

LAWRENCE WEINER
AROUND THE WORLD
VOLTA AO MUNDO

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OPENING 14 SEP 10 PM

14 SEPTEMBER - 30 OCTOBER 2021

AROUND THE WORLD (2020), is a work by Lawrence Weiner from which this show at Cristina Guerra Contemporary Art borrows its name. The work brings together five pieces that are seemingly connected by both an action and an idea. The action that binds these works together is that of navigation, and the idea I refer to is the line that divides the globe into two supposedly equal halves and takes its name from the notion of equality. Equator is a central reference whenever we think about the planet's geography, climate or population; it is an idea because it does not really exist, it is an imagined line to which I will return in more detail later. Literal or metaphorical, all kinds of navigation require reference points to inform those who are plotting a course, in order to know where they are and how to get where they are going. Navigate is a verb that can be applied to certain movements made first through science-fiction and today, as a consequence of technological development we don't even flinch when we read or hear about it in the context of recent interplanetary travels

In pre-digital navigation, the stars were used as reference points and location systems when there was no other visual information available. With the invention of the compass and the astrolabe, so did the quantity and the quality of the observations, and the ever-expanding human desire for travel devised new conventions to facilitate our voyages, which in turn transformed our planet into a finite place, subjected to new grammars of division. Navigation is an almost perfect metaphor for life.

Navigation has been part of the universe of structures traced and named by Weiner over six decades of producing work as vast as it is varied and consistent. In his works, especially since 1968, the responsibilities between artist-producer and receiver-user of the work fluctuate and, without getting confusing, it seems as if they unconsciously negotiate the production of meanings and/or values. The work and its recipient are both subject to the conditions of the time and place in which the work is presented. Even so, the here and now do not produce fixed and immutable imaginaries, but quite the opposite. In 1968, Weiner issued for the first time his "statement of intent", with which he established the framework for the reception (I dare say the "operation") of his work, which has been since then expressed with "language + the material referred to." The statement of intent does not imply a diminishing of the artist's role, but it does significantly affect how we conceptualize both the work (which may or may not be manufactured) and the receiver (most commonly addressed as "spectator" or "viewer"). Here, the receiver has the freedom and the responsibility to bestow meaning to the work, adjusting it to a personal existential level, high and/or low. Therefore, these lines you are reading do not claim to describe either the thoughts of its author or the artist's intentions when he created his work. My reflections on it need not be better or worse than anyone else's. Lawrence Weiner's works are not scores to be interpreted in a specific way; it's up to the receiver to decide what to make of them. Weiner has been a leading figure in the demystification and dismantling of the hierarchies that placed the work of art and the artist as separate from the reality of all other entities and individuals. "THE ARTIST'S REALITY IS NO DIFFERENT THAN ANY OTHER REALITY." The notion of the 'artist-genius' has given way to the 'artist as producer' described by Walter Benjamin in 1934, an idea that proposes to completely rethink the role of the artist as just another member of society, whose activity is integrated in an industry and defined by the means of its production.

Navigation brings to mind sailing and the taming of the wind, putting it to use to fulfil our will and aim. The North Star, wind, sea, flotation, waves, horizon are ideas that appear in numerous works by Weiner and transport us to visions of the sea and the actions of seafaring, environments that differ from the urban contexts and solid territories that are particularly common in his earlier works. It seems that, for Weiner, navigator is one of his natural conditions, his primordial state or that to which he always seeks to return. The artist has used a great variety of media to present his work, from the pages of a book to the walls of a gallery or art institution, posters and postcards that blur the boundaries between different languages. He is the author of ethereal drawings that seem to prefer to float in the air rather than be captured on paper and created durable public works that eschew the status of the monument. Weiner directed films and videos and produced songs that he uses as medium for his pieces.

Alongside his use of traditional, more permanent and durable materials, he has also utilized completely ephemeral materials and conditions. Along with words, the artist regularly resorts to graphic elements that, coexisting with the former, have sometimes succeeded in replacing them, generating spaces of approximate understanding and wide possibilities that the viewer – adult, young person, specialist or neophyte – can use to play with or, otherwise, end up finding some other use to the work.

STARS DON'T STAND STILL IN THE SKY (1990), is a good example and one of the many works that takes us back to the world of navigation and the sea. It has been put together and produced in numerous variations, formats and media over decades and helps us approach AROUND THE WORLD / VOLTA AO MUNDO in broader perspectives. Both navigation and liberal ethics (at least since Kant) are based on the belief in the constancy of a set of values that, like the stars that we assume to remain unchanged over time, eternal and unmoving. As much as things may change for humans, that set of values and references would, they say, remain unchanged and could always be depended upon. When the sensory evidence that the sun moves east to west was transformed into the postulation of the globe's daily rotation around its own axis which assumed that the world was spherical – those who advanced it needed both conviction and science to succeed, because their ideas were contrary to the interests of the power of their times. In 1519, Fernando de Magalhães began the voyage that, concluded by Juan Sebastián Elcano in 1522, would constitute the first complete circumnavigation of our planet, with the purpose of expanding the wealth and the territories of what was possibly the largest colonial empire of the time. This expansion of both the navigator's and their promoter's properties and wealth meant loss and injury to numerous indigenous persons, who were forced to trade their life, liberty, property and wealth for unknown diseases, bondage and the indignity of the Church's Inquisition, among other things. In many cases these acts included their complete annihilation. Defending the argument that the earth was not flat, nor the center of the universe, ended up costing many lives.

AROUND THE WORLD / VOLTA AO MUNDO is accompanied by four other works in this show. If it's true that we could consider the five works as a unit, an equation in which the order of the factors does not alter the product, I invite you to go through them without inducing or presupposing any relation or specific order. PLACED ABOVE THE EQUATOR / COLOCADO ACIMA DO EQUADOR, PLACED BELOW THE EQUATOR / COLOCADO ABAIXO DO EQUADOR, TO THE LEFT OF THE EQUATOR / À ESQUERDA DO EQUADOR, TO THE RIGHT OF THE EQUATOR / À DIREITA DO EQUADOR refer us to a division of the planet in a double binary system that presupposes, but does not depend on the establishment of cardinal points. By postulating an 'above' and a 'below', a 'to the right of' and a 'to the left of', the work invites us to consider an alternative orientation to a static world where the north would always be above and the south down. The cardinal points were not created to establish a hierarchy, but they ended up representing one in colloquial speech. The stars in the sky do not define who occupies what position, that is left to those who use the grid and to the dregs of history, which is largely irrational. We'll avoid the debate whether the planet earth is extensively and exclusively equivalent to what we call the world, even if we sometimes mix the concepts when we speak. We know that our planet and the humans who live here are but a small fraction, made of fragile balances and easy disagreements, of an infinite universe. For now, in any case, we have become aware of how our behavior as a species affects all the members and constituents of the world-planet, seventy percent of which is covered by water, most of which is navigable. We move on the globe's skin wistfully looking at the stars above us and fearing what lurks in the depths under our feet. Above and below are hierarchical expressions that, for example, in a sexual context, can be used with a wide range of implications. Each can determine 'their' up, down, right, left, in an out... if they remain the center of their own universe and not at the mercy of the authority of others.

First presented in 1968, Weiner's declaration of intent firmly places the work's final state and meanings in the decisions made, at each moment, by the receiver-spectator-reader. The idea that the work is completed by the receiver has its origins in literature: the text is completed by the reader on the occasion of it having been read. For this reason, Weiner's works are never normative; they do not contain imperatives, they do not tell anyone what they should do, but rather convey the possibility of determining what is possible to do with them. The works exhibited today are based on participles or sentences without verb, with which the reader-receiver-user is free to position themselves anywhere 'in the world.' Also, the work is not indicative of what is above or below the imaginary line that divides the world. We can position ourselves or anything else in relation to the Equator. The work invites us to become aware of the world's finitude, of our boundless freedom and desire to navigate.

Because it is a circular line, without beginning or end, and horizontal by convention (and interpretation), being located to the right or left of the Equator is seemingly an oxymoron, something absurd. But the work also asks us to question the conventions, abstract or concrete, of geography, that is, of the division of the world. What is up or down, in the representation of the earth depends on what was established by the first western navigators as they described their travels, often heading west, towards the setting sun. The Arab sailors heading east, toward the rising sun, came up with their own difference of 'up' and 'down'.

The way the works are placed in the exhibition and arranged in the gallery gives rise to interlaced readings. AROUND THE WORLD / VOLTA AO MUNDO welcomes the viewer through the large plate glass windows overlooking the street. The English version of the work appears in yellow letters with a black outline, and the Portuguese version's blue letters below. The two lines, or you could say the two language lines float together in a thin intersect, and where their letters interlace they are green. From there, the passerby is warned where this journey leads: around the world, a circumnavigation. Once inside the gallery, the works appear to pair up according to a rhythm and a sequence: in blue and to the right as we enter the space TO THE LEFT OF THE EQUATOR / À ESQUERDA DO EQUADOR gives way, in red, to PLACED BELOW THE EQUATOR / COLOCADO ABAIXO DO EQUADOR. On the adjoining wall, to the left in the direction of the entrance the red letter of TO THE RIGHT OF THE EQUATOR

/ À DIREITA DO EQUADOR precede the blue PLACED ABOVE THE EQUATOR / PLOCADO ACIMA DO EQUADOR, which in turn follows the wall as it bends in a sharp ninety degree corner. Here, the spaces between the letters on the upper and lower lines are devoid of color and appear white.

Lawrence Weiner's work is not comparable to poetry. When the artist started consolidating his work in the late-1960s, the relationships between creative genres in the field of visual arts, reproduction techniques (photography, cinema,...), theater, dance, erudite and popular music, and traditional and experimental poetic expressions were flowing into each other and forming vigorous currents that fed the vast ocean we call art, and that is continually renewed with new flows that come to replace that which evaporates into the air. Weiner draws attention to a decisive difference between his work, which uses language and the material referred to, and poetry: poetry is untranslatable. Aware that not only due to its linguistic specificity, but also due to the desire not to prioritize the reception of the work by linking it to the uniqueness of a language, Weiner has always combined English and the language/s of the place where the work is exhibited. The artist reliably declares that the creation of his works is not linked to a specific place, they are not site-specific, but they are received and understood in a specific context. Each place, with its own language, is a space of unique significance. In the various media in which the work may appear, the condition of its existence is linked to its publicness, to the fact that it is freely accessible in one way or another. The pages of a book, the walls of a gallery or museum, the floor of a street, the surface of a poster, the projection of light through a moving celluloid, all can be used as a medium, as a support that is as valid as the frame of a painting or the plinth of a sculpture.

The Equator divides the globe into two halves, equal in theory, but profoundly unequal in reality. Two different worlds touch each other at the Equator, the line whose name means the opposite of what it does. But being up or down is a function of our will, from which emanates our capacity to rebel, our need to share, and our desire.

Bartomeu Mari, 2021

¹ The term equator comes from the Medieval Latin *aequator*, from Latin *aequatus* (past participle of *aequ-are*, meaning 'to make equal').

² 1. The artist may construct the piece

2. The piece may be fabricated

3. The piece need not be built

³ Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the viewer upon the occasion of receivership

"It is that for Weiner it does not matter if the work lacks 'meaning'. What is important is that it allows the beholder to track its material process, to chart its making systematically, but not by way of interpretative decoding". Alberro, A. and Zimmerman, A.: "NOT HOW IT SHOULD WERE IT TO BE BUILT BUT HOW IT COULD WERE IT TO BE BUILT", in *VVAA: Lawrence Weiner*, Phaidon, London, 1998, p.50

"Implicit in Weiner's statement is a proclamation of the impossibility that the work of art can ever generate a stable circumscribed meaning. Instead, it enters into a dialogical relationship between the linguistic proposal of an artist's project and the spectator's interaction". *Ibid*, p. 51

⁴ "NOTES FROM ART" (1982) In *HAVING BEEN SAID. WRITINGS & INTERVIEWS OF LAWRENCE WEINER 1968-2003* Edited by Gerti Fietzek & Gregor Stimmerich, Haatje Cantz Publishers, 2004, p.130

⁵ Alexander Alberro writes about another of these examples: "FACTORS IN THE SCOPE OF DISTANCE (1984), for example, features drawings that do not illustrate a particular work but show paradigmatic ships on the horizon. The vertical lines indicate a cartographic method of determining distance and the horizontal elements render ships at sea as they appear on the horizon" Alberro, A & Zimmerman, A.: *Ibid* p. 55

⁶ If the Earth's axis was tilted enough — in 1917 it's axial tilt was calculated at 23°17' — the Equator would rise vertically, if we stick to the representational perspectives to which we have become accustomed. The axial tilt, or obliquity, creates the seasons and punctuates the passing of the years in each revolution around the sun.
