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► **To cite this version:**

Sara Martinetti, Alice Motard, Alex Sainsbury. Curating Textiles. The Stuff that Matters. The Handbook of Textile Culture, 2015. halshs-03873477

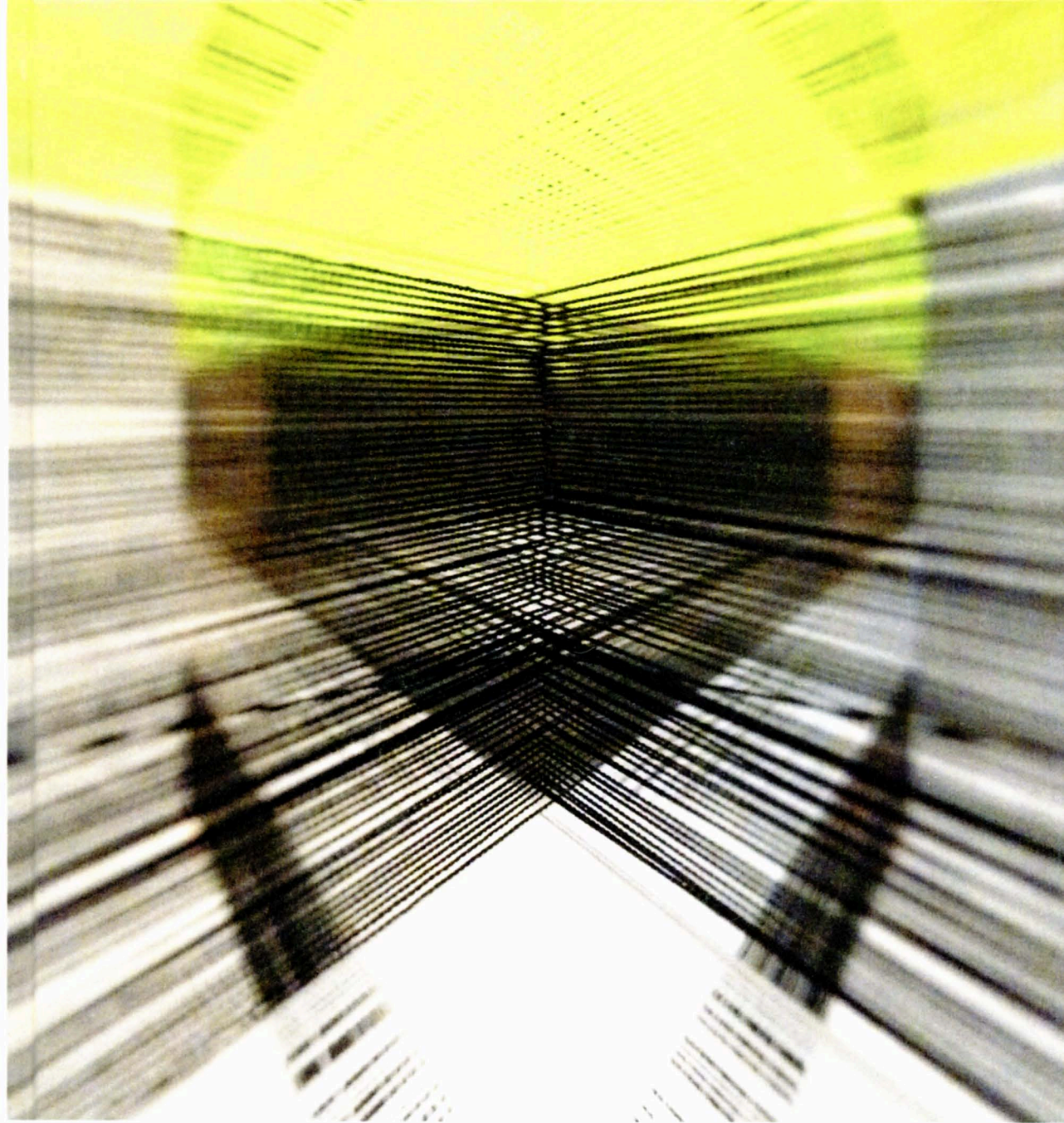
HAL Id: halshs-03873477

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03873477v1>

Submitted on 26 Nov 2022

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THE HANDBOOK OF **TEXTILE CULTURE**

EDITED BY JANIS JEFFERIES,
DIANA WOOD CONROY AND HAZEL CLARK

B L O O M S B U R Y

CHAPTER THREE

Curating Textiles

The Stuff That Matters

SARA MARTINETTI, ALICE MOTARD AND ALEX SAINSBURY:
AN INTERVIEW WITH SETH SIEGELAUB

A public and critical success, the exhibition *The Stuff That Matters: Textiles Collected by Seth Siegelau*b for the Centre for Social Research on Old Textiles at the non-profit art centre Raven Row in London, presented the collection of historic textiles assembled by the American exhibition organizer, publisher and bibliographer Seth Siegelau (1941–2013) over a period of thirty years.¹ Curated by Raven Row’s Alice Motard and Alex Sainsbury together with the French scholar Sara Martinetti, it was the first exhibition to focus on a lesser-known activity of the man who is famous for his pivotal role in the emergence of Conceptual Art at the turn of the 1970s.²

Between 1968 and 1971, after running a short-lived gallery in New York in the mid-1960s, Siegelau organized a series of 21 art exhibitions in innovative formats, among which *Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, Lawrence Weiner* (commonly called the *Xerox Book*), *January 5–31, 1969*, and *July, August, September 1969. Juillet, Août, Septembre 1969. Juli, August, September 1969*,³ in which the catalogue *was* the exhibition and no longer referred to anything else beyond itself. In 1972 Siegelau left the art world and moved to the Parisian suburb of Bagnolet, where he collected, compiled and published leftist books on communication and culture, which formed the basis of his International Mass Media Research Center (IMMRC). In 1986 he founded the Center for Social Research on Old Textiles (CSROT) to conduct research on the social history of hand-woven textiles and bring together his growing collection, a library and a bibliographic project on textiles. The latter, titled *Bibliographica Textilia Historiæ* and published as a book in 1997, has since grown as an online database to over 9,000 entries.⁴

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Exploring a widely overlooked aspect of Siegelau’s career, *The Stuff That Matters* included more than 200 items from a collection of 650. Woven and printed textiles, embroideries and garments as well as barkcloth and headdresses were shown alongside excerpts from relevant texts and books from the CSROT Library explicating their technological, aesthetic, social and political context, while highlighting that the collection was part of a wider bibliographic project (see Plate 3.1).

The exhibition furthermore reflected on the historic and geographic context of Raven Row. In the mid-eighteenth century, the two adjacent buildings in which it is housed were converted by two Huguenot mercers, Francis Rybot and Nicholas Jourdain, into shops selling silk woven in the surrounding Spitalfields district. In 1766, an import ban on foreign woven silk spurred the development of a lucrative textile industry in this part of London's East End. At the end of this embargo in 1824, this ban together with other factors led to the collapse of the trade, leaving the area to fall into poverty – until its proximity to the burgeoning financial services district allowed it to prosper again in recent times.

It was this historic background, among others, that prompted Raven Row's curators to approach Siegelau with an invitation to present a selection from his textile collection when he and his long-time partner Marja Bloem first visited the venue in summer 2010. From their discussions, it appeared that he had never considered exhibiting the collection (nor, incidentally, had he ever been asked to do so), but rather saw this part of his work as a pleasurable and instructive extension of his overarching bibliographic endeavour.

Curating an exhibition around a series of uncatalogued historic textiles called for a methodical approach: familiarizing with the objects in the collection with the help of photographs, arranging a series of meetings in Amsterdam, where Siegelau had been living since 1989, and, last but not least, tackling the considerable task of making an inventory of the collection.⁵ This in turn involved finding a workshop to store the textiles and hiring the conservator and restorer Emmy de Groot. To ensure sufficient knowledge was applied at each stage, Raven Row asked Martinetti, an expert in textiles who was starting a PhD thesis that embraces all aspects of Siegelau's career, to join the curatorial team. Still, it was to be expected that Siegelau – the man who had revolutionized exhibition-making and provided the blueprint for the figure of the contemporary curator – would want more than just a say in the project. But it soon became clear that he would take a back seat, perpetuating a deontological attitude that characterized his later conceptual projects such as the 'catalogue-exhibition' *18 Paris IV.70* and *July/August Exhibition Book. Juillet/Août Exposition Livre. Juli/August Ausstellung Buch*, an exhibition that took place in the pages of *Studio International*,⁶ in which he delegated responsibility and authority to others.

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The challenge posed by the exhibition, properly speaking, was to find a way to present the textiles in an engaging way. It was clear to the curators that the demands of exhibiting fabrics differed sensibly from those they usually encountered in their dealings with contemporary artworks. With the history of textile displays and the methodologies of collecting in mind, they developed a series of exhibition scenarios that would bring to life these pieces of cloth – providing historical context, highlighting connections to the realms of commerce and politics, illuminating their domestic use, or simply calling attention to their owner's humour. Most importantly, they sought to reiterate the main divisions as well as the conspicuous eclecticism of the collection by adopting varying approaches to display. The selection of exhibits and their distribution across the four floors at Raven Row therefore closely reflected the nature of the collection, as regards both the quantity and quality of objects it contains. The checklist was completed less than four months before the start of the exhibition, which left just about enough time for the firm of 6a architects to design and commission the production of display furniture according to a very specific curatorial brief.⁷

The main gallery space featured European (mostly Italian and French) velvets and damasks from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century, displayed horizontally on large tables that visitors approached from an elevated position and whose height had been designed to allow for a close-up inspection of the exhibits. These fragments, most of which were bought at flea markets and in auction houses in Paris during the 1980s, form the bulk of the collection. Their presentation in the exhibition emphasized the material refinement of woven silk, a fact also pointed out by the accompanying etymological and historic considerations on different types of luxury textiles and clothing quoted from *Recherches sur le commerce, la fabrication et l'usage des étoffes de soie, d'or et d'argent et autres tissus précieux en Occident, principalement en France, pendant le Moyen Âge* (1852/54) by the nineteenth-century scholar Xavier Francisque-Michel. The book was a crucial reference for Siegelau in the literature on textiles and which he reprinted as a facsimile in 2001 through his publishing house International General.⁸ Like islands on a map, the items were arranged by shape and/or colour (from warm to cold colours over two tables), technique and texture (textiles with gold, silver or metallic threads on the third table) or pattern (fragments with pomegranate motifs in various styles on the fourth table). Facing each other, shown upside down or inside out, they were connected by a web of dynamic relations such as the continuation of patterns across different items or the changing reflections of light on the fabric (damask, specifically) as spectators moved around the tables.

This horizontal display was echoed by a vertical presentation in the adjacent gallery of more recently acquired headdresses from Africa, Asia and Oceania ranging from simple hats for daily wear to elaborate designs for ceremonial purposes. This distinct part of the collection was assembled by Siegelau and Bloem on their travels. Siegelau considered them as textiles because of the materials and processes used to manufacture them, evidencing the boundless technical and aesthetic possibilities of textile fibres. The headdresses were displayed on slender, human-sized poles peaking at different heights to form a “forest” of hats that visitors discovered as they walked around it.

The first-floor galleries provided a “museological” context for ancient and archaeological textiles, most notably fifth-century Coptic, late-medieval Asian and Islamic, and Pre-Columbian Peruvian textiles. The items in this section were shown alongside three editions of Polydore Vergil’s *De Inventoribus Rerum* (1503), described by Siegelau as ‘a scholarly encyclopaedic compilation of texts’, which is not only ‘the first attempt to outline the history of the origin of textile fibers, weaving, dyeing & clothing etc’,⁹ but also the oldest book in the CSROT Library. This book, more than any other, bears testimony to Siegelau’s bibliographic research and expertise on the history of books and their material conditions: seeking to acquire the first edition, but grappling with the complexities of literary production and distribution in the Renaissance, he eventually bought various editions.¹⁰

The section on the second floor disregarded chronology and categories to concentrate on creating ‘textile environments’. Rybot’s former bedroom accommodated objects that alluded to the different purposes of fabrics – domestic (upholstered chairs), decorative and representative (framed textile fragment above the fireplace, textile samples) and recreational (gambling purse, candy box) – and was followed by an immersive double room covered in African barkcloth panels – a set-up vaguely inspired by Giuseppe Penone’s *Sculture di linfa* (2007) – and featuring a large tapa from Papua New Guinea. The display incorporated various other tapa objects from Oceania, including a mask, sashes and hats, which illustrated the different shapes and uses of fibre fabrics for architecture, clothing, exchange and ceremonies.

A further element, that was taken into account in the distribution of the exhibits, was the original use of some of the galleries. The bespoke display counters of Jourdain's shop on the ground floor, for instance, housed a collection of eighteenth-century French and continental silks. More generally, this gallery addressed the industrial history of London's Spitalfields district by means of a timeline of parliamentary acts regulating the production and consumption of silk throughout the eighteenth century, including the various Spitalfields Acts issued between 1773 and 1811 in an attempt to regulate the local silk weavers' wages and protect their trade. The display also hinted at the main commissioners of silk vestments, most notably through a number of ecclesiastical garments from the collection. Historic chasubles were displayed on rails, as though on sale in a trendy church apparel shop, and complemented by offcuts on tables waiting to be sewn together by an imaginary tailor.

This part of the exhibition illustrated Siegelau's idea of textiles as a means to weave together 'the history of fibers and cloth, such as wool, cotton, linen, etc., as well as the history of fine, luxury, decorative textiles, such as silk; the fine art of weaving as well as weaving as an industry and object of trade; the technology of textiles as well as its aesthetic, "fine art" aspects; i.e. the social-economic-practical aspects along with the artistic, decorative and beautiful aspects'.¹¹ Under the guise of an eighteenth-century shop advertising the latest exotic designs and techniques, such as the *chiné à la branche*,¹² it examined the commerce of goods, the privileges and distinctions that dictate aesthetic choices, and the encyclopaedic compilation of technological knowledge and inventions; in other words, the political and financial interests governing the circulation of textiles, thereby mirroring Voltaire's expression of 'the commerce of thoughts' in a letter from 1765: '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.'¹³ In an ironic twist of history, this gallery was now showcasing the very type of fabric – foreign silk – that was then banned from import, allowing the former shop to thrive.

Similarly, the antechamber to the master bedroom on the second floor hosted a display referred to by the curators as *La Lingère*, after the eighteenth-century book *L'art de la lingère* by François-Alexandre-Pierre de Garsault (also shown), the French word denoting both a laundry maid and a linen cupboard.¹⁴ This space, which might have been a dressing room, contained what could be likened to the contents of a *trousseau* (the clothes, linen and such given to a bride as a wedding present) such as embroidered items for domestic use, displayed alongside rare sixteenth-, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century pattern books. It featured a mix of textiles from various geographical and historic provenances, but mostly white in colour and delicate, which provided an opportunity to combine different types of display, with items hanging from rails and stretched out or rolled up on shelves. Like most exhibits in the show, they were left uncovered (i.e. unprotected), emphasizing one of the most noticeable and often remarked-upon aspects of the exhibition alongside the physical closeness this arrangement permitted.

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On a theoretical level, the exhibition was informed by a consideration of Siegelau's prolific and polymorphic career starting from his work as a promoter of Conceptual Art. Without presenting 'conceptual' evidence per se – a task left to the catalogue¹⁵ – the exhibition could be read in the wider context of a re-examination of the art of the 1960s

and 1970s, more specifically the supposed 'dematerialization of art' posited by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler in their eponymous essay in 1968.¹⁶ It did so by inviting visitors to consider not only the materiality but also the specific methodology of conceptual *things*.

Seen under this angle, the three chairs in the master bedroom on the second floor, for instance, could be read as a nod to Joseph Kosuth's iconic *One and Three Chairs* (1965), which reunited the object with its photographic representation and its lexical definition – a reference that underlined the historical and technical connections between text and textile. The chairs furthermore served as 'display devices' for three fragments of so-called Utrecht velvet, an industrial fabric produced in nineteenth-century France from cotton. Its pattern is embossed, as opposed to genuine velvet, where the motif is obtained through the weaving process itself. More generally, the similitude of weaving and printing techniques appears to have played a decisive role in the aesthetic and economic history of Europe. Indeed, printing techniques were seen as a cheap means to imitate expensive fabrics – when they did not start a fashion in their own right, such as floral indienne. The exhibition hinted at this ambiguity by putting the mock velvets in dialogue with another reference from the CSROT Library, a plate from Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* that illustrates and explains the embossing technique used in eighteenth-century textile production – a process that bears a striking resemblance to book printing.¹⁷ By doing so, it insinuated that these different yet related techniques – weaving, printing, embossing – are essentially methods to inscribe ideas into matter.

This cross-disciplinary approach, which was directly inspired by Siegelau's working method, was instrumental in evidencing that technologies, inventions and manufactures are part of a shared material culture. As a matter of fact, Siegelau's continuous interest for 'ideas' throughout his careers as editor, documentalist, collector, bibliographer and archivist runs counter to purely conceptual or linguistic conceptions of art. Indeed, the textile collection, as an integral part of his intellectual work, encourages viewers to reflect on the materiality of concepts; conversely, the new forms of artistic dissemination and mediation he developed in collaboration with artists can shed new light on the status of textiles as objects of exchange that materialize and encompass ideas of networking, economy, politics and technology.

The entrance space of the gallery accommodated an office desk, bookcases, a pile of catalogues, a table and chairs, handwritten inventory notes and a bibliographic database that could be consulted on a tablet – material traces of Seth's working methods as CSROT's director. In hindsight, one notices a remarkable similarity between the items in this room and Siegelau's arrangement for the exhibition *January 5–31, 1969*, organized in a rented office in the McLendon Building on 52nd Street in New York. Beyond the 'aesthetic of administration' noted by the art critic Benjamin Buchloh,¹⁸ Siegelau's career, its heterogeneity and continuity, can only be fully acknowledged in light of the history of intellectual technologies and writing methods. Not surprisingly, Robert Morris's card files, Mel Bochner's ring binders, Ed Ruscha's photographic inventories, Robert Barry's lists, On Kawara's 'countdowns', or Art & Language's indexes resonate with the bibliographic and research-based practice developed by Siegelau in his early publications and culminating in his work in the realm of textiles.

The key, therefore, to this reading of *The Stuff That Matters* was Siegelau's bibliographic magnum opus and reference book *Bibliographica Textilia Historiae*. The textile fragment from the collection that illustrates its cover is a telling choice in more than one respect, as Siegelau recognized in it the outline of a map of Europe from the UK to the Mediterranean. The display case in the entrance space brought together two

further maps: the planisphere on the previously mentioned catalogue of the *Summer Show* and the map of the Americas forming the face of Scrooge McDuck on the cover of Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's bestseller *How to Read Donald Duck (Para leer al Pato Donald, 1971)*, which Siegelau was the first to publish in English.¹⁹ The map thus appeared as a typical Siegelauian feature, 'the fragmentary representation of the contents emerging on the surface of oceans yet to be explored'.²⁰

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Nothing Personal . . . An Interview with Seth Siegelau

The following conversation – here reprinted in an abridged version – took place at Raven Row on 28 November 2011, three months before *The Stuff That Matters* opened to the public. Siegelau, who died unexpectedly in June 2013, situates his textile collection in a much wider framework, the extent of which is yet to be appraised.

SETH SIEGELAU: Off we go, home James, and don't spare the horses.

ALICE MOTARD: How did your interest in textiles come about?

SETH SIEGELAU: My interest in textiles? If you're talking about a date, as opposed to some mystical inspiration . . .

ALEX SAINSBURY: Possibly mystical inspiration as well . . .

SS: I don't recall anything dramatic in my life. I mean I didn't rip my mother's dress while breast-feeding or anything like that. Although I have a picture of me with a piece of lace when I was maybe two months old.

AS: Well, was there a more practical starting point?

SS: Yes, the practical starting point was probably in the early sixties in New York, when I started to look specifically at rugs, which was more or less coincident with my early experience in the art world. I wouldn't call these complementary by any means, but I think chronologically, it was at the same time.

AM: Did you own these rugs?

SS: No. I did try to buy rugs, but due to lack of money and also experience, I didn't make any serious effort. Much of that interest moved from actual rugs to books about rugs, which is what I really concentrated on and which at that time was more accessible, more practical, and probably more interesting – because you feel you are developing your expertise and your knowledge about certain things. In the case of rugs, it is to understand the history; how they looked or were used since antiquity. Methodologically that appealed to me more. Also there's absolutely no pretence to have every possible kind of textile in the world, but with books you can still have the illusion of finding every possible book on Coptic, Iranian or Islamic textiles and so on. So this seemed like a much more rational thing to do. Books also required less care, and were quite beautiful in their own right.