New Future Collect partner

Arts organisation Iniva has selected the Hepworth Wakefield as its partner for the second year of Future Collect. Established in 2020 with Art Fund support, the three-year programme partners with national and regional museums to commission and exhibit work by British artists of African or Asian descent. Last year, Iniva partnered with Manchester Art Gallery and selected Jade Montserrat as the first artist to be commissioned for the programme. The work of the second chosen artist will be displayed at the Hepworth Wakefield in 2022.

### Six commissions for Coventry

Art Fund is supporting six new commissions by Black female or non-binary artists, to be shown for the first time at Coventry Biennial 2021, which frames itself as the UK's social biennial. Titled 'HYPER-POSSIBLE' in reference to Coventry's radical history, this third Coventry Biennial, also part of Coventry's year-long tenure as UK City of Culture, will run from 8 October to 23 January 2022 across Coventry and Warwickshire. Comprising exhibitions, events, activities and new commissions, it will focus on three important artist groups that have associations with the area: Art & Language; The BLK Art Group and Cybernetic Culture Research Unit.

### Harold Offeh sculpture on view

In 2020 artist Harold Offeh asked the public to send him their prophecies (featured in *Art Quarterly* autumn 2020). Offeh combined these into mixes of sound, images and video that form part of his new sculpture *Hail the New Prophets*, commissioned with Art Fund support. Now installed on the rooftop of a former car park in Peckham, as part of 2021's Bold Tendencies art, architecture and events programme, on until 18 September, the sculpture is inspired by Afrofuturism and its pioneer, jazz musician Sun Ra. [boldtendencies.com](http://boldtendencies.com)



Left: Lawrence Weiner, **ALL IN DUE COURSE**, installation view at the South London Gallery, 2014; above, right: **AT A DISTANCE TO THE FOREGROUND**, 1999, installation view at the SLG Fire Station, 2021

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