

Seth Siegelau: The People Who Matter

By
Daniel McClean

LONDON, AUG 12 - I first met Seth in 2008 at the Berlin Biennale where we both participated with the artist, Maria Eichhorn in an event dedicated to his legendary contract and manifesto of artists' rights, 'the Artist's Reserved Rights Transfer And Sale Agreement' (1971) also known as the artist's contract.

During the relatively short time that I knew Seth we became close friends. We skyped and met regularly. We spoke together at events (Tate, Art Basel) usually devoted to discussing the artists' contract and its legacy. I often stayed with him and his long-term partner, Marja Bloem (a curator) in their magical apartment in Amsterdam – a tiny attic apartment crammed with tribal artifacts and village textiles and one solitary artwork (belonging to Marja) a small white letter painting by Boetti.

When Seth died unexpectedly of a heart attack in Basel earlier this summer, we were collaborating on the art law section of his Egress Foundation website – a website under construction consisting of different projects relating to Seth, including his involvement in conceptual art, the history of textiles and art law. As well as being an online archive, the website was intended to map his polymath activities.

Shortly before I met Seth, I had read Alexander Alberro's book, 'Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity' (a book which Seth liked) devoted to his pioneering activities as a dealer and curator of conceptual art in New York during the 1960s and early 1970s. In particular, the book focuses on Seth's involvement with his 'fab four' artists as he called them: Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner.

I was expecting to meet a Svengali who had once smoothly and aggressively promoted his artists. However, this expectation of Seth as arch-strategist was mistaken. If Seth had once helped to revolutionize the context for exhibiting art and its communication (more of this below), I met a warm, sweet and eccentric, Jewish New Yorker, in his late 60s. Seth was more like one of the Marx Brothers (and shared their anarchic sense of humour and disregard for authority) than a proto Charles Saatchi. Seth's ec-

centricity was reflected in his dress sense, in particular in his penchant for colourful Hawaiian style shirts and loud trainers. He could have stepped off a greyhound bus somewhere in the US and indeed, Seth and Marja always insisted on travelling by bus whenever possible.

I soon discovered that I had many affinities with Seth (I am an art lawyer and curator), in particular we shared a preoccupation with conceptual art and with authorship in its widest sense, including its cultural and legal articulations. It was probably no accident that we came to meet through the artist's contract. Seth proposed within a few months of our meeting that we should work together on various art law projects, including for the Egress Foundation website.

Over the next few years, our intimacy grew. As well as becoming an important friend along with Marja, I found Seth hugely inspiring. Seth was intuitively brilliant. He always had a way of breaking ideas down and keeping them simple. It was not simply his history that was important; he was an invaluable sounding board when discussing exhibition projects.

Looking back at Seth's life it is extraordinary to think of the number of incarnations that it encompasses: dealer, curator and promoter of conceptual art, publisher, archivist, historian and collector of textiles.

Seth's projects as a dealer and exhibition organizer (when he was only in his early twenties) are well-known. At his gallery, Seth Siegelau Contemporary Art (1964-1966)(New York) he pioneered the exhibition of a new art that was based not on objects, but rather on ideas or 'primary information' as he called it as well as on radical notions of art's communication and ownership: if the artwork consisted of the idea (principally expressed through language), then the logical conclusion was that the idea could be owned by everyone, it did not have to be private property.

Between 1968 and 1971 after he had closed his gallery, Seth embarked upon a series of over twenty exhibitions, which pushed the possibilities of the exhibition as a medium. These exhibitions include the 'Xerox Book' (1968), probably the first book in which the site of the exhibition is the publication: twenty five pages of the same size were each allotted to different artists including Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, as

well as Barry, Huebler, Kosuth and Weiner. The Xerox Book had been inspired by the idea that the exhibition could be cheaply multiplied through photo-copying and would be sponsored by Xerox. Sadly, this did not happen and the book only came to be produced in a limited form on a regular printing press.

The exhibitions also include, 'One Month' (March 1969) in which the time of the exhibition was mapped onto its organizational structure – with a different day being assigned to each of the thirty-one artists who participated in the exhibition throughout the month of March 1969. As with the Xerox Book, the exhibition existed again through its publication.

Seth, however, was modest about these exhibitions, acknowledging that they were born out of their radical artistic and political context. He was also disarmingly practical. I remember when he was once asked during one of our talks what had led him to organize the 'Xerox Book', he answered simply that it was because it was cheaper to make an exhibition this way.

Economy was always at the heart of Seth's projects which were produced on a shoestring budget. The wonderful thing about conceptual art was that it didn't require vast production costs: the work could be produced and, importantly, reproduced on paper or on walls: words typed and in some instances drawn. Often the advertising of the artwork (in magazines such as Artforum) or its publicity (on posters that Seth would lovingly help to design) was more expensive than the production of the work itself.

In 1971, Seth abruptly withdrew from the art world to pursue other activities, in particular, publishing. He also left New York to permanently move to Paris where he married and had two daughters, Nelly and Jessica.

There were various reasons, I think, for this exit. He felt that he had worked with a movement of artists and had exhausted the creative possibilities of exhibition making. He did not have the energy to try this again with a different group of artists and had so much else he wished to explore in the world. Seth also valued his independence. He explained to me how he got tired of being trapped as a dealer and then as a curator and did not want to be owned by anyone including artists.



• Robert Barry, Seth Siegelau at the Julian Preto Gallery, New York City, 1976, listening to Barry's sound piece *Portrait*.

The culmination of Seth's activities in the art world would be the artist's contract (1971), intended to be a 'self-help document' for artists. The contract came out of research into the inequalities of the art system and the question of how artists could better protect their rights. Before drafting it, Seth interviewed hundreds of artists and galleries to canvas their views. From this he drew two main conclusions which he framed in the contract: first, that artists needed a mechanism whereby they could benefit from the re-sale of their work and second, that they needed to control the exhibition of their works even after ownership had been transferred.

The artist's contract was prophetic. The artist's resale right has now been adopted in the laws of many countries, including throughout the European Community whilst the protection of artists' rights of authorship has also been recognized; see for instance, the Visual Artists Rights Act 1990 (US). The contract, however, was also deeply impractical. Founded on the premise that the collector of the artwork when selling it would have to find another collector to ratify the same agreement was never going to be an attractive proposition. Unsurprisingly, the contract was only adopted by a few artists,

most notably by the uncompromising Hans Haacke.

From the early 1980s onwards, Seth would begin amassing his collection of textiles. This is a remarkable collection – largely of fragments – consisting of textiles from different cultures/periods (from ancient Peruvian rugs to 18th century French embroidered cloth) that Seth had been able to acquire gradually on modest means. To begin with, Seth, the incorrigible bibliophile, bought books on textiles (providing the illusion as he said that he could own the contents of the books themselves), but this was soon supplemented by collecting textiles.

The beautiful exhibition held at Raven Row (London), 'The Stuff That Matters' (2012) presented a selection of Seth's collection to the public for the first time. It also provided an insight into what Seth had been up to for some of the time after he left the art world. The exhibition was, I think, an important reminder, that whilst Seth had promoted art that was 'immaterial' during the 1960s, he was also very much concerned with the materiality of art and things. It was this dual approach (information and materials) that led him to love textiles and books so much – in the words of Lawrence Weiner, 'books do furnish a room'.

Seth was also attracted to textiles for other reasons. He liked the way in which textiles were produced collectively (designated through guilds or factories) and anonymously – we are rarely aware of the individual authors of textiles in the way that we are aware of authors of artworks. Though I did not consider it when Seth was alive, I now see his collection of textiles as complementing his earlier exhibitions/publications of conceptual art: if the latter explored the 'dematerialisation' of the artwork then his textile collection took this process a step further, revealing the disappearance of the author whilst revelling in the materiality of the medium.

In the last decade there has been a resurgence of interest in Seth's activities, particularly from younger generations of artists and curators. It seems fitting that in 2011, Seth was able to transfer the bulk of his collection of early conceptual art to MoMA, New York along with his archive of documents relating to this period. For whilst Seth was ambivalent towards art history and sceptical of the institutions that help shape it, he remains an important part of it.

In today's rampant global art market, the conceptual art of the 1960s/1970s and enterprises such as Seth's gallery have an ex-

perimental purity and at times, naivety that makes them compelling. Having quit the art world in 1971, Seth was like a time capsule: through contact with him one entered into a moment of the past uncontaminated by a compromised legacy (and Seth was keen to preserve this purity, declining many invitations to curate and add his name to art exhibitions).

Yet it would be a mistake to think that

Seth was nostalgic. Far from it, he was always forward-looking. Seth left behind not just a legacy, but a series of unfulfilled projects, in particular his Egress website, from which he planned to ‘shake things up’.

Though Seth had been struggling with long-term cancer his unexpected death in Basel during the art fair (an ironic ending) was shocking and devastating nonetheless. I feel with his untimely passing that not just a

figure of history has died, but also a person replete with future possibilities.

Inspirational, eclectic, autodidactic, pioneering, democratic, anarchic, warm, funny, brilliant, an organizer, yet, paradoxically, disorganized, all of these adjectives come to mind when I think of Seth. Above all though he was a person not scared to be himself.

Seth was one of those people that matter.

(advertisement)

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Book presentation
7/9, 12h

ENCOUNTERS.
ON THREE FILMS
BY MANON DE
BOER

Book presentation with Sophie Berrebi

Jan Mot
Rue Antoine Dansaertstraat 190
1000 Brussels, Belgium

Koester’s new film shot
in Brussels



• Joachim Koester, *The Place of the Dead Roads* (production still by Lui Mokrzycki)

BRUSSELS, AUG 16 - Last month, Joachim Koester filmed at the Brussels’ Kaaithheater his new work, entitled *The Place of the Dead Roads*, a western structured around the choreography of the shootout. In the film four down and out and incredibly dirty looking androgynous cowboys engage in the ritual of posing, circling, drawing the gun, falling and other gestures linked to the genre of the western. But contrary to the common progression of such scenes the gestures of the cowboys appear devoid of narrative or chronological order. Instead their actions seem motivated by messages from a hidden world buried deep within. Gradually as the cowboys engage in an exploration of these

dark sensations of tweaks and involuntary movement their actions come to resemble an odd kind of dance. Eventually the tension and build-up of the scenes are resolved through these dance-like movements and the duels come to an end. The setting is subterranean world, which resembles a mine. It is in this confused maze of underground hallways, rooms and spaces that the cowboys roam. With Pieter Ampe, Boglarka Börcsök, Liz Kinoshita and Halla Olafsdottir. The work will be shown for the first time in the context of Koester’s solo show at the Centre d’Art Contemporain in Geneva (June 2014).

Letter to the Editor

By
Asad Raza

MONTREAL, AUG 16

Dear Jan,

I'm in Montréal, where I visited the CCA (Centre Canadien d'Architecture) today, where the architect Cedric Price's archive is held. Have you seen it? Price was one of those figures who occasionally emerge and become prominent by reminding us of their field's limitations, or questioning the motive force behind their field's everyday practice. Like most figures of this kind, he did this not from the outside, in the purely negative forms of dissent or critique, but situated convincingly within architecture, transforming it subtly from the inside.

Funnier and less theoretical than the Situationists, whose utopian leanings parallel his, over the length of his career Price consistently re-posed basic questions: why do we build?; does what we build serve our aims?; what might we build if our aims were different? His output, beginning in the 1960s, often took the form of highly personalized drawings annotated in his handwriting—showing the influence of London's pioneering graphic culture. To give the gist of a project, he would create sets of storyboard-like explanatory panels, almost like advertisements, with aphoristic explanations of his guiding ideas—typical panels related to his Fun Palace project contain sloganeerings like “for your delight” and “LONDON [NOW] LONDON [NOW] LONDON [NOW]”. One of the most striking things about these drawings, panels, and pamphlets, if you look at them, is the degree to which they give off a sense of “personality.” This quality is more important than it might first seem.

Price's work was also part of the cultural tectonics of the 60s in that it refused to aspire to monumental status and permanence—he thought buildings should have an expiration date, for example. In particular, his unbuilt designs for the Potteries Thinkbelt (a mobile university utilizing a disused industrial railway) and the Fun Palace (a kind of modular machine housing every form of culture), deflated modernist architecture's grandiose desires and its drive towards emblematic/immortal forms. Price's work is mostly adaptable and disposable—he prioritized the use of a building over the building's own objective status. He never forgot the question: What is it for? As Arata Isozaki

wrote, Price was “that rare figure who can introduce non-architectural ideas into architecture today” (this is in the great Price book edited by Hans Ulrich Obrist, Re:CP).

Maybe a better way to suggest this is in the form of a well-known anecdote. Approached by a wealthy individual who wanted to commission him to build a house, the story goes, Price, as architects do, spent time interviewing the client about his life and activities, in order to understand what needs the house would fulfill. At the end of this process, when it came time for him to present his plan, Price met the client and told him: “You don't need a new house, you need a divorce.”

Glib though it may sound, Price's answer was also a form of architectural practice. If we consider it in terms of the architect's aim of creating built environments in response to human needs, in fact, it may be that he saved the client from wastefully and quixotically pursuing a transformation of his built environment by diagnosing the factors underlying his desire. And, in a larger way, the episode points to not building as an architectural choice that is at times as relevant as building.

In this connection, the thinker Joshua Dubler once wrote a book about the problem of agency for a democracy's average citizens, who have minuscule political power. The one massive possibility an ordinary person has to change things, he points out, is to become an assassin: a figure of no political status who nevertheless completely diverts history's flow. Yet Dubler concludes that this is a false agency, actually no greater than that of all those citizens who choose not to assassinate someone. The non-assassin also exerts power though their inaction, albeit in a more invisible form. Price's career is about the overcoming of something analogous to this invisibility problem.

Never-built designs and temporary buildings have always exerted massive influence on architecture, and the anecdote about Price, or the circulation of his plan for the unrealized Potteries Thinkbelt, operate in the same way. But the form of the story is important too: a joke. Why? Because it is the joke-quality of the anecdote that helps it lodge in the mind, that makes it memorable. Just as more monumental forms of architecture summarize themselves in the form of a memorable and often simple shape, so the story uses a punchline for the same purpose.

For Price, the production of ideas, drawings, and plans, that are punchy is the key to

making them work. Otherwise, for instance, the injunction not to add permanent new parts of the landscape would appear as boring and conservative, whereas Price's work looks to the future, and the needs of people still to come, for inspiration, rather than trying to freeze in place a perfected past. He relates in this way to Richard Hamilton, the great Pop artist and Price's generational peer, for whom new combinations of old things can free us from repressive arrangements. Utopia is a set of small changes, always unfolding.

His designs and ideas are often imitated, though mostly stripped of their utopic character (what I think of as their light character) and used as self-consciously “radical” components of other architects' work, a typical result for 1960s quasi-utopic practices, which are, as any number of people have by now pointed out, easily transformed (or “appropriated,” in Marxist lingo) into the “content” of a churning production process that ignores or confounds their core meanings. But that's okay; being depressed until a total revolution comes about is a mug's game. Despite causing no obvious paradigm shift, Price's preference for making temporary structures that relate to and produce communities in the present, rather than memorializing or commemorating, has had an almost prophetic influence, one you can see all over the place. You might say that his genteel brand of influence shows by contrast the vulgarity—the hero worship—underneath the idea of a overturning a field by effecting one-man paradigm shift.

Beyond this, why might Price's career be of interest? One reason has to do with the life of cities, or as Price proposed calling them, “concentrates.” (The idea of suggesting a new word for cities is classic Cedric Price.) In 1999, Price entered a competition held by the CCA to redevelop the railway by the Hudson River around 31st street in New York City—one that is still empty today, near the only drive-through McDonald's in lower Manhattan. Instead of designing a commercial building to sit on top of the tracks, Price proposed to leave it mostly alone, adding a simple promenade from which to view this unbuilt-upon site and its huge volume of air upon the river, which he called a “Lung for midtown.”

The dossier Price created for his submission for New York's rail yard (which did not, in the end, win) begins like this:

CITIES HAVE A FUTURE DEPEND-
ENT ON GROWTH AND CHANGE,
TOGETHER WITH THE QUALITY OF
THEIR OCCUPANCY

NEW YORK CITY HAS A PARTICULAR
NATURE, WHICH IS ‘PRIDE IN THE
NEW’

As it turns out, 1999 was one of the last years in which one could say this traditional shibboleth about New York City. Sadly, the post-2001 epoch in the city's history has been mostly about exclusion, nostalgia, re-trenchment, and a movement back towards 1950s fantasies in the form of cupcakes and cocktails. For a decade or so, New York was beset by a quality we could call “retro-fixation”—the invocation of a proud and stable identity (a “homeland”) that must be continued, as with the extreme clumsiness of the plan for a 1776-foot Freedom Tower. Luckily, the phase seems to be passing. But the idea of basing change around the needs of the present and future (“PRIDE IN THE NEW”) is one Price can still help us with. A city is not a collection of buildings, he reminds us, it is a concentration of living people, a set of flows. Exhibitions and other cultural projects should remember these vectoral truths.

The other thing about Price is that he's a model for the issue of style. Jokes and a sense of personality are very important to his work—without them the ideas are lifeless, lack embodiment. But of course it goes even deeper, because no great style is ever possible to separate from its matter. But even when style and matter are indistinguishable, when one is concerned with the problem of the new, as Price was, things can get a little overserious. For instance, as the museum director and graphic designer Willem Sandberg wrote in 1969:

now

adjustment to the past = slow death

to the future = life

It's beautifully realized poetically and graphically, but it's a bit melodramatic. It's also a bit of a timeless truth, and the problem with timeless truths is that they leave one nowhere to go. As a stylistic matter, Price's lightness is a great strength: it's situational and it knows its time is coming to an end. Style is an omelet, Price might have agreed, that is made to be eaten right then.

Price himself once wrote that,

Style is perceived in the sequence of time, whether evidenced, recorded, or experi-

enced. Human involvement together with movement in time is therefore integral to true style. For example, style can be found in writing, cooking and dressing since the constituent parts, to be valid, must relate to an overall process requiring the passage of time.

I think it's a good moment to remember this humble set of ideas about newness.

In Brief

The Jury of the 55th International Art Exhibition of la Biennale di Venezia chaired by Jessica Morgan (Great Britain) and comprised of Sofia Hernández Chong Cuy (Mexico), Francesco Manacorda (Italy), Bisi Silva (Nigeria), and Ali Subotnick (USA) has awarded to **Tino Sehgal** the Golden Lion for the best artist in the International Exhibition Il Palazzo Enciclopedico (The Encyclopedic Palace).

Joachim Koester received the Camera Austria Award for Contemporary Photography (2013). Members of the jury were Sandra Križi Roban, Florian Ebner, Martin Beck and Reinhard Braun.

The contribution on page 5 in commemoration of Seth Siegel (1941-2013) is by **Jonathan Monk**.

Xoco, The Kid Who Loved Being Bored is the title of a recent book by **Mario Garcia Torres** with a text by the artist and illustrated by Tomoko Hirasawa. Published by Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo.

The opening of the exhibition by **Manon de Boer** at the gallery coincides with the Brussels Art Days. During the weekend of 6 till 8 September 30 galleries inaugurate a new exhibition. More information on brusselsartdays.com. On Saturday the 7th at 12h the recent publication *Encounters. On three films by Manon de Boer* will be presented. Sophie Berrebi will read one of the texts from the book, a letter written by **Sven Augustijnen** and addressed to De Boer.

Tino Sehgal has been short-listed for the Turner Prize. This year's Turner exhibition will be held at Ebrington in Derry-Londonderry, 2013's UK City of Culture and the winner will be announced on December 2. Other artists on the short list are Laure Prouvost, David Shrigley and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye.

Agenda

Sven Augustijnen
Spectres, Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, Cinema Dynamo, Geneva (CH), 23/07 - 08/09 (screening & talk); *Leisure, Discipline and Punishment*, Contour 2013, Mechelen (BE), 24/08 - 03/11; *Suspicious Minds*, Galeria Vermelho, Sao Paulo (BR), 27/08 - 21/09; *Le Guide du Parc*, Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, Cinema Spoutnik, Geneva (CH), 03/09 (screening & talk); *Just what is it that makes today so familiar, so uneasy?*, LIAF 2013, Lofoten (NO), 06/09 - 29/09

Pierre Bismuth
Dear Portrait, Mostyn, Llandudno (UK), 20/07 - 13/10; *On the Tip of My Tongue*, Magasin 3 Stockholm Konsthall, Stockholm, 13/09 - 08/12

Manon de Boer
Encounters, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (NL), 08/06 - 15/09 (solo); *Encounters*, Kalmar Konstmuseum, Kalmar (SE), 15/06 - 15/09 (solo); *Un escalier d'eau*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 20/06 - 09/09; *Several Species of Small Furry Animals Gathered Together in a Cave and Grooving in a Pict*, Veneklasen Werner, Berlin, 06/07 - 14/09; *Hermes' Lack of Words*, Artspace, Newton, Auckland (NZ), 26/07 - 31/08; *Dissonant*, Sylvia Kristel - Paris, Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, Geneva (CH), 03/09 (screening & talk); *one, two, many*, Jan Mot, Brussels, 06/09 - 26/10 (solo); *Think about Wood, Think about Metal*, Sylvia Kristel - Paris, *Resonating Surfaces*, Osso & Architecture Triennale, Lisbon, 20/09 (screening & talk)

Rineke Dijkstra
So Much I Want to Say: From Annemiek to Mother Courage. Goetz Collection at Haus der Kunst, Haus der Kunst, Munich (DE), 19/04 - 13/09; *Performing Gender*, The George Eastman House, Rochester (US), 11/05 - 13/10; *This Infinite World - Set 10. From the Collection of the Fotomuseum Winterthur*, Fotomuseum Winterthur, Winterthur (CH), 08/06 - 09/02; *Des Images comme des Oiseaux*, Friche la Belle de Mai, Tour Panorama, Marseille (FR), 04/07 - 29/09; *Ages. Portraits vom Alterwerden*, Landesgalerie Linz (AT), 07/11 - 16/02

Mario Garcia Torres
The Boetti Lesson, MADRE, Naples (IT), 21/06 - 30/09 (solo); *Un escalier d'eau*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 21/06 - 09/09; *The*

