

WADSWORTH ATHENEUM
MUSEUM OF ART

Wall Drawing #793 C (Irregular wavy color bands on two facing walls), by Sol LeWitt

Master of minimalism

Bio details Sol LeWitt's complex relationship with Hartford

BY FRANK RIZZO
Special to The Courant

In a recently released biography on Sol LeWitt — a Hartford-born, New Britain-raised artist who was a 20th century master of minimalism and conceptual art — Connecticut author and LeWitt friend Lary Bloom recounts in dramatic detail the surprise 70th birthday party held in 1998 at Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, when “stunned guests watched as the guest of honor did all he could to ruin the party.”

But more on that party later. First some perspective on the man who redefined the role of the artist with his belief that “the work of the mind is more important than the work of the hand.”

LeWitt's practice was based primarily within his own intellect, establishing formal instructions that assistants followed to create his works.

“As art historians have said there have been two great artists who have come out of Hartford: [19th century landscape painter] Frederic Church and Sol LeWitt,” says Bloom, author of “Sol LeWitt: A Life of Ideas,” Wesleyan University Press. (LeWitt died in 2007 at the age of 78).

But LeWitt, who loathed the personal spotlight, had a complex relationship with a city that had once rejected its native son.

In 1980, LeWitt was commissioned to create a wall piece for the former Hartford Civic Center, which was being rebuilt after its roof collapsed two years earlier. Public reaction to the proposed work was not kind.

“You have to remember the context of the times,” says Bloom, who was editor of The Courant's former Northeast Sunday magazine starting in the early '80s.

“This followed Carl Andre's 1977 ‘Stone Field Sculpture’ — which most people simply call ‘The Rocks’ — and the derision that work of art received, though not a penny of it came from public funds,” says Bloom. And then there was Mayor George Athanson's hostile reaction to Alexander Calder's bright orange ‘Stegosaurus’ sculpture in Burr Mall.

“He disliked it so much that he kept his blinds closed in his office so he wouldn't have to look at it,” Bloom says.

It was clearly a city that did not always embrace challenging art, though over time Hartford has developed a reputation for it, despite itself.

“You can go back to the time of Wadsworth Museum Director Chick Austin [from the late '20s to the mid-'40s],” says Bloom, “and — as much as Chick did for Hartford, making it as one writer called ‘the Athens of America’ — he faced tremendous opposition from the museum board, too.

“Being the capital of the insurance industry, Hartford was built largely on the absence of risk so when along comes the likes of Chick, or Andre or [Real Art Ways] founder Joe Celli or [street theater artist] Tim Keating — or Sol, it doesn't respond well.”

LeWitt's proposal for a wall mural featuring geometric figures for the Civic Center elicited hostile reaction, fueled by scornful editorials in The Courant that mocked the art, ignored the artist's international standing and brushed aside LeWitt's local roots, referring to him as “a New



WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART PHOTOS

“La Vecchia,” a 1502-08 oil on canvas by Giorgione (c. 1477/78-c. 1510) owned by Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice, on exhibit now at Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford.

A RARE VISIT

Giorgione's groundbreaking ‘La Vecchia’ leaves Venice for Wadsworth Atheneum

BY SUSAN DUNNE

In Venice during the Italian Renaissance, portraitists painted the wealthy and powerful, most frequently men, who stood proud and dignified, dressed and posed in ways to emphasize their status and high rank.

In the first decade of the 16th century, the painter Giorgione did a radical thing. The sitter for his “La Vecchia” (“The Old Woman”) is seemingly of the working classes, humbly dressed and snaggle-toothed, her mouth gaping with exhaustion, her shawl falling off. She clutches a shred of fabric on which is written “col tempo,” meaning “with time,” as if to suggest that with time, we all will grow old and tired.

Giorgione — born Giorgio Barbarelli da Castelfranco — died while still a young man. He left few works behind. The owner of “La Vecchia,” the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice, cherishes its painting. In the 500-plus years since its creation, “La Vecchia” has spent only a few months outside of Venice.

So its presence at Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford is a rare luxury, a chance to see a High Renaissance masterpiece without having to fly to Italy. It will be on exhibit until Aug. 4. It comes to Hartford from Cincinnati Art Museum, where it was shown from February to May. After Hartford, “La Vecchia” will go home to Italy. The exhibit was organized by the two museums in collaboration with the Foundation for Italian Art and Culture.

To honor its distinguished visitor, the museum has created a new gallery space on the second floor of the Avery wing, reclaimed from its use as a storage area. One introductory artwork and wall text, as well as a spectacular reproduction print of Renaissance-era Venice, lead visitors around a corner, where “La Vecchia” hangs alone. A bench is installed in front of it, to encourage lengthy contemplation of the artwork.

“We decided to do this because of the



“Madonna and Child with a Donor,” a c. 1504-05 tempera and oil on panel by Andrea Previtali (Italian, c. 1470-1528). Previtali was a contemporary of Giorgione and also studied with Bellini.

quality of the work. This is a truly iconic art piece,” said Oliver Tostmann, the museum's curator of European art. “It rewrote the course of Venetian portraiture. We wanted it to have a deep impact, a grand hello, and present it in the best light possible.”

After “La Vecchia” goes home, Tostmann said, the new gallery will exhibit artworks that deserve space to themselves, for lengthy viewing.

Before Giorgione

Tostmann said trends in portraiture before Giorgione were driven not just by the aristocratic sitters who wanted their portraits painted, but also by artists and buyers.

“When you did have female sitters, they were extremely famous and the highest rank imaginable. They were portraits of idealized, beautiful women. The artists were male. The buyers were male. They were not interested in an ugly

old woman,” he said. “Giorgione wiped all that away and set a precedent.

“She is depicted in a blunt, realistic style. She is missing teeth. She has wrinkles. She needs a haircut. You can see the ravages of time,” he said. “She's not represented as being in any way distinctive. She was just an average person you'd meet on the street in Venice, an ordinary woman of low rank.”

Tostmann points out, however, that Giorgione did not degrade his model.

“He creates a dynamic that makes her more lively, and there's her hand gesture. He puts her behind a parapet, which ennobles her,” he said. “She is a woman without a name, but Giorgione memorializes her.”

In subsequent years, Giorgione “greatly influenced Venetian artists, most of all Titian and Sebastiano del Piombo,” Tostmann said. “Beyond Venice, he certainly influenced Nicolas Poussin and

Turn to ‘La Vecchia’, Page G2

A first for Smithsonian Institution

Lonnie Bunch named the first African American leader in museum organization's 173-year history

By PEGGY MCGLONE
Washington Post

Lonnie Bunch — the founding director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture — has been appointed secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, becoming the first black leader in its 173-year history.

The Smithsonian's board of regents introduced Bunch as the institution's 14th secretary on Tuesday morning. He succeeds David Skorton, who announced his resignation in December and whose last day is June 15.

Bunch, 66, takes over a quasifederal institution of 19 museums, nine research centers and the National Zoo that is supported by 7,000 employees and a \$1.5 billion annual budget.

As he ascends to one of the most powerful positions in the museum world, Bunch inherits a host of challenges that will test his political, fundraising and management skills. As the world's largest museum and education organization, the Smithsonian has struggled to catch up with technological advances, has a massive and costly backlog of maintenance needs, and faces pressure to add branches focused on American Latinos and women. Efforts to improve diversity and inclusion in staff, collections and exhibitions are underway but are far from complete, and a recent mandate to connect a sprawling bureaucracy of independent museums hasn't gotten much traction.

Bunch acknowledges the problems but prefers to focus on the possibilities.

"I am cognizant of the challenges that the institution faces during the next decade, but more importantly I am excited by the potential," Bunch told an audience Tuesday that included his 91-year-old mother, Montrose Bunch, associates from the African American Museum and Smithsonian officials.

"I revel in the opportunity to work closely with the regents and with my gifted and dedicated colleagues - from scientists to curators, to educators, to security officers to volunteers - to help the Smithsonian become the institution American needs and America deserves."

Bunch's appointment was cheered across the Smithsonian, with many employees pointing to his insider status as an advantage. He is the first Smithsonian director to become secretary in 74 years, and the first historian in the job. He will start June 16.

"What does the Smithsonian do best? We do museums best, and we picked the top person from our top museum, the leader of one of our crown jewels," said search committee member Stephanie Stebich, director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Bunch's reputation among his colleagues, his fundraising skills

both in Congress and with private donors, and his experience at three Smithsonian museums separated him from the pack, said David Rubenstein, the chairman of the board of regents. The success of the African American Museum, the newest Smithsonian, was another important factor.

"He has achieved one of the most impressive accomplishments at the Smithsonian in decades, building the African American Museum from scratch," Rubenstein said.

Bunch will face the task of bringing the same vision and excitement to the Smithsonian, an institution founded in 1846 and burdened with an unwieldy infrastructure and a culture that some say rewards caution over innovation.

Bunch became director of the African American Museum in 2005 and, over the next 11 years, oversaw the design, location and construction of the 400,000-square-foot building on the National Mall, adjacent to the Washington Monument. He also led the effort to amass a collection of 40,000 items.

Showcasing political skill and fundraising prowess, Bunch secured \$270 million in federal funding and \$317 million in private donations by the time the museum's doors opened on Sept. 24, 2016. Oprah Winfrey, Will Smith and Stevie Wonder were among the celebrities who joined President Barack Obama, former President George W. Bush and civil rights icon Rep. John Lewis, D-Md., to celebrate a museum whose mission is to tell the story of America through the perspective of the black experience.

"The day when we opened was America at its best," Bunch said in an interview Monday. "It was when people crossed racial and political lines and came together for the greater good. I'll take that lesson with me. I want to help the museums become as community-centered and as exciting to the public as the African American Museum is."

The long-awaited museum immediately became one of Washington's top attractions and has welcomed more than 4 million people in its first 2 1/2 years. Spencer Crew, a history professor at George Mason University, will serve as interim director.

The African American Museum changed the culture of the Smithsonian, said Eduardo Diaz, director of the Smithsonian Latino Center.

"It drove home the importance of a commitment to diversity and inclusion," Diaz said. "It brought the issue to the forefront. Directors are now thinking about how (they) manage diversity and inclusion. What exhibitions are they researching? Whose experiences are they researching?"

Bunch's promotion sends a strong signal, Diaz added. "The message is clear. It will be heeded with him in charge."



JAH CHIKWENDU/THE WASHINGTON POST PHOTOS

Lonnie Bunch III, director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, will become the next secretary of the Smithsonian.



Bunch oversaw the design, location and construction of The National Museum of African American History and Culture.

That message extends to the larger museum field, which is working to address issues of diversity and equity, said Laura Lott, president and CEO of the American Alliance of Museums.

"His appointment to this prestigious national position, which is the closest thing the United States has to a ministry of culture, sets a tone for a new era that we need to be more inclusive," she said.

Bunch is also tasked with addressing the Smithsonian's lackluster performance in the digital realm. The institution's strategic plan calls for its virtual programs to reach 1 billion people a year by 2022. It's a steep task, but not impossible, colleagues say.

"The Smithsonian found itself behind the curve in terms of technology a decade ago. We've been pedaling really fast to catch up, but we're not there yet," said Kevin Gover, director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. "The challenge is to get ahead of the curve. Lonnie, having been here

and done the job he's done, he comes in knowing where the challenges are."

Drowned out in the enthusiasm for Bunch's appointment are questions about the scale of the job. The two previous secretaries were former university presidents with experience managing vast operations with thousands of employees and billion-dollar budgets. Bunch brings the knowledge of the museum field they lacked, but his management experience is on a different scale: The African American Museum has a staff of 163 and a \$40 million annual budget, a fraction of the Smithsonian's.

"There are no other museums at this scale in our country," Lott said of the Smithsonian. "Like any of the major agencies or big corporations, it's all about the team."

Bunch's first stint at the Smithsonian was as an education specialist at the National Air and Space Museum from 1978 to 1979. After a few years at the California African American Museum in

Los Angeles, he returned in 1989, joining the National Museum of American History, where he moved up the ranks to become associate director of curatorial affairs, a position he held for six years. In 2001, he became president of the Chicago Historical Society.

"After serving in three museums, I have touched all aspects of the Smithsonian," Bunch said. "Hopefully, I can help to close the chasm that exists between the Castle (the centralized administrative offices) and the museums."

Bunch was born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1952 to two teachers and was raised in a predominantly Italian American neighborhood in Belleville, New Jersey. He earned bachelor's and master's degrees in history from American University. He is married to Maria Marable-Bunch, the associate director of museum learning at the National Museum of the American Indian, and the couple has two grown daughters.

In addition to his museum work, Bunch has taught at numerous universities and written books on black military history, the American presidency and museums. His book "Call the Lost Dream Back: Essays on History, Race and Museums" was published in 2010, and "A Fool's Errand: Creating the National Museum of African American History and Culture During the Age of Bush, Obama, and Trump" will be published this fall.

In 2005, the American Alliance of Museums named Bunch one of the 100 most influential museum professionals. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2017, and last year, he was given the Phi Beta Kappa Award for Distinguished Service to the Humanities.

'La Vecchia'

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Velazquez, up to Manet in the 19th century. "

Mysterious artist, sitter

No one knows who the model for "La Vecchia" was. According to myth, she is Giorgione's mother, but Tostmann said there is no proof to substantiate the myth.

Giorgione himself is a mystery.

Little is known about his early life. He was born in the 1470s in the town of Castelfranco Veneto. He moved to nearby Venice at some point in his youth to apprentice under Giovanni Bellini. Giorgione began gaining praise for his work in his early 20s and received commissions from aristocrats, creating altarpieces as well as the sort of portraits that "La Vecchia" later challenged.

It is known he worked with Titian and once met Leonardo Da Vinci. Giorgione died in 1510 during an outbreak of the bubonic plague, when he was in his 30s.

Tostmann said Giorgione was known for ambiguous messages

in his work. The inclusion of "col tempo" could be evidence of that tendency. "Col tempo was a trope that was repeated all the time in poems. It is possible Giorgione wanted to paint an allegory about the passing of time in competition with poets who were famous at the time. That was very much the world of Venice in the 1500s," he said.

Only one other painting is shown in the exhibit. In the introductory bay of the gallery is "Madonna and Child with a Donor" by Andrea Previtali, from 1504-1505, which the Athenaeum owns. Previtali was near Giorgione's age and also a student of

Bellini. Both artists worked in oils, which was a relatively new medium. Previously, European artists tended to paint with tempera.

"This painting is easy to overlook. Now it's in a new context, all alone," Tostmann said of the Previtali.

To encourage contemplation of "La Vecchia," the gallery will have soft, piped-in lute music, composed during Giorgione's era, playing from 4 to 5 p.m. each day. The recorded music, performed by New Haven Renaissance performer Hideki Yamaya, was composed by Marc'Antonio Pifaró, Vincenzo Capirola, Josquin des

Prez and, from the 19th century, a Venice-inspired piece by Franz Liszt.

Museum spokeswoman Kim Hugo said some may prefer to view the work without music, so the limited time frame was chosen. Those who want silent viewings can see the painting before 4 p.m. each day.

GIORGIONE'S LA VECCHIA is at Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum of Art, 600 Main St. in Hartford, until Aug. 4. thewadsworth.org.

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WORD WATCH

Readers' disinterested quibbles on common mistakes

By ROB KYFF
Special to The Courant

Every so often I like to unleash my readers' pet peeves, aka, 'pêt'e noires,' cur'sed terms and 'dog'grrrrrel.

Emailer Phyllis Aronson unleashes an entire kennel of curs. She hates it when people 1. use "shrank" instead of "shrank" as the past tense of "shrink"; 2. insert "of" into "not that big [of] a deal." 3. use "further" instead of "farther" for physical distance.

When it comes to kibble quibbles, Shelley Reed of Alameda, Calif., serves up objections to "first-come, first-serve," which should be "first-come, first-served," as well as "passed" used for "past," e.g., "he walked passed the building."

Mark Lander of Old Saybrook is no fan-fan of redundancies such as "ATM machine," "hot water heater," "knots per hour" and "MLB baseball," while Dexter Senft of Bedford, N.Y., notes that nine out of 10 people use "decimate" to mean "almost totally destroy" when it technically means "to destroy 10 percent of something."

David Anson of Bradenton, Fla., disses the use of "disinterested," which means "unbiased," to mean "uninterested," and Judy King of Farmington hits high wattage when people say, "What?" instead of "Excuse me?" or "Pardon me?" when they haven't heard someone.

Emailer Don Onnen gets out of sorts when he hears people on cable news channels continually say "sort of," and Jim Bond of Canton is shaken, not stirred, by the

misspelling of the past tense of the verb "to lead" as "lead" instead of "led," and John Strother of Princeton, N.J., gets "so" angry when people begin every sentence with "So."

Blair Johnson, an editor and professor at UConn, wants to say "ta-ta!" to the insertion of an extra "ta" into "preventive" to form the needless variant "preventative," while Vera Eggert of Clinton thinks it's unhealthy for people to describe food that's good for you as "healthy" (not diseased) when it's actually "healthful" (promoting health).

Emailer Jerry Schwartz wants people to get their facts straight. He notes that the widely-used term "false fact" is an oxymoron, and that a "factoid" is not, as many people seem to think, a nifty little fact, but a

piece of unverified or inaccurate information that's presented as a fact.

The dropping of syllables from "meteorologist" (meterologist) and "temperature" ("tempature") raises the temperature of Rita Marie Mathias of Tullytown, Pa., while Rick Suttner of Greensburg, Pa., is, like, you know, annoyed by people who repeatedly insert "like" and "you know" into their sentences.

Rob Kyff is a teacher at Kingswood Oxford School in West Hartford. Write to him in care of The Courant, Features Department, 285 Broad St., Hartford, CT 06115, or by e-mail at WordGuy@aol.com.

Artist

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York artist.”

Instead of publicly defending his art, says Bloom, LeWitt quietly withdrew his proposal and moved on.

“Though Sol was deeply hurt he was also very careful about reserving his energy for the next thing he was working on. And he took that to his death bed when two days before he died [in 2007 at the age of 78] he was still making ideas for his work. For him it was ancient history. And don't forget, [after the Civic Center incident] Andrea picked up the ball and did a retrospective at the Athenaeum.”

Bloom is referring to the Athenaeum's curator Andrea Miller-Keller, who rectified the civic snub when the museum, under the direction of Tracy Atkinson, decided to present the first retrospective of LeWitt outside New York in 1981.

“She was as responsible as anyone for making him happen here,” says Bloom.

The Wadsworth embraced LeWitt, though not always unanimously — Sage Goodwin resigned from the board of directors over the museum's first purchase of a LeWitt work in 1980. In the mid-1990s, LeWitt created a spectacular wall work for its main lobby “and that was a huge deal, too.”

In addition to the Athenaeum and NBMAA, other museums that prominently feature LeWitt's work are Mass MOCA in North Adams, Mass.; New York's Museum of Modern Art; the Art Institute of Chicago; the National Gallery of Art and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.; the Tate Gallery in London; the Dia Art Foundation in Beacon, N.Y.; and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

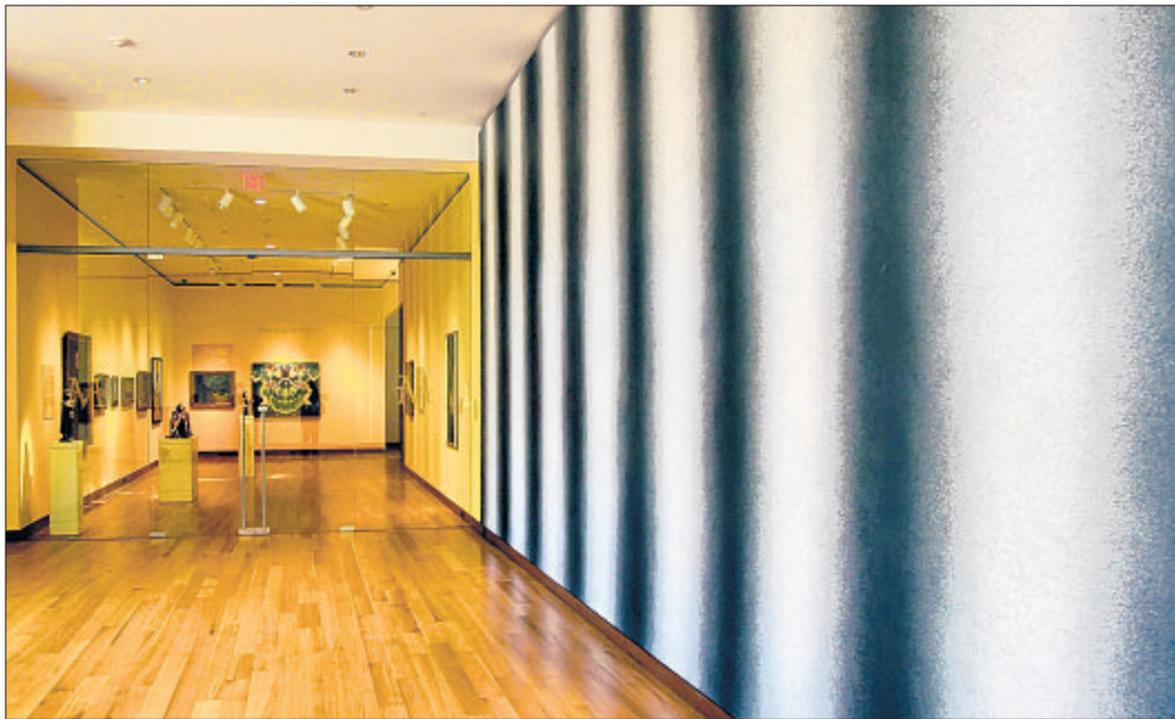
New Britain, Chester connections

In contrast to Hartford, LeWitt's relationship with his hometown of New Britain was more positive.

His parents, Dr. Abraham and Sophie LeWitt, were Russian Jewish immigrants — and cultured. Family members, says Bloom, attended the Athenaeum's many celebrated events under Austin's tenure, including its “Paper Ball,” the premiere of Virgil Thompson/Gertrude Stein's first opera with its all-black cast, “Four Saints in Three Acts” and the first major retrospective of Picasso.

Bloom says LeWitt's life-long support and generosity toward women artists “goes back to his mother in New Britain, who was a strong, affectionate and accomplished woman.”

“Like a lot of kids who have ridicule for the place they grew up, in time Sol eventually had great affection for New Britain,” says Bloom. The artist also developed a close relationship with the New Britain



JOHN LONG/HARTFORD COURANT

This Sol Lewitt mural resides at the New Britain Museum of American Art.



COURTESY OF WADSWORTH ATHENEUM

This Sol LeWitt, acrylic paint wall drawing #1131, titled Whirls and Twirls, is at the Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum of Art. It measures 18 feet 9 inches by 113 feet 9 inches.

Museum of American Art where several works of art are on display and a major exhibit on the artist is planned in two years. Its current exhibit by artist Pablo Helguera, “Amazing Stories,” also pays tribute to LeWitt.

In the last decades of his life, LeWitt lived in Chester, where Bloom got to know him as a friend and neighbor. In Chester LeWitt took on a different kind of art project. With architect Stephen Lloyd, LeWitt designed a new synagogue for Congregation Beth Shalom Rodfe Zedek that featured an octagonal sanctuary. LeWitt also designed the ark for the new building, using his signature bright colors for the

doors. It opened in 2001 to much acclaim.

But it was also in Chester that LeWitt witnessed another attack on modern art when in 1988 and 1993 fellow Chester resident Morley Safer did separate pieces on CBS-TV's “60 Minutes” that dripped with sarcasm, including the familiar quote of “a sucker born every minute.” After the broadcasts, local encounters between the two men were strained.

Needless to say Safer was not invited to LeWitt's infamous surprise birthday party at the Wadsworth's Avery Court in 1998, which meant to honor a man and a career of international stature.

“The reason it had to be a surprise party

was that he wouldn't go if he knew about it,” says Bloom, who was at the event.

“Sol arrived with a smile on his face but you could see the smile was a forced one. He was happy to see his old friends — and there was a busload from New York, including Chuck Close, Mickey Friedman and Carl Andre. But it went downhill when the speeches began. [Museum director] Peter Sutton got up to start the formal part of the program but he didn't get very far. Sol said, ‘No speeches!’

“Sutton implored Sol to at least let Andrea talk, and as she started to go to the podium, Sol said, ‘Come here.’ ... When he asked what she had there, she said it was her speech. He asked to see it and she gave it to him and he folded it up and put it in his pocket saying, ‘I'll read it later. Sit down.’

“Some of the people who knew him best were very upset and they thought he was rude. ... But that was him: a man of complexity and contradictions. He had hostility to personal aggrandizement. He wanted it to be about his art.”

Lary Bloom will be speaking about “Sol LeWitt: A Life of Ideas” on June 2, 4 p.m., at Beth Shalom Rodfe Zedek, Chester; June 5, at 5:30 p.m. Lyman-Allyn Museum, New London; Sept. 5, 7 p.m., Institute Library, New Haven; Sept. 12, 5:30 at NBMAA; and Sept. 15 at 2 p.m. at Florence Griswold Museum.

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