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CURATORS' NOTE

LEONTINE COELEWIJ AND SARA MARTINETTI

In 1969 Seth Siegelaub declared in an interview, “You don’t need a gallery to show ideas.”¹ This simple statement not only explains his involvement in the emergence of Conceptual Art, but also confirms his deeper interest in the presentation and circulation of ideas as a characteristic that extended to all the other fields in which he was subsequently active.

This exhibition is the first institutional attempt, two years after Siegelaub’s death, to assess his work as a curator, publisher, bibliographer, and collector in depth. Through an extensive selection of artworks, documents, books, and textiles—many presented for the first time to a wider public—it surveys his various projects and collections, from Conceptual Art and mass media to politics and textiles. Adopting a methodological perspective informed by extensive research in his archives, it contends that, irrespective of the subject, his approach was fundamentally guided by a lifelong interest in books and printed matter.

During the late 1960s, when Siegelaub was looking for alternative ways to present art, the venue of the institution was the furthest from his mind. Indeed, his experience as a gallerist had taught him to dread what he called the “overheads” of permanent structures: opening times, rent, storage, shipping, etc.—all the problems arising from the materiality of art in the traditional sense. Siegelaub’s reservations notwithstanding, surely the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam is the appropriate institution, if any, to organize a comprehensive retrospective of his life and work. With a proven track record as a showcase for experimental practices, it has maintained a long and close relationship with Conceptual Art: the exhibition *Op losse schroeven: situaties en cryptostructuren* (Square Pegs in Round Holes. Situations and Cryptostructures), curated by Wim Beeren in 1969, put the Netherlands on the map of the Conceptual Art network, and works by Carl Andre, Jan Dibbets, Sol LeWitt, and Lawrence Weiner form the basis of its considerable collection of art from that period. Another important characteristic of the Stedelijk’s work—one that resonates strongly with Siegelaub’s own practice—is its critical questioning of established exhibition models. This applies more to this exhibition, which has had to reconcile institutional orthodoxy and personal idiosyncrasy, than to any other. In this case, it responded to the problem by broadening the museum’s usual *modus operandi* to encompass other work models—primarily, research conducted as part of a Ph.D. dissertation—and to include contributions by two contemporary artists, Mario García Torres and Maria Eichhorn, who were invited to continue Siegelaub’s legacy on two of his concerns: García Torres created a new video work inspired by Siegelaub’s bibliographic project on time and causality, and Eichhorn made an updated version of her installation on

Siegelaub's Artist's Contract, which she first presented in 1997. Finally, the fact that Siegelaub lived in Amsterdam, where he inspired numerous artists and curators, also played a role in the Stedelijk's decision to take a lead in establishing his place in the history of art.

A pre-Conceptual Art sculpture by Douglas Huebler, a 1968 photograph of Siegelaub in conversation with Joseph Kosuth, original artworks that went into the making of the *Xerox Book*, airline tickets to Europe, a wall drawing by Sol LeWitt, the 1971 Artist's Contract, a request to exchange publications on mass media, translations of the anti-imperialist pamphlet *How to Read Donald Duck*, office supplies used for book layouts, a brochure entitled *The Book as a Political Weapon*, textile inventory cards, volumes from Keppel Archibald Cameron Creswell's *Bibliography of the Architecture, Arts and Crafts of Islam*, a handwritten sales receipt from 1654 for a large number of textiles, a chasuble and matching dalmatic in silk damask, Nicolaas Wilhelmus Posthumus's book on Dutch cloth merchants' organizations, the earliest weaving pattern book, a pre-Colombian Peruvian feather headdress, etc.—the list of exhibited items is both long and disparate.

The exhibition considers all of these as mobile carriers of information whose significance extends beyond a given place or time as they form part of a wider network of relationships. In trying to do justice to their richness and complexity, we were intent on defining a specific, explicit framework for each individual item, while at the same time exploring their meaning as a whole. This would enable us to emphasize that the various "collections" and "libraries" assembled by Siegelaub are underpinned by editorial, bibliographic, and archival methods. Instead of organizing them through the use of dividing walls (in the symbolic and literal sense), we followed Siegelaub's cue and, for the main conceptual and spatial device structuring both the exhibition and the catalogue, we chose "the list," in the form of a map or an index. This, in turn, allowed the many transitions, unexpected connections, and recurrences—as well as the ruptures between his various projects—to emerge as the most singular moments in an essentially open chronological and geographical arrangement.

The catalogue, with its deliberately simple, indexical format, reflects the primary principles of the exhibition layout. Special attention was given to the materiality of the items featured in the show notably the textiles and the headdresses, most of which were photographed especially for this purpose by the artist Marion Benoit. Penetrating into the heart of the texture to reveal the information contained in the weft of the fibers or the marks of wear, these images, explains Benoit, show textiles as complex representations of a wider historical and cultural background—one of the characteristics that explains their appeal to Siegelaub as a collector.

The central part of this publication is a chronology in ten chapters, each bringing together three kinds of elements: illustrated bibliographical captions describing Siegelaub's projects and publications; sequences of images related to his collections and libraries; and finally, archival documents, photographs, and statements by people who knew him well. By interweaving these three types of information, it retraces the many shifts in his long career, whereas the index at the end of the catalogue encourages seeing all the intersecting themes.

The lead essays in this catalogue concentrate on different aspects of Siegelaub's life and work: Sara Martinetti considers Siegelaub's methodologies in light of book practices (on page 14); Leontine Coelewij examines his influence as a groundbreaking curator on younger generations of exhibition-makers (p. 504); and Julia Bryan-Wilson analyzes the material conditions of his work (p. 30). Further contributions include Jo Melvin's account of Siegelaub's collaboration with Peter Townsend for *Studio International* (p. 466); Götz Langkau's recollection of the transfer of the library of the International Mass Media Research Center to the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam (p. 478); and a conversation among Matilda McQuaid, Marja Bloem, and Alan Kennedy on Siegelaub's activities as a collector of textiles and books (p. 488).

Last but not least, we also wanted to make room for Siegelaub's own voice. Expanding from an anthology of his writings and interviews to be published in the wake of this catalogue,² we are therefore publishing an interview with the artist Ursula Meyer from 1969 (p. 190), in which he clarifies his conceptual methodology, and a more informal conversation with Robert Horvitz and Thomas Levin from 1987 (p. 31), a time when his focus shifted from mass media to textiles. At some point in that discussion, reflecting on the ingrained conservatism of the textiles milieu, Siegelaub sums up his intentions with another programmatic statement—one that we, very humbly, made our own: "I think we can make some trouble there."

Notes**1**

Seth Siegelaub and Patricia Norvell, "Seth Siegelaub: April 17, 1969," in Alexander Alberro and Patricia Norvell, eds., *Recording Conceptual Art: Early Interviews with Barry, Huebler, Kaltenbach, LeWitt, Morris, Oppenheim, Siegelaub, Smithson, and Weiner* by Patricia Norvell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 38.

2

Better Read Than Dead: The Seth Siegelaub Source Book (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2016).