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Memorial Service for Seth Siegelaub
Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 23 September 2013
Sara Martinetti

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

Dear Marja,

Dear Jessica, Nelly and Yves,

I would like to contribute another perspective – that of a scholar of Seth’s work who was incredibly fortunate to benefit from his precious support, openness, stimulating remarks, generosity and intellectual creativity, firstly in the conception of an exhibition of his textile collection, and secondly in the completion of a PhD thesis.

‘Seth Siegelaub’ could be the homonym for several people. Indeed, the contexts in which he worked were so diverse that one could be tempted to think that several, unrelated people were sharing the same name. For a while, there were also two Seth Siegelaubs in my mind, each of whom I encountered individually in the two realms in which I *was doing research* separately. There was the “Contemporary Art Siegelaub” who was being referred to in my art history classes, and there was the “Textile Siegelaub” whose bibliography I used as a tool in my research. This gallery poster from 1964 admirably illustrates this dichotomy.

Siegelaub is most familiar to art historians as the main “organiser” or “facilitator” of Conceptual Art in New York between 1966 and 1972. His name appears – discreetly, but assertively – in the margins of his famous ‘catalogue-exhibitions’ where the catalogue *is* the exhibition and refers to nothing else beyond itself. This way of “signing” an exhibition was understood by some to be the signature of the promoter behind a group of four trendy artists, and by others as an early example of the curator-as-author, but I would personally argue that it is essentially the gesture of a publisher.

If we were to extend our investigation to the realm of political communication, we would see that Siegelaub is the author, together with Armand Mattelart, of an anthology in two volumes entitled *Communication and Class Struggle*. A lesser known fact, which I learned from him as I was trying to

unravel his multiple avatars, is that he also used a pseudonym – Ian Segal – to co-sign the *Guide de la France des luttes*. In 1973, taking a courageous stance against cultural ideology and risking a legal battle with the Disney empire, he published the first English translation of Mattelart's and Ariel Dorfman's seminal pamphlet *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* – a daring gesture that would secure the book's global readership. It was during this period that Siegelaub started using acronyms, founding for instance the International Mass Media Research Center, or IMMRC. Seated on the outskirts of Paris, the 'IMRC' (as it was called in Seth's unpronounceable pronunciation) was simultaneously a library open to researchers, a bibliography on Marxism and media, and a series of published essays participating in the international critique and renewal of the information and communication theories formulated by the likes of Marshall McLuhan.

This method of pursuing projects no longer as an individual but under the banner of an institution also led to the creation of the Stichting Egress Foundation in 2000, which encompassed the various strands of his varied work, while accommodating new endeavours such as his project on time and causality in physics. As he once jokingly remarked in a different context: 'I have always been interested in the future because I plan to spend the rest of my life there.'

Siegelaub leaves behind him a colossal body of work that has often been reduced to, and obscured by, his role in the establishment of Conceptual Art rather than being considered in its entirety or as a consistent enterprise. Siegelaub's legacy to future generations is vast: a new outlook on art, two reference bibliographies, and three thematic libraries with several thousand books each. If we consider his approach of art and books, as evidenced by his catalogue-exhibitions, in the wider economy of the written and printed word, and on the scale of a lifetime, his activity as the main exponent of Conceptual Art becomes an initial and short but founding moment of an astonishing career.

A gallery manager, exhibition organiser, coordinator, mediator, editor, publisher, librarian, bibliothecary, passionate bibliographer, compiler, documentalist, archivist, director of a research centre, collector, etc., he could seamlessly switch roles and positions within one and the same field. In terms of self-referentiality and self-criticality, the question remains of course whether the archivist did not bibliographise the sources of information at the same time that he documented himself.

Having had the honour to explore his work under his own guidance, the image I would like to share with you is that of a man working at his desk-cum-library, or his ‘R and D Department’ as he called it, busy making telephone calls, writing briefs, designing page layouts, debating on Skype, answering letters and emails, ordering books on Amazon, wrapping books to be posted, doing the odd bit of accounting, entering information into databases, researching on the Internet, drafting lists, etc.

Siegelaub’s focus was on what could maybe best be described in terms of what the philosopher Patrice Loraux has called ‘*les sous-mains*’ – the French word for ‘desk blotter’ – to describe the material conditions of intellectual work. This becomes clear if we turn our attention: to the layouts of the catalogue-exhibitions he conceived and implemented in discussion with the artists; to the printing techniques as epitomised by the *Xerox Book*, which is in fact a traditional offset print; to the presentation of his documents such as the letterhead paper for Public press + News Network in 1971; to details such as the staples holding together a notebook of contacts, expense records and travel notes; to the binding such as this book which he purposefully cut up into chapters which can be read individually without having to carry all the others; to the folder with press clippings from *Le Monde* and *L’Humanité*; and finally to the various types of lists, from artists’ names to books.

This kind of “office work” does not contradict the practical and distinctly political aspect of his work. To illustrate this, allow me to share with you a very precise moment in his biography, namely his journey to Portugal in May 1975, during which he collected all kinds of printed documents related to the Carnation Revolution – posters, newspapers, press releases, tracts. Here, too, he acted as a documentalist – albeit a more daring one. And while the organising methods of libraries erase the original context of books in order to integrate them in a standardised entity such as a catalogue or bibliography, Siegelaub’s approach put the documentary research back into the context of the ‘first-hand’ experience of the revolution as he called it – a direct confrontation with complex historic issues and an unfamiliar communicational situation.

This “stationery”, if you will, may seem anecdotal, but it effectively evidences the essence of his relationship to the written and printed word, if we take it that all of Siegelaub’s work can be traced back to books. And, although he did not consider himself a writer, he once said that ‘I have always enjoyed reading books, reading books about books, creating books, publishing

books, carrying books, distributing books, selling books, collecting books, cataloguing books, holding books, looking at books, etc.’

Siegelaub’s relationship to ideas passed through books as the places from where he got all his knowledge. For instance, in one of our discussions on his passion for books, he recounted how at the beginning of the sixties (he was then in his early twenties) he discovered and explored the art of the twentieth century in New York’s public libraries, among which the open-shelf Donnell Library on fifty third Street, opposite MoMA. His later work with conceptual artists derived directly from this experience and the acknowledgement of the importance of books in the perception and dissemination of art. This insight also led him to reconsider the typology of exhibition catalogues, for which he would essentially appropriate the methodology of bibliographical repertories. This approach, which was inspired by the great nineteenth-century bibliographers, implied that exploring a subject usually began with compiling bibliographical notices and classifying.

When introducing visitors to his libraries – whether in the shape of books, bibliographies or databases, whether on politics, textiles or theories of time – he would string together, as he went from one book to the next, an unending chain of bibliophile information, reading anecdotes, reflections on the author’s theories, explanations on cataloguing techniques ...

The following lines by Voltaire, from a letter written in seventeen sixty-five, could be Seth’s: ‘I am currently looking for ways to get some rather curious books to you that were sent to me from Holland. The commerce of thoughts is somewhat interrupted in France. It is even said that it is forbidden to send ideas from Lyon to Paris. The manufactures of the human mind are seized like forbidden fabrics.’ Seth’s textile collection would no doubt have had its place in the exhibition *Interwoven Globe: The Worldwide Textile Trade* which has just opened at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Incidentally, we had planned to visit this show together later this year in the framework of my research on his archives at the Museum of Modern Art.

What emerges from Siegelaub’s body of work is a global and dynamic conception of ideas, writing and books that encompasses issues as diverse as: the relationship of ideas to the specific materiality of printed matter, the free circulation of thoughts beyond ideological barriers, the circulation of books and the commerce of the library, the authors’ moral and economic rights over their work, and not least the inventory and the classification of books.

To the familiar methodologies of the library and bibliography he added another type of inventory of objects and another kind of aesthetic sensibility: the textile collection. While building an exhaustive library on a subject is a realistic undertaking, it is impossible, for instance, to own all velvets and damasks produced at a given time in history. And while it was to be expected that Siegelau – the man who had revolutionised the exhibition of Conceptual Art – would curate the exhibition of his textile collection at Raven Row in 2012, he actually took a back seat and handed authority to others, as he had done in his final projects in the art world. So what did it mean to suddenly no longer work on but with Seth (although in a sense also without him because of his curatorial restraint) on what would sadly become his last exhibition?

The framework laid out by Seth and Marja was defined by trust and generosity. We – that is, Alice Motard, Alex Sainsbury and myself – had access to the reserves, the hidden corners and the binders with the info sheets for each item. Together with Emmy, Seth guided us through his inventory and item references (the famous ‘SST’ numbers, for Seth Siegelau Textile) and was a constant source of inspiration, for instance asking: ‘Is there another way to do it? I don’t know. Perhaps by displaying an arbitrary mix of textiles by size or colour?’

When confronted with the history and rococo architecture of Raven Row, two former shops set up by Huguenot silk traders in London’s Spitalfields district, Seth’s collection, with its openness to different textile cultures, turned out to be a constant source of surprises and discoveries in terms of materials and textures. If one aspect of Seth’s interest in textiles remained somewhat enigmatic at the end of the exhibition (despite our best efforts to analyse it in the catalogue), for me it was his attraction to the motif – the motif as it is inscribed in the very depth of the woven fabric.

In that he disregarded the social boundaries between different fields of knowledge and followed his own “thread”, Seth continues to inspire my own work. His astonishing career is a paradigmatic example of what research can be when it is understood in its most profound sense. There are many academics, but few researchers – if research is understood as articulating a relationship to concepts as much as practice. In 1969, Siegelau prophesised: ‘The effect of what I’m doing, egotistically or not, may not be felt until ten or twenty years from now.’ A self-taught scholar with a very personal agenda and driven by determination, method and imagination, he conducted his research in much the same way as an artist would in his field. Therefore let me end by letting him have the last word: ‘Information’, he said, ‘is going back and forth so quickly. I like

that idea and can see myself working in this area much, being able to ship not things but ideas and people, and ideas about things, all over the world, very, very quickly.’

Thank you for your attention.