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► **To cite this version:**

Sara Martinetti. A Guide to "Better Read Than Dead". Seth Siegelau: "Better Read Than Dead"; Writings and Interviews, 2020, 978-3-86335-784-9. halshs-03873492

HAL Id: halshs-03873492

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03873492v1>

Submitted on 11 Nov 2023

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**Seth
Siegellaub
“Better
Read Than
Dead”
Writings
and
Interviews
1964–2013**

Seth Siegelau: "Better Read Than Dead"
Writings and Interviews, 1964–2013

Koenig Books, London
Stichting Egress Foundation, Amsterdam

A Guide to "Better Read Than Dead"

If you would not be forgotten, as soon as you are dead and rotten, either write things worth reading, or do things worth the writing.

—Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanack*, 1738

Better Read Than Dead was the title Seth Siegelaub had chosen for an anthology of his own written output—one of the many projects for which he never found the time, busy as he was running and expanding his global one-man operation.¹ By presenting a selection of writings and interviews, followed by an extended bibliography, this book of the same name hopes to fill this and other gaps in the reconstruction of the sprawling network of exhibitions, publications, projects, and collections that constitute Siegelaub's life's work. A chronology with the major events in his life and career rounds off this publication aimed at scholars and the general public alike.

For the eclectic reader, the topics addressed here offer multiple entry points, from the context of art to the economy of publishing and the circulation of ideas. The material is presented chronologically so as to make visible the many twists and turns in a professional biography that extends well beyond 1972, the year the "godfather of Conceptual Art" all but disappeared from the radar of art history. This chronological arrangement also highlights the recurrence of the same concerns and approaches across projects—a fact that has been partly obscured by the diversity, or presumed incompatibility, of Siegelaub's interests beyond Conceptual Art, such as leftwing communication theories and practices, textile history, and theories on time and causality in physics. Within this linear narrative, and for reasons of clarity, readers will find sequences, chronological or not, of documents pertaining to one and the same project, such as the famous exhibition and catalogue *January 5–31, 1969* (pp. 40–44), which shed light on his work method; specific thoughts or concepts, such as the distinction between "primary information" and "secondary information," which he expounds in several interviews (pp. 60, 67, 80, 145, 211, 284, 298, 324, 329); and single texts or documents, such as the computer file "Address to Impress: A Compendium of Art-World Promotional Clichés" (p. 320), which clarify his positions on a number of contiguous subjects.

While exploring the archives, it quickly became clear that the common definition of "writing" had to be opened up if the full scope of the "Siegelaubian paperwork" was to be grasped. An editor, publisher, designer, researcher, documenter, collector, bibliographer, and archivist, Siegelaub often played several, if not all, of these roles at once on any given project. The only function missing from the list is that of writer or theoretician, at least in a traditional understanding; as a matter of fact, in his memoirs from 1970, "a book about writing a book"—an excerpt of which is published here for the first time (p. 93)—he stresses that this is his first and last production as a writer. Despite changing subjects and Siegelaub's refusal to be considered a writer, writing is indeed the binding agent in his daily work. His was a polygraphic practice that is often overlooked by researchers due to its complexity—a complexity that we have tried to address in this book and in the catalogue of the exhibition *Seth Siegelaub: Beyond Conceptual Art*.²

Besides this "meta-autobiography," the first class of writings—understood in the classical sense as productions of literary, theoretical, or journalistic interest—comprises his statements of intent, including a programmatic text on Conceptual Art written in 1973 with his friend, the French art critic Michel Claura (p. 151). To a certain extent, this anti-manifesto—which is offered here in a new English translation—anticipates Siegelaub's polemical response to Benjamin

1 The title is a wordplay on the famous anticommunist slogan "better dead than red." The double semantic shift it operates is characteristic of Siegelaub's writing practices.

2 Leontine Coelewij and Sara Martinetti, eds. *Seth Siegelaub: Beyond Conceptual Art*. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, and Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2015.

Buchloh's authoritative text "From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions" (1989).³ Adding another piece of evidence to this epochal debate, an unpublished letter by Siegelau to the editors of *October* magazine is now also made available here to a wider readership (p. 217).

The second class of writings includes acknowledgments, prefaces, and introductions—productions the French theoretician of literature Gérard Genette has defined as "thresholds" of the text as such: "A text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations. And although we do not always know whether these productions are to be regarded as belonging to the text, in any case they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present* . . ."⁴ Most of Siegelau's written interventions belong to this category, as they are predominantly intended to contextualize the matter at hand. They often mirror his thoughts on the framework of art and ideas, or more specifically, the way they are presented and mediated in exhibitions, institutions, and bibliographies. "A Communication on Communication" (p. 173), Siegelau's metatextual and tautological preface to *Communication and Class Struggle*, an anthology co-edited with Armand Mattelart and published through International General, is a case in point: while self-consciously revealing the political machinery that regulates the circulation of ideas through printed matter, it frames the book in terms of Marxist theories of production.

The third and last set of writings is more generally related to Siegelau's everyday work and encompasses project outlines, letters, instructions, forms, contracts, invitations, press releases, and the like—in other words, administrative documents, both public and private, often provisional, always formulated in a simple, direct style. Together with the announcements, advertisements, and posters, with their short but often important statements, they illustrate Siegelau's organizational system, whose structural base unit was the list, whether as an inventory of names and figures or as a temporary repository for ideas—a *foutoir* (dump), as he called it unceremoniously. As evidenced by the reproductions from the Seth Siegelau Papers at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, they deserve our special attention in light of the prominent place of lists, inventories, and protocols in the presentation and formulation of Conceptual Art, as it was precisely this kind of "paperwork" that allowed the artists, in synchrony with Siegelau, to develop an itinerant, immediate, and simultaneous practice that unfolded through a web of cross-references and translations. When trying to survey this system, where everything, including the work of art, was potentially a document to be itemized and catalogued, typological distinctions tend to become blurred. The document "Instructions for secretary" (p. 44)—written for the benefit of the young aspiring artist Adrian Piper who had been hired to look after the exhibition *January 5–31, 1969*—is a case in point, as it could easily be mistaken for a Conceptual Art statement.

If we accept the premise that the—essentially artisanal and economical—production and dissemination of written and printed matter lay at the heart of Siegelau's project of circulating ideas, then the material and visual aspects of his working documents are as important as the information they contain.⁵ The decision to include the abovementioned writings as reproductions aims to communicate a sense of the variety of mediums (manuscript, typescript, collage, web page), materials (sheets of paper, notebooks, publications, brochures, paperbacks), and layouts (conceptual austerity, political iconography, office economics, advertisements, old books) they involve. More generally, these documents—papers, files, archives, books, libraries, boxes, and various other collections of things—evoke Siegelau's daily working environment.

The second body of texts in *"Better Read Than Dead"* concerns the transcriptions of interviews and talks. A primary source of information for historians of contemporary art, the vast majority of interviews from the period between 1969 and 1972—broadly speaking, the Conceptual Art phase—are reprinted here, including the oft-quoted programmatic "conversation" with Charles Harrison orchestrated by Siegelau in 1969 (p. 80). Among the texts published for the first time are a discussion with Elayne Varian, which captures

the atmosphere of Siegelaub's apartment and showroom at 1100 Madison Avenue in the late 1960s (p. 63); a telephone symposium at Simon Fraser University, which essentially revolved around the then-nascent technology of conference calling used to connect its participants (p. 73); a radio interview with Clare Spark, which retraces the origins and developments of the Artist's Contract (p. 128); and a conversation from 1972 with Lorraine Sciarra, then a student at Pomona College, in which Conceptual Art is already discussed from a historical perspective (p. 143). Several interviews were re-transcribed based on the original recordings and edited for the purposes of this book, always with the intention to get as close as possible to what was actually said and give a vivid account of Siegelaub's role as a catalyst of ideas. This becomes apparent, among others, in the radio symposium "Art Without Space," (p. 83), which echoes the debates and rhetoric of the art world in those years.

From 1973 to 1988 Siegelaub lived in the "red" Parisian suburb of Bagnolet, where his bibliographic and editorial work focused on the theoretical and practical aspects of mass communication. One of his rare public statements from this time is a radio interview with Ariel Dorfman, Andrew Goodman, and David Kunzle in 1975 (p. 161). His "kitchen talk" with Robert Horvitz and Thomas Levin in 1987 (p. 191), a time when he launched into a new phase of his work, is unique in that it further illuminates his previous shifts from Conceptual Art to mass media and textiles. With increasing academic interest in Conceptual Art in the early 1990s—in part fuelled by the first retrospective survey in a major institution, *L'Art conceptuel, une perspective* at the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris (see the interview with Claude Gintz and Robert Horvitz from the exhibition catalogue, p. 211)—the number of interviews and talks Siegelaub was asked to give grew steadily, accompanying the curatorial turn of contemporary art and the emergence of a new wave of Conceptual artists in the following decade. From this rich corpus, "*Better Read Than Dead*" presents a selection of conversations touching on different aspects of Siegelaub's work: with Jonathan Monk on bookmaking (p. 256); with Maria Eichhorn on the Artist's Contract (p. 261); with Koen Brams on the Stichting Egress Foundation (p. 300); with Ben Kinmont on trading in old books (p. 306); and with Alice Motard and Alex Sainsbury on textiles (p. 322). The transcript of a panel discussion organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2007, where Siegelaub shared the stage with Robert Barry and Lawrence Weiner—two of the "four famous," as he called them—takes readers on a journey back in time, while highlighting the crucial role of scholars Alexander Alberro and Christophe Cherix in preserving Siegelaub's legacy (p. 276).

All in all, this representative selection from Siegelaub's variegated career will allow readers to retrace the main stations of a literary life that was less concerned with erudition than with action.

Sara Martinetti

- 3 Buchloh's text was first published in Claude Gintz and Suzanne Pagé, eds., *L'Art conceptuel: une perspective*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989), 25–53, and later republished as "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105–43.
- 4 Gérard Genette, "Introduction," in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.
- 5 See Bruno Latour, "Les 'vues' de l'esprit", *Réseaux* 5, no. 27 (1987): 79–96, and David Barton and Uta Papen, eds. *The Anthropology of Writing: Understanding Textually Mediated Worlds* (London: Continuum, 2010).

Bibliographies compiled by Sara Martinetti

Explanatory Note

As becomes evident throughout this book, Seth Siegelauub often held several, if not all, posts in the book production chain at once, from author, editor, and designer to publisher and distributor. Such was his “holistic” understanding of his various roles that they seem bound to remain indistinguishable and inextricable; had he himself had a say, he might have argued that organizing lectures was not fundamentally different from curating, which itself had to do with making lists and compiling bibliographies. Untangling this dense web of roles and responsibilities was therefore the first and main task of this bibliography.

Another point that became obvious during the research to this publication was that any bibliographic survey of Siegelauub’s work would have to acknowledge the gaps and inconsistencies resulting from lacking historic documentation or, more prosaically, the vagaries of daily business, where projects were started but failed to materialize or had to be abandoned en route for lack of time or money, or often both. The *Public Press + News Network* is a good example: a newsletter advertising the need for a newsletter that would never see the light of day—unless, of course, you consider that it actually did, if only for five issues announcing its advent.

The four bibliographic subsections that eventually emerged in response to these considerations are therefore informed primarily by a reading of Siegelauub’s daily labor. Together, they aim to communicate a sense of his variegated career, while visualizing the many connections, overlappings, and shared concerns between the various editorial departments of his one-man syndicate:

“Publishing” is the most straightforward bibliographical subsection and gathers the books and other printed matter that Siegelauub “physically” published, either under his own name or that of his various publishing ventures, including International General, which he founded in 1970 as a book-distributing company and expanded into a publishing house in 1972.

The second category, “Editing and Writing,” brings together Siegelauub’s own writings and the books and paraphernalia (announcements, posters, etc.) for which he appears as the editor. Siegelauub was not a writer in the common understanding of the word, and his theoretical output appeared mostly in his own editorial projects and publications, where it often served to frame the debate. For reasons of common sense, and although many examples can be found throughout the anthology, this category does not include acknowledgments, brief descriptions, or even introductions, unless they develop a specific argument. Ultimately, the subtle transitions between editing and writing in Siegelauub’s output questions the very concept of authorship.

The third category concerns the numerous published “Interviews” given by Siegelauub, either in face-to-face situations or as part of panel discussions organized around his persona and his work. It includes reprints, in full or excerpted, as well as translations.

The fourth subsection regroups “Talks, Lectures, and Discussions” in which Siegelauub played an active part, whether as organizer, moderator, or panelist. Several of these events were subsequently transcribed and published and therefore appear also in the subsection “Interviews.” Despite our best attempts, the list of talks, lectures, discussions, in particular, is hardly exhaustive and merely reflects what could be established from the archives and a reasonable amount of fact-checking.

These four categories are by no means impermeable, and users of the anthology are encouraged to navigate between them. Supplementing the chronological presentation of documents, this bibliography hopes to provide a typological reading of Siegelauub’s work, while allowing readers to reconstruct its development, methods, and networks.