

## 4

Installations:  
Sol LeWitt at Rice

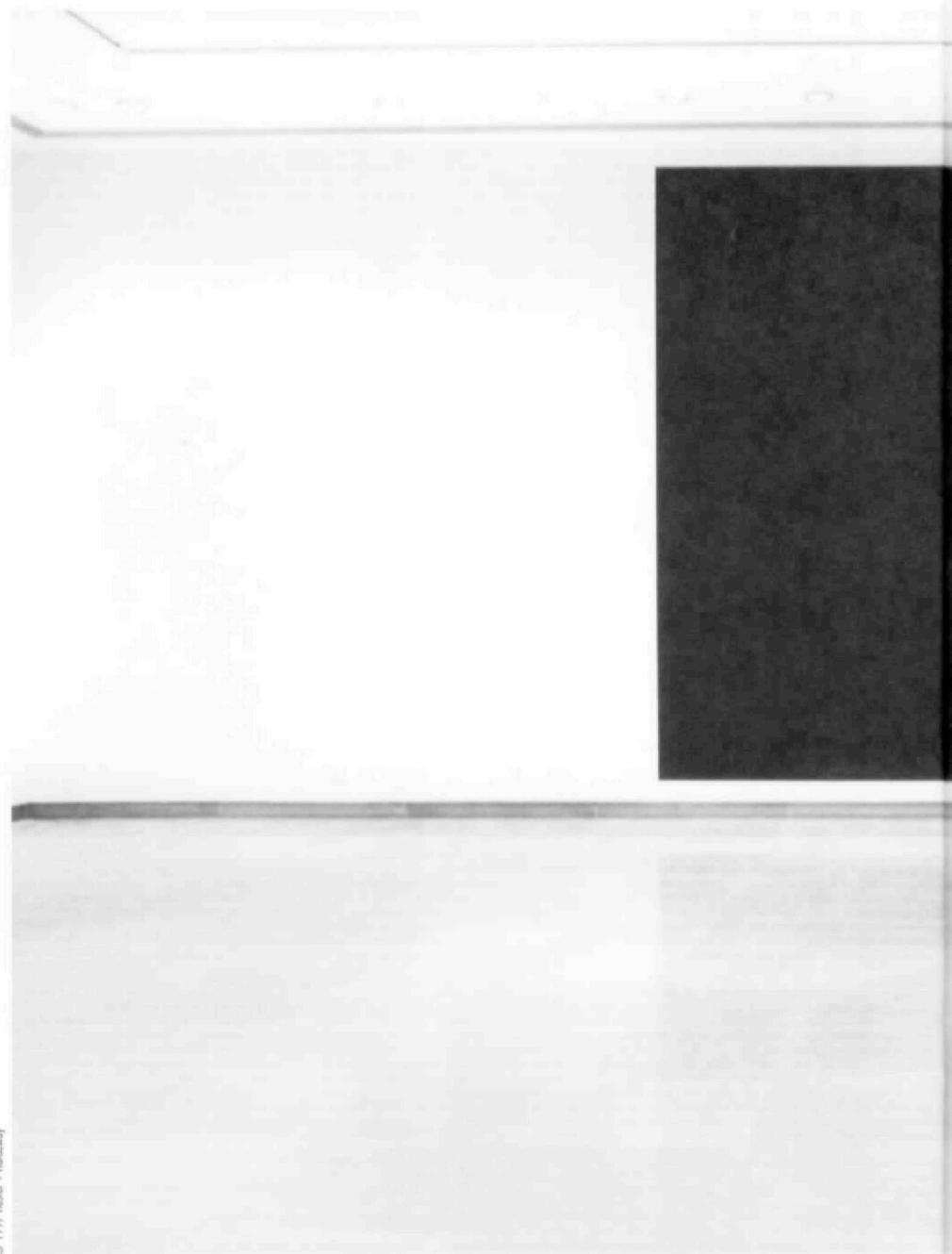
William F. Stern

In late January, the Rice University Art Gallery opened an exhibition featuring the art of Sol LeWitt. Organized and curated by the gallery director, Kimberly Davenport, the exhibition presents an unusual opportunity to view several aspects of LeWitt's current work. Divided between two venues at Rice, the exhibit includes a wall drawing installation, an installation of cut Styrofoam pieces, and a concrete cinder-block piece in the Rice University Art Gallery, and sculpture from the series called the "complex forms" in the Farish Gallery at the School of Architecture. The exhibition runs through April 13.

Born in 1928, Sol LeWitt lives and works outside of Hartford, Connecticut, and spends several months a year in Spoleto, Italy. His work has been the subject of numerous museum exhibitions, including a retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1978 and, more recently, a print retrospective also organized by the Museum of Modern Art and shown last fall at the University of Houston's Blaffer Gallery. LeWitt's work includes drawings on paper, drawings on walls, three-dimensional structures, photography, prints, and books with overlapping relationships between the work. Both two-dimensional and three-dimensional pieces are made in series, where permutations of an idea are explored in a multiplicity of variables and sequences.

LeWitt's three-part black-and-white wall drawing forms the centerpiece of this exhibition. LeWitt's first wall drawing was executed in 1968 at the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York. In those early years the wall drawings were just that — graphite on the flat surface of a white wall. As the wall drawings progressed, LeWitt introduced other media and techniques, including colored pencil, crayon, chalk, black India ink, colored India ink washes, and, most recently, black latex house paint. With the first wall drawings LeWitt developed a system whereby he would write instructions for a drawing, describing in words the idea to be executed; later, more complex wall drawing instructions might also be accompanied by a plan diagram. From the beginning LeWitt wrote his instructions in such a way that the wall drawings could be executed by others. Untitled, each drawing is assigned a sequential number, with its place of original installation identified. The Rice University Art Gallery piece will be recorded as wall drawing #813.

For the Rice show, two of LeWitt's



Center wall of the three-part wall drawing by Sol LeWitt, 1997, Rice University Art Gallery.

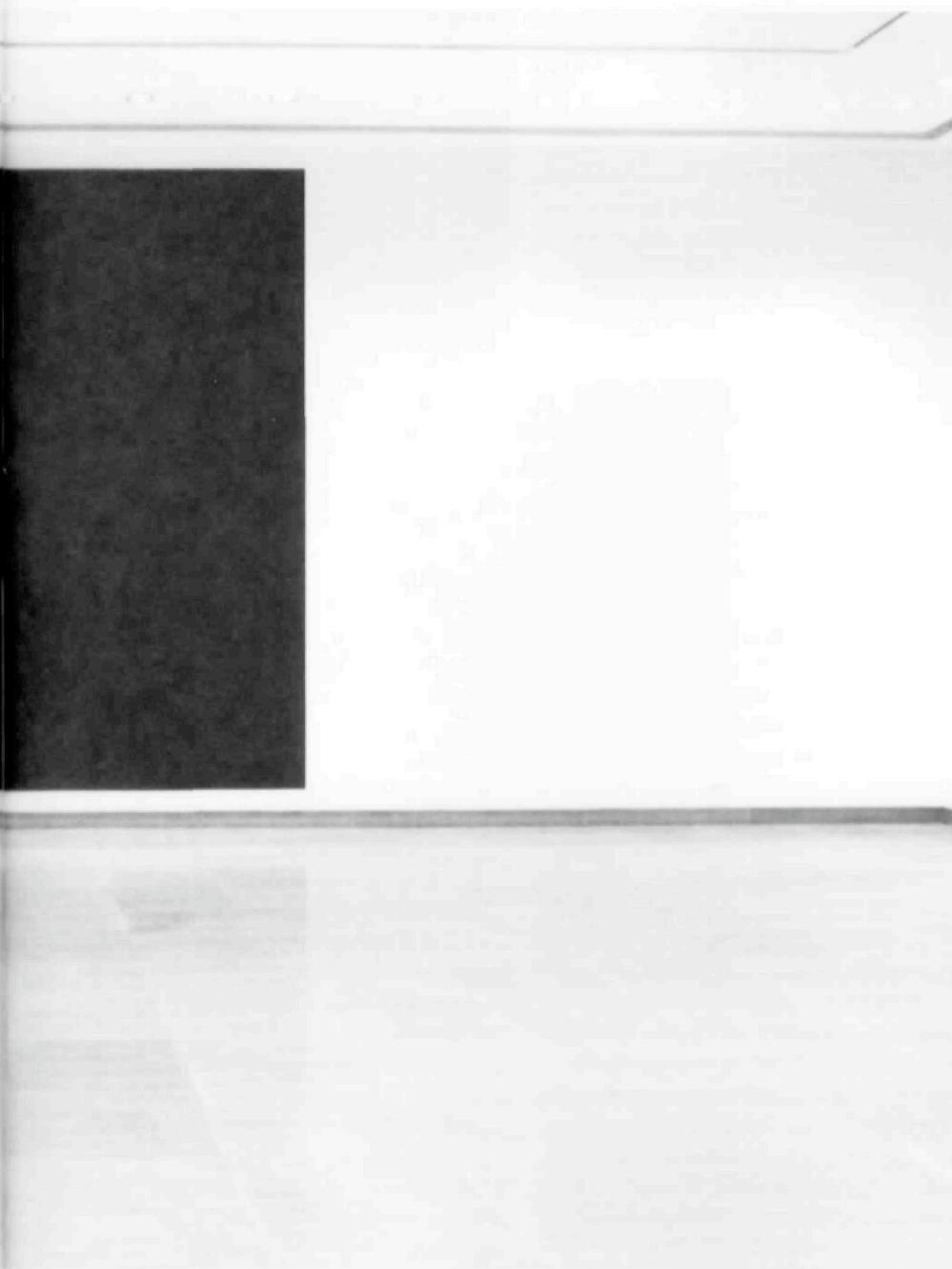
assistants, John Hosford and Kathleen McShane, came to Houston to install the drawing and were assisted by Rice University art and architecture students. Months prior to the installation, LeWitt was sent a plan and video of the gallery space. His instructions, which consist of a diagram for the gallery's three opaque walls, were given to his assistants, who completed the work in a period of one week. The drawing, covering the three 16-foot-high, white walls of the gallery, consists of a series of monolithic black squares divided (or separated) vertically or diagonally by a change in surface treatment from flat black to gloss black paint. As a site-specific piece, the drawing relates specifically to its architectural environment, in this case the gallery container, which is seen initially through the entry wall of glass.

Like much of LeWitt's work this piece deals with combinations, variations, and sequence — thus, on one wall, two black squares, one with a gloss sheen, the other flat, are held apart by the flat white space between them. On the opposite wall, two almost-square blocks, again one flat and one gloss black, join to form a large rectangle. The third wall, facing the glass entry, presents one block, centered on the

wall and divided diagonally between flat and gloss surfaces. These blocks are each held six inches down from the ceiling and six inches above the baseboard, making for a constant border that also establishes a common vertical dimension. Though the explanation of the process clarifies the nature of the piece, the wall drawing is intended to be experienced by the viewer as an interaction of form, shape, and texture within the confines of the three-dimensional space. The drawing presents a bold set of geometric relations and combinations, absolute in their purity and directness.

Because the drawing is site specific, it can only be installed at the Rice University Art Gallery and will be painted out when the show closes. Other wall drawings have been permanently installed — in private collections, museums, and public places. Not all of LeWitt's wall drawings are site specific; some can be adapted to different settings. But each can only be installed in one place at any given time.

The secondary space off the main gallery was chosen by LeWitt for the installation of a cut Styrofoam piece. Related to the wall drawing, but standing as a separate work, the installation con-



sists of one-inch-thick Styrofoam (commonly used in building construction as insulation board) broken into hand-size pieces, five to six inches across with three, four, or five sides. The broken pieces, painted gloss black, are nailed to the four walls of the gallery, which is painted flat black. The pieces are closely spaced with approximately a one-inch separation. Like the wall drawing, the Styrofoam piece was installed by LeWitt's assistants. Shape and placement of each broken piece was left to the discretion of the installer within constraints established by LeWitt. In common with the wall drawing, the broken Styrofoam piece is seen and experienced as part of the room and is dependent upon the physical space around it. Like the wall drawings, LeWitt's Styrofoam pieces are made in series with installations in other places and variations explored in contrasting colors.

Just outside the main gallery in the foyer space, LeWitt placed a sculptural piece fabricated from concrete cinder blocks. Entitled *Progression #3*, this work is not site specific and could be installed in another location at another time. The cinder-block piece is conceived as part of an ongoing series LeWitt began in the

mid-1980s. Taking as his module the single cinder block (16 by 8 by 8 inches), he explores the infinite permutations possible as the blocks are combined. *Progression #3* begins with a 48-inch cube, three blocks long and six blocks tall. The next tier, stepped in one block, forms a 32-inch cube, two blocks long and four blocks high, and the third tier, a 16-inch cube, is one block wide and two blocks tall. Thus the stacked cubes telescope proportionally (3:2:1), regulated by the scale and module of the cinder-block unit. One can begin to imagine the possibilities as Sol LeWitt has done in dozens of other cinder-block pieces, sometimes painted white or other times left natural gray. *Progression #3* was built by a Houston mason, Wayne Brinkley, who followed the instructions provided for the piece, purchasing the materials from a local supplier and assembling the structure in a few hours. LeWitt fully intends for this type of work to be made by local craftsmen using available materials.

Two years after LeWitt began making the cinder-block pieces, he started working on a series called the "complex forms." Six pieces from this series, all dating from the early 1990s, were installed and assembled in Farish Gallery

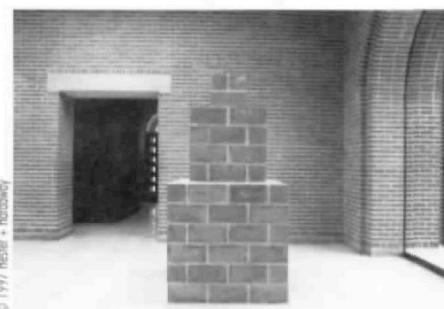
by the gallery director, Dung Ngo. More complicated than the cinder-block pieces or those from the earlier series known as the "open cubes," these structures closely relate to a series of colored ink-wash wall drawings called the "continuous forms." Fabricated of plywood or aluminum painted white, each begins from a plan drawn on graph paper. The plan is then projected to a point whose position is indicated on the graph paper and whose height is predetermined. While the plan might seem relatively simple, the three-dimensional projection is something else, appearing as a multifaceted carving whose system has been purposely obscured. Of all of Sol LeWitt's work, the complex forms, whether intentionally or not, are the most figurative and most evocative of natural shapes. Seen at the Farish Gallery with its expanse of glass to the outside, these pieces are sharply defined by the play of natural light, heightening the rhythmic interplay between the facets and shapes.

This provocative exhibition of four installations proves the ingenuity of Sol LeWitt's methods, both in the way he conceives the work and in the way the work is realized. Since LeWitt's first exhibition in the early 1960s, this artist has produced an enormous body of work that constantly progresses and invents upon itself. His is an art that can be understood and appreciated on many different levels, from the purely intellectual to the romantic and sensuous. It is an art that communicates equally with its artist, its makers, and its viewers. ■



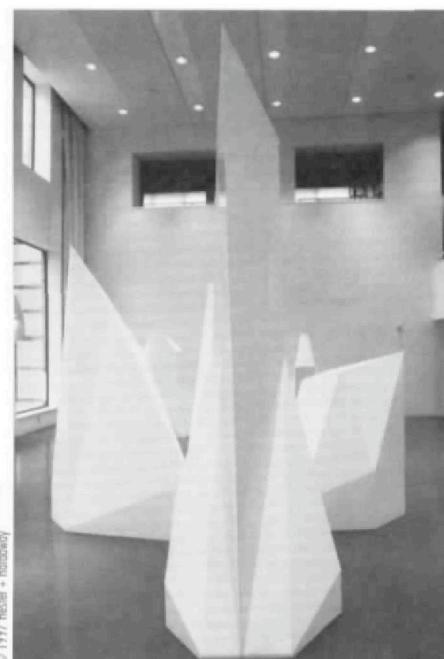
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Wall drawing installation, Rice University Art Gallery.



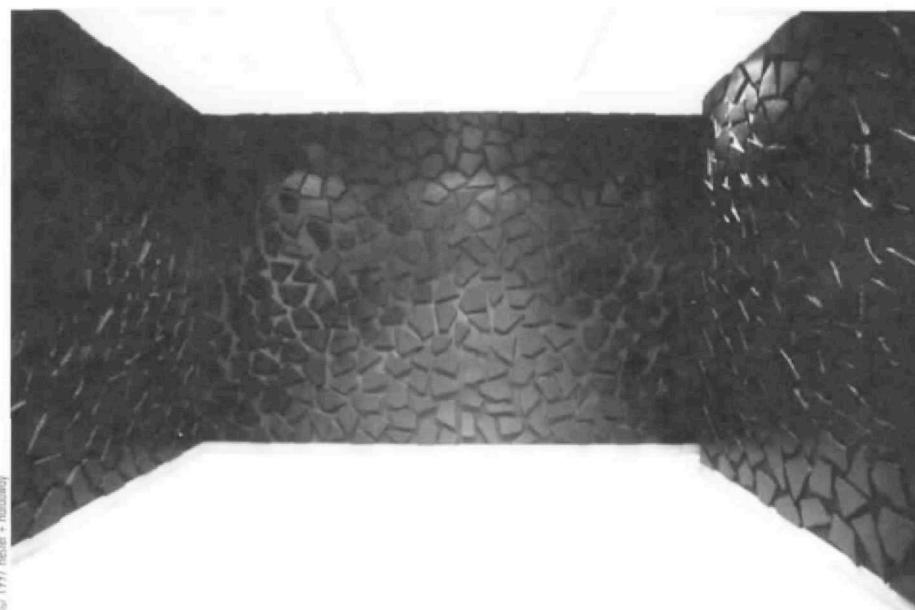
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*Progression #3*, 1997, Rice University Art Gallery.



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1990 sculpture from the series of complex forms, Farish Gallery, Rice University School of Architecture.



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Installation of broken Styrofoam pieces, 1997, Rice University Art Gallery.