

Public Art Works

SEASON 1 - EPISODE #4

IN DIRECT LINE

Tom Eccles, Lawrence Weiner & Lisa Frigand

TRT 25:15

LAWRENCE WEINER: One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Eins, zwei, drei, vier, fünf, sechs, sieben, acht, neun zehn...

TOM ECCLES: And, uno, due, tre, quattro, cinque, sei.

LAWRENCE WEINER: Si. Let's hope they don't start ripping up the street.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: Hi everybody. I'm your host, Jeffrey Wright. Welcome back to the Public Art Fund podcast Public Art Works, where we use public art as a means of jumpstarting broader conversations about New York City, our history, and our current moment.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: In this episode, we time-travel a bit, back to the year 2000, when the Twin Towers still stood, and New York City was, in some ways, a very different place.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: But first, a quick visit to the Whitney Museum of American Art downtown, where a subtle but important artwork by Lawrence Weiner is installed permanently on the museum's front steps. It's a manhole cover, albeit a "fake" one, but only in the sense that it doesn't open up into the bowels of the city. Though it does look that way. And instead of bearing some civic crest or decorative motif, it says, in Weiner's characteristic block lettering:

PUBLIC VOICE 1: "In direct line with another and the next".

PUBLIC VOICE 2: "In direct line with another and the next."

PUBLIC VOICE 3: "In direct line with another and the next."

PUBLIC VOICE 4: "In direct line with another and the next."

PUBLIC VOICE 5: "In direct line with another and the next."

JEFFREY WRIGHT: Yes: "In direct line with another and the next." But what exactly does that mean?

PUBLIC VOICE 6: Maybe there is a secret passage down there?



PUBLIC VOICE 7: I guess, are there manhole covers that are in line with this? No that would be too literal wouldn't it?

PUBLIC VOICE 1: I've never looked down.

PUBLIC VOICE 8: It's a direct line going somewhere.

PUBLIC VOICE 2: Something like being in line with other people in terms of the way they think?

PUBLIC VOICE 9: We're all here, in line, together.

PUBLIC VOICE 4: Everybody's connected.

PUBLIC VOICE 5: My interpretation is that things are connected to one another and that, in part that's the concept of art, is that it connects us.

PUBLIC VOICE 2: This city is so full of like little hidden gems just like this.

PUBLIC VOICE 7: I think it just elevates you everyday experience with a surprise and something that sort of jars you out of your mundane thoughts as you walk down the street.

PUBLIC VOICE 5: That to me is part of the beauty of being in an urban environment is the opportunity to experience things that you won't otherwise experience and to have these shared moments.

PUBLIC VOICE 10: I think especially in New York we kind of have tunnel vision. So it's nice knowing I guess that there are roses to smell or manhole covers to read.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: Weiner's manhole cover originated as a long-term project with Public Art Fund that launched in November 2000 and technically ran until January 2011, though a few of these manholes remained installed and in-use until recently.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: The exhibition included 19 functional manhole covers in total, installed over actual manholes on city streets in and around the East Village, the West Village, and Union Square. The manhole covers themselves were made in collaboration with Con Edison and Roman Stone and the show was curated by our then director and chief curator, Tom Eccles, who now runs the Hessel Museum and Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: The project—which was titled *NYC Manhole Covers*—was a different sort of public art work. It wasn't intrusive. It didn't stop you in your tracks in the way a large sculpture or installation might. It spoke quietly but potently. It went undercover on our dense

and busy city streets, which, of course, was the idea.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: Lawrence is, of course, one of the most celebrated artists of his generation—a central figure in what we now think of as “conceptual art.” You might have seen his work on buildings, billboards, and museum walls—and I don’t mean hanging on museum walls, but actually printed on the walls themselves, combining block letters and geometric shapes. And often engaging in a bit of wordplay.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: They say things like: “PUSHED AS IF & LEFT AS IS”; “WASHED IN WATER, HUNG OUT TO DRY”; and “HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?” Lawrence works in other media as well, including video, installation, printed matter, explosions (in the case of some of his earliest work) and, thanks to Public Art Fund, manhole covers.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: Born in the Bronx, Lawrence is also a tried and true New Yorker, which is basically where we’ll start...

LAWRENCE WEINER: I spent a lot of my youth putting work up on the wall in chalk in front of people’s houses that I knew. And that’s how we’d discuss it and then we’d meet and we’d talk about it. I think that art can be made public and should be made public and the public is really quite more open to it than anybody realizes. My idea is that when you’re putting things up for public that nobody asked for. It has to say something. Everybody can use graffiti and things but it has to say, my children are hungry or the sky is blue. If it doesn’t say anything, it’s just nothing, it’s just egotism. So, when we’re doing this I put down this work that was all about relationship to sculptures. And that was, “In direct line with another and the next.” What it says is exactly what it is. All things are in direct line with another thing and the next.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: Streamlined and direct as the content may be, there were of course some pretty heavy logistical aspects to a project like this too. Here’s Tom to explain...

TOM ECCLES: I think for me definitely the excitement of working on these projects, one was the collaboration with the artists themselves. It is at the service of the work and the artist themselves. But also, just learn something new, like, I don’t know how to do that. I was like, manhole cover, I don’t know how to do that. And you’re like who does manhole covers? And then you find out, Con Ed. Well, I didn’t know it was Con Ed. And then you find out they’re made in India, and you know so everything was kind of a discovery about this great city too, but about sort of like, lots of lots of...

LAWRENCE WEINER: How things are tied together...in direct line with another and the next.

TOM ECCLES: And often we were trying to do things where we weren’t really seeking permission or we were saying, we were giving ourselves permission, you know?

LAWRENCE WEINER: Yeah.

TOM ECCLES: But we also, you know, like we used to talk about democracy in this work. Well democracy isn't just about everybody coming to the same agreement. It's about actually having very distinct viewpoints.

LAWRENCE WEINER: And being able to exist on the same place.

TOM ECCLES: And being able to exist in the same place, yeah. And so saying yeah, an artist does actually have the right to do this. So like in the case, just of the Rachel Whiteread *Water Tower*...

JEFFREY WRIGHT: This is another Public Art Fund project that Tom's referring to here by the powerhouse English artist, Rachel Whiteread. Her translucent sculpture takes the form of another iconic New York City structure: the water tower—a fixture in our downtown skyline. The piece was originally installed on the roof of a building in the West Village from 1998 to 2000. It now sits permanently on the roof of the Museum of Modern Art.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: But back to Tom...

TOM ECCLES: So like in the case, just with the Rachel Whiteread *Water Tower*, there is no permit in the city of New York for a sculpture on a roof.

LAWRENCE WEINER: No.

TOM ECCLES: So I was like, okay so it's not a sculpture, what can it be, it's a sign. So we got a permit for a sign but then we got fined every month for having an unlit sign. And I think certainly for us at the time, each of these kind of projects unearthed some form of collaboration that was unexpected. And in a sense from there, everything would grow.

LAWRENCE WEINER: You dropped me at Con Ed and dropped me in an office with a man named Len. And we talked and we talked and the next thing I knew, we were on board. And then we just went ahead and did it. And you dropped me at Roman Stone to have it made. And they were enthusiastic and they stepped in and that's the foundry that had to send it out to India to get to get cast. And everybody walked away feeling quite good about themselves.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: For Lawrence, it was important that the work take on the form of the manhole cover unadulterated. This is, in essence, what gave the work its strongest effect.

LAWRENCE WEINER: It fit into an urban environment. People in cities don't look at the sky to find out where they are from the stars. You can't see it. But they look around them and down. And that means that basically you're looking for a sighting one way or the other where to go when you're walking home. I I go home by Johnny pumps, so by, what do they call them, fire hydrants, and other things because I'm an urban person.

TOM ECCLES: We also really thought about the siting of the, of the manhole covers in relation to your journey through the city. It was a little bit of history the you either did or didn't know which was fine, but it was kind of your journey home...

LAWRENCE WEINER: Most of the viewers could put it together. Because it was my bar voyage as a kid from the checkerboard clubs on the Lower East Side to MacDougal Street, to Union Square, to Max's, and then it all went through down the city and it ended up in front of the Village Nursing Home.

TOM ECCLES: Yep.

LAWRENCE WEINER: Which I thought was not ironic, it's true. You live your life in a city, you end up in a nursing home.

TOM ECCLES: Could you talk a little bit about your use of materials, the materiality of it? I think at one point you said you're a materialist.

LAWRENCE WEINER: The relationships of, you know, human beings to materials and material to each other in relation to human beings is all that anybody's art is about.

TOM ECCLES: Mm-hmm. Maybe you can explain that in the context of the manhole covers. Because you did talk about the manhole covers as situating the viewer, so to speak, in relation to the material.

LAWRENCE WEINER: It allowed the person to deal with a material that already had a function. So they didn't have to justify what's that billboard in my way, what's the piece of something in my way. It was, part of it was holding a hole in the ground. It was a manhole cover. And they didn't have the word "person" in those days as I said and that's a problem. It was either a manhole cover or it was a sewer cover. I prefer manhole cover.

LAWRENCE WEINER: And I like manhole covers. It was a way to unobtrusively put something out that somebody would discover. You walk across the manhole cover, one day you'll look down and lo and behold you're reading something. And you just either keep walking or you get involved. Well, that's not so bad. And uh there is a difference between showing and telling. You can only tell what you know for certain. And I don't know that my work is for certain. I know it's perfectly crafted for what it's supposed to do.

LAWRENCE WEINER: All art is made by people trying to communicate with other people about something. All art, any kind. Any culture's art, anything else, it's all about trying to show the world something that you're trying to tell them. I use a material that is a little more accessible than some things. That's it. And less accessible because it doesn't have the right body, it doesn't look right. It's the kid that's not dressed correctly to be let into the place.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: As Lawrence and Tom both mentioned, a project like this that literally remakes and reinstalls actual pieces of New York City, certainly requires the involvement of the city itself. In this case Consolidated Edison, or Con Ed. And, fortunately, they had someone there in their corner...

LISA FRIGAND: I am Lisa Frigand. And I'm speaking to you in the capacity that I had at Con Ed as manager of cultural affairs which included philanthropy and special projects.

LISA FRIGAND: The philanthropic part was through all disciplines, nonprofit organizations and special projects would be ones exactly like the ones with Public Art Fund um, MTA Arts for Transit, This City... We sometimes generated our own projects as well within the company, so I would be the point person for that.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: Lawrence's project wasn't Lisa's first with Public Art Fund—nor was it Con Ed's. Their expertise was needed on projects like Sarah Sze's *Corner Plot* at Doris C. Freedman Plaza near Central Park. The sculpture was installed mostly in the ground, a sort of mad scientist's laboratory, which could be viewed from street level through a small window in a chunk of building—a corner—that looked as if it was poking out from the street.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: Con Ed consulted heavily on Olafur Eliasson's *New York City Waterfalls* too, which famously flowed under the Brooklyn Bridge and along the banks of the East River in the summer of 2008. The piece—a series of manmade waterfalls—required a good amount of electrical power where there really wasn't any...

LISA FRIGAND: Nothing compared to Olafur's because the project couldn't be done without Con Ed. One of the things that I hadn't thought about is that the waterfront has no electric installations and we had to make determinations of where it was possible to create them for the pumps for these various works, 'cause there was a lot of electricity that was going to be going through them. So I got to take boat rides with Olafur and our technical people on police boats and we would go up to the South Bronx where they would do test runs for the waterfalls, at the rate at which they came down, the velocity, and how much energy was necessary.

LISA FRIGAND: And I learned so much, but the magic of these projects is, in the end people have no clue what work went into it. They just see this, the river's transformed and how magical it is to ride a boat and go under these waterfalls. It was wonderful.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: Lawrence's manhole covers required Con Ed's involvement too, but that project was different in that it seamlessly intervened in something that is part of the fabric of our city in a very literal way. The timing was somewhat serendipitous as well—Con Ed had just wrapped a pilot manhole cover project with the designer Karim Rashid.

LISA FRIGAND: Well I have to admit that I never thought that my legacy in life would be

working on artistic manhole covers but so be it.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: In the process, Lisa became a de facto expert on the subject. So what did she learn?

LISA FRIGAND: Well first of all how many there are, there are about a quarter of a million of them in Con Edison service territory, which includes lower Westchester and the boroughs. How heavy they are, mostly between 250 and 300 pounds. And that, I learned, was because methane gas builds up and if they weren't heavy they would be blowing all the time. I learned that there are people who really love manhole covers. There are historians who really advocate for the historical ones. I think there's one that dates back to the 1880s in Lower Manhattan. And then there are a few, maybe two others that are 19th-century manhole covers. And they're simple design but you can see that they have treads and I was told that was partially so that the horses didn't slip back in the day. And of course, on a more modern level, the concerns now are for withstanding traffic and some of the things we talked about, potential explosions, etcetera.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: Like Tom, Lisa thought Lawrence and his work were a perfect fit for the manhole cover as form.

LISA FRIGAND: It's consistent with his work and yet it's in a medium that you would never expect it to be. I also think because he's kind of iconoclastic and goes against so much that it was kind of fun to do it with Con Edison, like you know, the kind of most corporate, bureaucratic place you could possibly think of. There was a kind of, I'm guessing, little thrill for him to work with us on this project. And he was very gracious with everybody, and humble about learning as much as he could about manhole covers and extrusion. So it was a kind of really nice fit in an unusual way I would say.

LISA FRIGAND: The other thing that Lawrence really loved was it getting messed up and dirt in it and pieces of tissue. He thought that added to the whole kind of gestalt of the piece. So I took a lot of photos myself of things in it or, it just, how it changed by virtue of what people dropped in it, or leaves, and that makes it part of its beauty I think.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: Lisa had an affinity for one of Lawrence's manhole covers in particular...

LISA FRIGAND: The Union Square is the one that I walked on and passed everyday because I would take the Path train from Hoboken to Sixth avenue and always make it a point to walk on top of it.

LISA FRIGAND: When I first saw the text and came in contact with it I think my first interpretation of "In direct line with another and the next" was almost a commentary on the continuity of time in the world. How it's different, it's the same, but it's going to line up with the next. But something really incredibly, very profound happened after 9/11. The meaning

of Lawrence's piece took on a whole 'nother effect after 9/11 in a very shocking way for me personally. The first time I walked over it and stepped on it on my way to my office two days after 9/11 and I read "In direct line with another and the next," and I looked and saw it was in line with the Trade Centers, I got the chills. And I thought, it took on a whole haunting, ominous, somber, end of the world feeling, that obviously he hadn't intended. But the context now was so strong at that time that I couldn't help but think of it as almost prophetic. It was kind of bizarre for me. And it made me realize how art, particularly conceptual art, changes in context, and meaning changes in context, whatever intention is. It was a very interestingly profound experience for me. I really will never forget how much that actually physically hit me, of how all of a sudden it took on a completely different meaning for me.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: There was a hopeful way of looking at this too.

LISA FRIGAND: You know when you think of the material, cast iron, there really is a sense of permanence. And the fact that, that they stayed really was comforting on some level. And it reminded me a little bit, I mean I'm segueing here but you know the Fritz Koenig's *Sphere* which was made of cast iron survived and it became very symbolic for the people of New York.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: This is the spherical sculpture of a fragmented globe coming together that originally sat between the towers. It did indeed survive and has since been moved to Liberty Park, nearby.

LISA FRIGAND: Sort of really hanging onto that and wanting it reinstated somewhere else as a kind of symbol of resiliency. I think that public art can have a function in times like that. And I think the other thing that happened which is a really interesting byproduct during the period, because I was involved, was when they started putting maquettes down in the World Financial Center for possible designs. I think it was surprising how many people came to see them and made remarks just lay people with their families, would pick one of ten. People took pride, future-wise, in what was going to be and replace in terms of the tower, in terms of the memorial. People, for the first time, understood structural engineering. No one ever really thought about how buildings stay up. And I think it created an awareness of design that people wanted their voices heard more, which I don't think had happened that much in civic dialogues.

LISA FRIGAND: I think there was a lot of care that went into the redesign of even infrastructure facilities to make it as attractive as possible now that they had the opportunity to start over. And see what the shortcomings were in the past, even dealing with substations and how they looked. And I think the entities that were in charge, whether they be city or Con Edison etcetera, actually took in more opinion than they generally would have because it was such a sensitive rebuild for everybody.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: It is, in essence, about people. And about citizens. The citizens who encounter these things and the way that these things they encounter go on to shape their

days, their weeks, even their worlds.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: Which brings us back to Lawrence and Tom...

TOM ECCLES: You have this phrase, I found it today: “Public art does in fact attempt to deal with not only alienation but as well to help its citizens find their place in the sun.”

LAWRENCE WEINER: Exactly.

TOM ECCLES: And that...

LAWRENCE WEINER: “Place in the sun” is the only metaphor I think I’ve used in the last 50 years. But to find your place in the sun. When you do public art you have to realize that you are the public as well. You pay taxes, take your kids to the dentist. You’re the public. You don’t have to be apologetic. And you don’t have to look down on anybody if they didn’t know what it was.

TOM ECCLES: Certain kinds of work, like particularly the southeast corner of Central Park, I used to know what was popular or not because the hot dog vendor would sell more hot dogs, because people would hang out. In the case with Lawrence, I’m sure many of those encounters very very personal and private moments,

LAWRENCE WEINER: Yes.

TOM ECCLES: And often kind of later at night, you know, early in the morning...

LAWRENCE WEINER: When there was no imperative of the day moving along. That was the point.

TOM ECCLES: And I think for me, you know what made, and this sounds a little pretentious now but it really was important to me at the time was the experience of it is different from a museum in that you encounter it over time, over again.

LAWRENCE WEINER: That’s, that’s public art for me.

TOM ECCLES: That really really touched people over time. We used to, you know, I used to always get um letters and phone calls from angry people whenever we put a new artwork in, right? There’s always the angry people, right? This guy on Fifth Avenue called me and he’d berate me every time we put in a new work. And I’d say, “You seem pretty wealthy, you got a family, you got a house. You know, so, you know, you’re doing pretty well.” But then it was when we took works out and removed them that we’d usually get this overwhelming response from people.

LAWRENCE WEINER: Where is it?

TOM ECCLES: Yeah, where is it? And also like, then people would tell you what it meant to them. You know? And they weren't the people who lived on Fifth Avenue. You know and that for me was kind of like, that was actually genuinely moving and motivational in some ways.

LAWRENCE WEINER: There's there's a big difference between supposition and position and such. I prefer to propose work rather than impose it. The public is not dumb. And because they never saw something before does not mean they're not capable of looking at it and putting it into their own context. It's like somebody asked me from the New York City station, when we put them down how, you know, you have an aggressive history, I was involved in politics in the city and civil rights in places. And why is this so not aggressive?

LAWRENCE WEINER: And I said, in fact, "I don't want to screw somebody's day on their way to work. I want to screw up their whole life." And I meant it. And I still to this day mean it. You put out work that people use to understand who they are in relation to the society they are in, it will break what I consider the inequities and the horrors of our society. And art is about morality. Art is about how you relate to the world around you, the real world, the bricks and the mortar and the stone that's on the ground. Without that you're lost.

JEFFREY WRIGHT: Thank you for joining us. For more information on the artworks mentioned in this episode, please visit us online at www.publicartfund.org. And please join us next time too, where we hear from artist Sue de Beer and the skateboarder-slash-organizer whom she wanted to put on a billboard in Times Square.

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