

THE RECORDS ROOM

Dorothy Kay
The Glue Pot

Edward Wolfe
Aishia

Walter Battiss
African Rocks and Figures

Irma Stern
Girl with Recorder

Elize de Beer
DBRELI004

A research paper and exhibition submitted in
fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree
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Viewer becomes reader when a work of art is represented through text. Creating an active viewer within an all too passive museum. Through archival text and imagery and the absence of the original painting, the reader become author; recreating the artworks in their mind. It is through this recreation that the book becomes painting and where the book becomes the exhibition.

A book's power lies in its ability to resonate a multitude of ideas with a reader. A book allows for a reader's imagination to create a world within their minds through the text and images that reside within its pages. The Records Room takes advantage of this imaginative power that readers have to create, and the book's ability to facilitate this creation.

The viewer enters into a minimal gallery space. On the walls hang four prints each of a single colour; each are scale renditions of four paintings within the Iziko South African National Gallery (I-SANG) collection. Walter Battiss' *African Rocks and Figures* (1958) (Fig.1), Irma Stern's *Girl with Recorder* (1951) (Fig.2), Dorothy Kay's *The Glue Pot* (1951) (Fig.3) and Edward Wolfe's *Aishia* (1938) (Fig.4). The single colour prints representing the paintings each allude to a dominant colour the artist has used. *African Rocks and Figures* is represented by a rich cobalt turquoise, *Aishia* by a light Prussian Green, *The Glue Pot* by a rich Chinese Yellow and *Girl with Recorder* by its Rose Pink. The paintings are visually reduced to minimalist singular colours and their dimensions, providing the viewer with a starting point to further investigate the paintings.

The paintings are not physically exhibited within the gallery space. Each one is rather deconstructed through their respective documentation drawn from the archives of the Iziko South African National Gallery (I-SANG) and Art Collections Library. In the centre of the room lie four black covered, hand bound books on top of a wooden trestle table. Each book has one of the artwork's titles and the artist's name engraved on its front cover. The books 'become' the paintings. Rather than displaying the physical works, the works are displayed through their documentation that exists within the I-SANG archives and the Art Collections Library. Without ever revealing how the actual painting looks the books

give the viewer an abstract view into the painting, the artist and how both function within the museum. The viewer is denied access to the original and any reproductions of the painting, but is shown only their textual and museological existence and categorisations of their visual form. Through this the viewer then imaginatively 'recreates' the artwork based on this information.

The books are intended as new articulations of these four paintings, whereby they are now reinterpreted within a conceptualist methodology, where the 'idea' and 'meaning' of a work is far more important than its physical qualities. The paintings are then placed within a cognitive realm where the reader recreates them through texts and selected imagery. Museum audiences are demanding; they want to be continuously stimulated but yet prefer to remain passive. The aim of *The Records Room* is to create an active viewer by challenging curatorial conventions and placing the painting within this now-cognitive realm. Referring to the curatorial work of Seth Siegelaub (1941-2013) and in particular his notion of how a book can become an exhibition, allows for these four books to become new expressions of the paintings, with which visitors can then critically engage, beyond their purely formal characteristics. Books, documentation and text has functioned throughout the 20th century in the hands of artists such as El Lissitzky, Kurt Schwitters, George Maciunas, Natalia Goncharova, Joseph Kosuth, Hans Haacke, Douglas Huebler and Rosemarie Castoro as alternative art forms, which have given artists greater freedom to translate their ideas and concepts.

The book however releases an artist's control over an idea, allowing the reader to become an active participant and creator, rather than a passive receiver. *The Records Rooms* turns the reader into author and into cre-

ator. Aligning with Roland Barthes' essay *What is an Author?* (1968) the idea and the painting now exist within the power of the reader, since the painting no longer exists physically, but rather within a cognitive realm, the painting is recreated in the mind of the reader.

Since the paintings are not exhibited physically within the gallery space, but rather within the mind of the reader, there is then also a shift in the painting's 'aura'. Walter Benjamin's notion of 'aura' is explained in his 1936 essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Benjamin argued that the since an artwork's aura can only exist within the original work, a reproduction only diminishes its said 'aura'. However the books within *The Records Room* are rearticulations of the paintings rather than reproductions. This shifts the aura placed on the paintings physical value to an aura within the imagined paintings, through the authorial power of the reader.

All four paintings were acquired between 1953 and 1961 during John Paris's tenure as Director of the then SANG. Paris's aim as Director was to change the public perception of the museum, to make the museum more modern and to slowly bring the SANG to the international art world. These four paintings and many similar modernist works were purchased to achieve this goal. Paris became the Director in 1949, taking over from Professor Edward Roworth (1880- 1964), part-time director of the SANG from 1941 to 1949.

Roworth was viewed by artists as dictatorial and overruled the opinions of his colleagues at the I-SANG (Lilla, 2004:27). Roworth was a British born-artist who studied under the likes of realist painter Sir Hubert Herkomer (1849–1914) and Herkomer's pupil Tom Mostyn (1864-1930).

Roworth's artistic style, knowledge and experience were forged from these two artist's and from British artwork for the late 1800s. When he came to South Africa in 1902 he had a vested interest in that particular artistic-historical knowledge base and had a view that in contemporary times would be best described as 'conservative'. Roworth also had particular views on what was 'good art' which was heavily rooted in romantic realism. Roworth was a highly influential and revered man within the Cape, allying with the conservative nature of the Cape Town public (Berman, 1970:369). He held a lot of power within the Cape art world, not only as the director of the SANG but also as the Director of the Michaelis School of Fine Art and President of the South African Society of Artists (SASA). It was through these roles where Roworth was able to impose his own ideals, many of his critics argued that his personal tastes were being inappropriately imposed on the institution. In 1940 Roworth delivered a public lecture in which he argued his rejection of Modernism, stating that Modern art was a calamitous development and far too self-indulgent. He argued that Modern Art was shocking and unsettling for traditional conservative art viewers. Paintings were distorted in colour, and rejected the naturalistic conventions and classical conceptions that he prioritised. Roworth aligned himself with the Hitlerian ideologies of modern art as 'degenerate' (Berman, 1970:9). Modern art was therefore prohibited from entering the museum's collections, arguing that a national art museum should be kept pure and 'free from the alien and disintegrating influences' spread by Modern art. (Lilla, 2004:34).

Much to Roworth's distaste, Modernism was slowly trickling into the Cape as more and more artists were adopting modernist thought. South Africa was sheltered and distant from the international art world, and very little artistic influence from America and Europe were entering the

country. The primary artistic influence in the country came from British artists who settled in South Africa, like Roworth himself. Many individuals were not pleased with this state of affairs; and artist groups such as the New Group led by Lippy Lipshitz (1903 - 1980) aimed to raise the standard of South African art, and by organizing exhibitions and sales, hoped to increase public awareness and an appreciation of Modern art. This group fostered and encouraged a uniquely South African art form, and one that challenge conservative art establishments such as the I-SANG. It was only when artists started to travel internationally to countries like France, Germany, Britain and America that they were exposed to the vast possibilities that was Modernism.

Irma Stern (1894 – 1966) was one of the most esteemed artists in South Africa. She was both a pioneer and rebel in South African art circles as she, along with artist Maggie Laubser (1886 – 1973), introduced modernism to the conservative South African art world in the 1920s. In 1916, whilst living in Berlin, Stern met her mentor, Max Pechstein (1881-1955), who introduced her to German Expressionism. Pechstein had a strong influence on her style and artistic philosophy, and encouraged her to adopt the use of loose expressive brush strokes, arbitrary colours, unusual angles in compositions, and distorted and stylised representations of her subjects. Colour was the primary vehicle of her expression and the richness and variety of her palette becomes the most distinctive feature of her style (Berman, 1970:440). Stern often travelled between Germany and South Africa, bringing all the modernist inspiration along with her and attempted to bring South Africa in line with international trends. During her youth Stern was rejected by the conservative South African art community who regarded her work as vulgar (Berman, 1970:440). Roworth and Stern were two opposing figures in the South

African art world, Roworth a Traditionalist and Stern a Modern Expressionist. Roworth started in 1946 that Expressionist art was 'touched by the modern fever and fret, the strange disease of modern life, with its sick hurry and its divided aims.' (Lilla, 2004:31) While many of Stern's works were rejected by the I-SANG, it was only when Paris become director that he saw the value in collecting her works and numerous other Modernist works for the I-SANG.

Similar to Stern, **Wolfe** (1897 -1982) was a well-travelled, South African-born artist who spent most of his life in London where he developed his career becoming the esteemed artist for which he is now recognised. During 1913 Wolfe met the modernist artist Roger Fry (1866 -1934) who brought Post-Impressionism to Britain through two very influential exhibitions of French artists in 1910 and 1912 (Tayler, 1986:15). Wolfe joined Omega Workshops soon after meeting Fry and later joined the Bloomsbury Group. He began to fully immerse himself in modernism and was highly influenced by the worlds of French Impressionism and Post-Impressionism as well as artists such as Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne and Matisse. Wolfe soon became a true modernist painter with his vivid colour palette along with free handling of form and subtle abstractions. He was undoubtedly a colourist, and it is his vibrant use of colour which is the most unforgettable characteristic of his work. (Tayler, 1986:60) His travels always led him back to South Africa, where in the 1950s he was able to showcase this modernist movement he had discovered in Britain.

Unlike Wolfe and Stern, **Walter Battiss** (1906 – 1982) was only taught in South Africa and only travelled internationally after 1938. Battiss began his artistic career with a strictly academic conservative approach, and it was only through his interest in African rock art that he developed his

distinctly individual style (Berman, 1970:58). Battiss studied rock art's history and technical aspects, while doing illustrations of these paintings, never losing sight of their aesthetics (Berman, 1970:365). He was attracted to the symbolic simplicity and magical schemata of the rock paintings. He soon broke away from academic realism to modern abstraction with rock art being his main visual influence. As expected, the conservative Roworth argued that rock art had no place in the history of art and it was ridiculous to suggest that there was any comparison between it and western art (Lilla, 2004:32). Battiss was however producing works that manifested from these rock art paintings and they were on a par with international Modernist painters such as Picasso, who was also looked to African imagery for inspiration. Battiss' colour palette was bold, and very similar to that of the French Fauves, yet his context and symbolism were essentially African. *African Rocks and Figures* shows Battiss' conceptualisation and interpretations of African themes along with riotous colour compositions, *sgraffito* lines scratched into thick layers of paint, all to create a freely inscribed narrative (Berman, 1970:59). Battiss emerged during the early 1950s as South Africa's first significant abstract painter, whilst joining modern artistic groups such as the New Group, alongside Wolfe and the International Art Club. Battiss was able to showcase his work through these platforms which allowed him to challenge the conservative norms that existed within the South Africa art world of the time.

Kay (1886-1964) was an interesting artist in the sense that she initially aligned herself with Roworth's school of thought and strongly condemned modernism most her life. Like Battiss, she had her roots within traditional realism. She considered herself self-taught even though she studied at the Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin, working mainly with-

in academic tradition which placed emphasis on draughtsmanship and simple compositions. (Berman, 1970:230). After the death of her husband in 1946, her artistic practice shifted slightly towards more expressive and self-reflective paintings. During the 1940s and 1950s modernism had slowly gained popularity amongst South African artists since its introduction in the 1920s. Kay slowly began to pick up on some of the motifs and eventually made a smooth transition from traditional painting into modernism (Berman, 1970:9). In a letter Kay wrote to Marjorie Reynolds she discussed how in her new work, *The Glue Pot*, she was trying to break away from her strict academic tradition stating: "I find it so difficult to discard the shape and modelling and just think of shapes on my own – but I'm trying" (Kay, 1957). *The Glue Pot* is an example of her shift from academic tradition into a more modernist framework. She began to reimagine shapes and began looking for modernist influences, in the letter to Reynolds, she further writes how "I keep looking at the Lautrec and his rich wine reds" (Kay, 1957). The works of Post-Impressionist painter Henri De Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901) become that Modernist influence, and the colour palette in his painting *At The Moulin Rouge* (1890) (Fig.5) speaks to those wine reds Kay refers to and gives hints to the Chinese Yellow that runs through *The Glue Pot*. Her paint application was slowly shifting, and her paintings become slightly more expressive with quick handed brushstrokes that gave more texture and movement to her work. Her compositions then made full use of the canvas space, filling it with subject matter, embracing the clutter she once eliminated in her earlier works. Modern art began to influence even the most traditional of artists such as Kay. Contrary to Roworth's outlook on Modernism, his artworks spoke differently, with their subtle hints of modernism. His paintings played with the indigenous light and colour of the Cape, showing hints of Impressionism, loosened brushwork and

with the inclusion of pure, intense colours, as seen in his work *The Track of the Storm, Wynberg Flats* (1916) (Fig.6).

It was then Roworth's successor, Paris who began to include modernist works evident of Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism and Abstraction that existed within South Africa. Paris had museum experience whereas Roworth had none before taking up his position as museum director. Coming with directorship experience, Paris was on a mission to revive the I-SANG, and one aspect of that plan was to modernise and change the look of the museum through the artworks exhibited.

'Book as Exhibition'

The viewer enters into a minimal gallery space. On the walls hang four single colour prints, each of scale to the paintings and each alluding to a dominant colour that exists in the painting. Minimalist space can be intimidating to viewers as there is limited legible visual information. However the minimalist space can also spark one's curiosity, as minimalist works result in the viewer spending more time in order to experience and understand a work, forcing them to pay attention to smaller detail and to find an aspect of the space they can relate to, and make their own interpretations (Lippard & Chandler, 1968:46). Minimalist painters and sculptors also avoided overt symbolism and emotional content, but instead concerned themselves with the pure form of the material. Sol LeWitt wrote in *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*,

What the work of art looks like isn't too important. It has to look like something if it has physical form. No matter what form it may finally have it must begin with an idea. It is the process of conception and realization with which the artist is concerned

(LeWitt, 1967:14).

LeWitt's functioned as a manifesto for many minimalist and conceptual artists. This is also where *The Records Room* is rooted; it is the process of conception and realisation that is the artist's/curators' concern and the books facilitate this process.

Each of the four books sits passively on the centrally-placed table awaiting a reader. The first page in each book is the same colour as its corresponding print on the wall, creating a link between the book and the print. A book as a physical object demands a different type of engagement compared to the traditional museum object. Paintings are usually read from a certain distance due to museum regulations, often under the careful eye of a museum attendant. Viewers are rarely allowed to touch artworks within the museum, strongly limiting their direct access and the tactile nature of the painting. In contrast these physical hand-held books depend on an active reader and viewer in order to uncover the information within the book and what can be revealed about the paintings. However these do not function as traditional books; these four books function as conceptual art objects, as artist's books which facilitate interpretation, recreation and cognitive thought.

The primary visual experience of the paintings has been removed from the viewer and has rather been substituted by these books. In an abstract sense the books 'become' the paintings. The four books 'become' the exhibition, and the viewer becomes a reader. The books break down traditional boundaries and reconstruct the places and ways that the artwork could and should reach the viewers. The book has the ability to become the substitute for the paintings because it allows the reader to

recreate the painting in their mind, through the use of the archive and selective images the reader is able to piece together the painting. Rather than simply acting as a digital reproduction of the painting it rather facilitates a substitute, and facilitates a recreation of the invisible original.

In the 20th century, artist books became a sought after medium in response to the rise of dematerialization. The dematerialisation of an art object that results in conceptual and minimalist artwork, manifest when artists place more emphasis on the idea rather than the physical nature of the work. Seth Siegelaub (1941-2013) was an influential gallerist, art dealer, and curator during the 1960s who engaged with the dematerialised nature of conceptual art and how it functioned within a gallery space.

The problem lay in the fact that artist had to find a way to physically showcase work that was not a physical art object. Sol LeWitt argued that an artwork can just be an idea and never has to physically manifest (LeWitt, 1969:107). There is so much power in that, as the work no longer has physical limitations. However, it has limitations in how that 'art-idea' is exhibited. Since art doesn't have to depend on its physical presence, it still needs a solution to exhibit those ideas without distorting or altering the work's intentions. Siegelaub argued that the book was the solution:

When art does not any longer depend upon its physical presence, when it becomes an abstraction, it is not distorted and altered by its web reproduction in books becomes "PRIMARY" information while the reproduction of the prince conventional art in books and catalogues is necessary just started "SECONDRY" information When information is primary the catalogue can become the

exhibition (Meyer, 1972: XIV).

The book becomes the exhibition. Siegelau further added that the use of catalogues and books to communicate (and disseminate) art, is the most neutral means to present the new art. This new art was highly conceptual and text based, many curators and gallerists struggled to find a successful means to display text-based art. The book then acted as a means of presentation, the same way a gallery space would present art (Siegelau, 1969:37). Siegelau began to publish artist exhibitions within books, such as the *Xerox Book*, 1968 (Fig.7). The book consisted of seven Xerox photocopy works by Carl André, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Lawrence Weiner and Robert Morris, who were each given 25 pages and asked to respond to the format (Dyment, 2012). The book was conceived by Siegelau as an exhibition in print. Another example was Siegelau's *January 5-31, 1969* which was a group show he organized after completing the *Xerox Book*. It was Siegelau's first group exhibition in which the catalogue was the primary manifestation of the project (Museum of Modern Art. nd). According to Siegelau's sketch of the exhibitions floor plan (Fig.8) the exhibition functioned within two rooms. The catalogue was exhibited in the front room on a coffee table at the entryway to the second room where the artworks were displayed. It shows his minimal curatorial approach to the exhibition as the catalogues and book were the focus. The concept of the book as the exhibition was highly influential and one can find echoes in other modernist art movements of the late 20th century such as Dadaism, Surrealism and Fluxus. One aspect of the 'book as exhibition' that is still apparent in the contemporary, is the catalogue. It was in the 1960s where books were being produced by artists or galleries as an extension of an exhibition, also giving rise to the hybrid genre of the catalogue as

artists' books. (Drucker, 1996:12). In the contemporary it has become a mandatory practice for any exhibition to have a catalogue. It adds legitimacy to the exhibition. Just as where Siegelau argues that the book can become an exhibition, a portable exhibition, superseding the exhibition once it has closed as an art document. A form of documentation with photographs and text has now stood in for the physical curation. Robert Morgan argues that "if art can be reduced to selected images and texts, the presentation of these elements could then be read directly as art" (Morgan, 1991:343).

Siegelau used the term 'demystification' in order to establish the shift in exhibition production conditions and curatorial norms (O'Neill & Siegelau, 2006:5). Exhibitions become critically engaging, revealing and displaying art in way that it challenges the viewer and traditional institutional curatorial standards. This 'demystification' functions in the same way in *The Records Room* whereby the artworks are not displayed according to their predisposed museum convention; instead the works are displayed as a form of books, revealing the museum's hidden functions and knowledge. There is a treasure-trove of knowledge that exists within these 'records rooms' and basements within museums that remain hidden to the general public. The documents chosen not only refer to the physical paintings themselves, but also include information on each artist. The artists' books include biographies, archival documents such as correspondence letters, informal personal letters, text on the artist's practice and exhibition information; all of this is information that exists within the records of the gallery and library. These documents not only give the reader a contextual understanding of how the work is produced, but it also acts as a reminder that people create these works.

Once a work is hung on the gallery wall, the provenance is often disregarded. The artists' books aim to hint at the 'back-story' and to the ongoing relationship the museum has with the artist and their practice. When the audience passively walks through the museum they are unaware of the activity that happens within the museum. Thus when the artworks are hung on the walls are treated in the same way. Even though museums are public spaces, there are also spaces within the museum that are off-limits to the general public, blocked by their "staff only" or "private" signs. It is what happens behind the scenes within a museum, and their inner functions that define the museum, yet they become these sacred spaces filled with the inaccessible knowledge of artworks and the museum, which are only visible to a select few. *The Records Room* is not only about creating an active viewer, but also about giving the viewer brief access into the hidden world of the museum.

The information contained in these sacred museum spaces reveals the history of the museum, not only generally speaking, but the history of all its inner functions, such as its collection, its directorship, staff, funding, meeting minutes, exhibitions, restorations, consignments, and all the aspects that allow for the museum function. When this type of information is included within the artists' books they reveal to the reader that there are finer details at play within the museum. They reveal when the works were acquired and by whom, and whether it was from the artists themselves. They also reveal whether or not the works had previously been damaged or restored. This type of information adds to the contextual value of the works, so they do not just become physical formal art objects but it enhances with information both conceptually and historically. *The Records Room* aligns itself with the aim to 'demystify' the museum and its sacred spaces by making them accessible through the use of

archival text and image based documentation to viewers within the creative space of the exhibition.

In *The Records Room*, the artists' books create a dialogue between the artworks and their presence within the museum archives and library, a relationship between the painting and its texts that creates a visual narrative within their pages. The artists' book as an alternative art form can also exist outside the gallery and museum structures. (Drucker, 1996:70) The books provide a platform which invites responses and demystifies the museum's archives. The paintings escape their physical limitations through their textual reinterpretation, however, they are reinterpreted within the limitations of the museum archive.

The museum prescribes a particular value onto the artworks in their collections, whether it is a cultural, aesthetic, investment or historical value. It is through this value that museums influence how these works are viewed by the public. There is a hierarchical system that is maintained within museums and galleries where there is often resistance to art shifting from its traditional identity because of the historic and culture value the artworks hold. This is however, dependent upon the institutions' understanding of experience-as-art, aesthetics-as-art, and even investments-as-art (Burn, I. 1970:189).

For the I-SANG these four paintings hold those values as they are works of highly accomplished artists both locally and internationally, who were breaking the conservative artistic moulds that existed within South Africa at the time. The documents within the artists' books reveal elements of those inscribed values as seen in the acquisitions meetings. It gives reasoning for why they should exist within the museum collection and

the value they would add, the minutes also reveal the initial monetary value of the works, showing that there is certainly an element of investments-as-art involved.

Within Conceptual art the use of documentation such as the acquisitions meeting minutes and correspondence letters as an art material, developed from their interest in language and information as an art form. As Conceptual art evolved it started to reach its peak in dematerialization. Rather than the artist producing a traditional art object, the artist's ideas were embedded through the semiotic qualities of the written language (Atkinson, 1972: 9-10). Ian Burns and other conceptual artists such as Sol LeWitt and Charles Harrison, were exploring language to create access to alternative ways of seeing and thinking about art. Perception is no longer a direct and unified act; through language, it has become fragmented and dispersed (Burn, I. 1969:110). For example Burn's conceptual art piece *No object implies the existence of any other* (1967) (Fig. 9), the work consists of a text placed across a framed mirror that read "*no object implies the existence of any other*", which reflects back to the viewer, inviting the viewer to reflect on their own subjectivity. There was a strong impulse within Conceptual art that the work's power resides in the idea rather than representations of the world. This notion of not needing a physical art object challenged art in ways that audiences and art critics did not expect (Meecham & Sheldon, 2005: 17).

The Conceptual art group *Art & Language* took the written word to its limits, wherein their minimal approach allowed them the means of meeting art and language. (Harrison, 2001: 49). Through their engagement with materials such as paper, books and gallery walls, the group was using language as the material of art, rather than a means to simply speak

about art, so it became the art. The actions of *Art & Language* were often misinterpreted as being hostile towards art due to its lack of traditional subject matter and their text based works often critiqued the very art world they were in, questioning the form and function that art should take through the Conceptual art movement (Meecham & Sheldon, 2000: 17).

Language is so familiar when used as a form of oral and written communication, that when it is made to function within the context of an art form, audiences are left unsure how to respond to this new form of written language as art. Language became a powerful conceptual art medium, as it demands cognitive engagement rather than passive glances at the work. As in the case of Burn's *No object implies the existence of any other*, the text creates the platform for an active viewer to question what they are viewing and how it functions as an artwork. Since Conceptual artists were focused more on the idea rather than form, language gave them an accessible means of presenting both simple and complex ideas to viewers, no longer restricted to the limitations that exist in traditional physical art objects.

The four artists' books within *The Records Room* function on the same premise whereby the text within the archival documentation allows for the exchange of ideas and contexts about the paintings and the artworks that purely formal visual forms could not easily communicate. Language and text allows for an alternative viewing experience where the viewer and reader is a creator rather than a bystander of the art. North American Conceptual artists such as Lawrence Weiner and Douglas Huebler also questioned the role of museums and galleries in the promotion of art, its market status, and its relationship with the audience (Ramirez,

1995: 550). The idea that art needs to be experienced in order to extract an idea or underlying intellectual scheme as well as to perceive its formal essence continues from the opposing formalist premise that painting and sculpture should be looked at as objects per se, rather than as references to other images and representation (Lippard & Chandler, 1968:49).

When works of art, like words, are signs that convey ideas, they are not things in themselves, but symbols or representations of things. Such a work is a medium rather than an end in itself or “art-as-art.” The medium need not be the message. Lippard refers to some ultra-conceptual art of George Brecht’s Fluxus inspired ‘happenings’, Allan Kaprow’s ‘assemblages’, Bruce Nauman’s early self-starring video works, and works by Robert Smithson, Richard Long, Joseph Kosuth and Vito Acconci, who seem to declare that the conventional art media are no longer adequate as media to be messages in themselves (Lippard & Chandler, 1968:49).

Joseph Kosuth was one of the most influential conceptual artists. His practice has made use of books, documentation, text and language, favouring the idea over form, which challenges the viewer’s engagement with art objects. Artists have made use of the documentary potential of the book form, while others have engaged with the more subtle and complicated fact of the book’s capacity to be a highly versatile form of expression (Drucker, 1996:9). Kosuth’s 1970 *Information Room* (Fig. 10), was a reading room display made up of two long wooden tables piled high with paperbacks from his library at the time. It included texts dealing with linguistic philosophy, structural anthropology, and psycho-analytic theory along with stacks of New York newspapers. *Information Room* is significant in making use of a interactive discursive installa-

tion format where the work only exists through public engagement. In a 1970 New York Times review of the work, the title read “Don’t Just Stand There—Read!” it was that interaction that *Information Room* demanded by providing viewers with chairs and tables filled with reading material to share in the artist’s investigation.

The material within *Information Room* and within *The Records Room* artists’ books include the artist’s preliminary imagery and text, which refers to their practice, and this includes, sketches, models, studies, notes and conversations, all of which are important information that adds to the context of the artist and their practise in term of their style, thought process and methodology. LeWitt wrote that the objects that show the thought process of the artist are sometimes more interesting than the final product (LeWitt, 14), this is because of that contextual information it provides and it is conventionally an aspect of an artwork that is rarely seen by viewers. The aim of *The Records Room* is to expand the viewer’s ability to engage with the paintings within the realm of text and cognitive thought using the medium of the book, and more specifically the artist’s book.

The Records Room focuses more on Conceptual artists appropriation of the book as an art form, where it was the most apt means of recording and disseminating their ideas, theories, diagrams or drawings, or to embody their artworks. At this time many artists were also concerned with writing –as art, or about art, and thus, they too were led naturally to use the book form (Phillpot, 1985:99). These four paintings have now been translated into these minimalist black books, like many artist’s books their aim is to communicate imaginative spectacles and to create a way to redefine aesthetic experience (Kostelanetz, 1985:29). In 1985 Lucy

Lippard argued that the book can be “an artwork on its own and acts as a portable exhibition that encapsulates ideas and images” (Lippard, 1985: 47). The book provides the audience with first-hand experience, providing a more intimate communication compared with traditional art objects.

Artists’ books are predominately created by artists themselves, however within *The Records Room* the books are compiled by a curator. According to Marcel Duchamp it is an artist’s book if it is made by an artist, or if an artist declares it to be one (Lippard, 1985: 53). Linking back to Siegelau’s term of ‘demystification’ and his aim to create a shift in exhibition production, whereby curators were beginning to make visible the mediating component within the formation and production of an exhibition (O’Neil, 13). This gave curators more agency and creative licence within exhibition spaces, shifting away from the norm of curator as administrator and mediator into the role of artist; ‘curator as artist’ (O’Neil, 21). ‘Curator as artist’ looks at an exhibition as art, whereby the space, objects and the exhibition become artist mediums for artistic interpretation. It is through these mediums that the ‘curator as artist’ is able to construct new narratives through and with exhibiting narratives. *The Records Room* functions on the same premise, with the agency of the ‘curator as artist’ the archive material becomes an artistic medium to create new and engaging narratives through the use of artists’ books.

Most artists’ books are produced shoestring budget by the artist themselves. They are an inexpensive means to produce unique art objects. They are low maintenance, relatively long-lived, free floating objects with the capacity to convey a great deal of information, and serve as a vehicle to communicate far beyond the limits of an individual life or con-

cepts. (Drucker, 1996:8). *The Records Room* artists' books are not produced to be physically precious art objects, unlike the paintings, which are these precious, fragile objects, all resonating with the value that the museum places on them, and which limits their accessibility. Historically artist's books were not these precious objects, but rather function as an alternative visual vehicle for artist's ideas and concepts. This once again following a Conceptual art's methodology, whereby the formal entity of the work comes second to the ideas, and thus the artwork exists rather through ideas. The books remove the value the museums places on the physical painting. Rather the books are minimalist, low cost, hand bound books. The books are no longer precious, intimidating objects and this makes them more accessible to readers.

Curators seek to find new and alternative ways of showcasing artworks and information in ways whereby viewers can critically engage with and the book. Referring once again to Siegelau's notion of the 'book as exhibition', these books exist not as mere reproductions of the paintings, but are new articulations through their documentation. The artists' books act as a curatorial intervention in the SANG's painting collection and historical archive. The use of documentation as an art material has its roots embedded in Conceptual art as in works by Rosemarie Castoro's 1970 *Eclipse* (Fig.11) and Hans Haacke's 1971 *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*(Fig.12). Haacke's work interrogates issues of gentrification that started to emerge within New York, making use of selective photography and Real Estate documentation to bring the issue to the public. Douglas Huebler's 1969 *Location Piece #2* (Fig.13). Huebler's work was an artist book in the form of several series of photographs, maps, drawings, and descriptive language. The combinations of the documentation

and imagery were used to create an alternative view of New York City. Huebler's works, similar to *The Records Room*, uses various elements to construe and recreate the whole, as in this case, a painting or a city. The documentation was strongly text-based in Huebler's work, where he argues that "people deny words have anything to do with art. I don't accept that. They do. Art is a source of information" (Huebler, 1972:137). It is through the use of language that Huebler is able to articulate narratives and elements of the city that images cannot. Huebler's work is concerned with determining the form of art when the role traditionally played by visual experience is mitigated or eliminated. The visual experience now functions as a document that exists to serve as a structural part of a conceptually cognitive system (Huebler, 1972:137).

Artist Lawrence Weiner (born 1942) produced artists' books consisting of typography along with corresponding images. Language was fundamental to his practice. He felt confined by the mediums of sculpture and painting, and so he chose to create artists' books and immersed his practice within the medium of film, which he saw as insubstantial and repetitive. Author Issa Maria Benitez Duenas speaks about the physical nature of the book as a vehicle of written language that provides a sense of intimacy and so it is not only an object of interpretation but also of experience. (Duenas, 2003:299). That intimate relationship which is created between the work and the reader is vastly different to the general experience of visually viewing an exhibition which can be distant at times. The four paintings by Battiss, Stern, Kay and Wolfe within *The Records Room* were traditionally focused on their evocative visuals, but are now concealed in favour of the texts and administrative documents which track each painting's history in the museum archive. Texts and documents have a history in the manifestos of the earliest *avant-garde*

movement, to concrete poetry and later conceptual art and art theory. These texts demonstrate the central role that language has come to play within the development of the visual arts. Here the four paintings are reconstructed through fragmentations, and each document, image and text within the book reveals something else about the painting.

The books create an experience for the viewer and reader, and therefore release their control over an idea, making the reader an active participant rather than a passive receiver. The reader now holds the power. By reading the artists' books, the reader is able to determine their form and even the destruction of the art idea (Bury, 2003:3). The authorial hand continually shifts through the exhibition. Roland Barthes' 1968 *What is an Author?* challenges the idea of the author with his intention and as personality, as an individual existing prior to the texts production, and independent of those texts. . There is the notion that authorship resides in texts, rather than in the being of the writer. In reference to the exhibition, the authorship resides in the texts: ie the documents, information and visual fragments of the individual paintings, rather than the formal painting. Barthes use the term 'author-function' which is a function which emerges only when the text is being read, and this is when the author is created. In this case, the reader becomes the author and creator. The author-function emphasizes the role of reader/viewer, turning the reader into an active producer, rather than a passive receiver (Drucker, 1994:127).

The advantage of using text is limitless in interpretation. The text is can be read and freely interpreted by the reader. *The Records Room* books house these texts and it is the power of the reader's mind and imagination, which brings the paintings to life with their limitless interpreta-

tion. The texts never provide a stagnant image of the paintings and the images are ever evolving with every turn of the books' pages. Thus the reader's mind keeps constructing this painting with every new piece of information revealed in the texts. It is also about taking the time to engage with these books in the imagined curatorial model that the project is based on. This echoes the standard practices attached to reading any literature. if the reader opens the book at page 45 and only reads the one page they will only experience a fragment of the book's entirety, and he will receive only a fragment of its overall message. The same applies to the artists' books. LeWitt further emphasizes that it doesn't really matter if the viewer understands the artist's initial intentions. Once out of his hands the artist has no control over the way a viewer will perceive the work. Different people will understand the same thing in a different way. (LeWitt, 1967:14). By articulating the work through documentation and written accounts the painting can now be read through the museum's records.

The Records Room's aim is to create a more active viewing experience. The books are then essentially reproductions of the painting in an abstract sense. In Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, he argues how mechanical reproduction diminishes the viewer's experience. Benjamin's argument had its roots within formalist thinking, as he gave greater power to the physical form of the artwork rather than to its content (Rollins, 2014). The authority of the object, its value and weight derives from tradition. Benjamin placed 'aura' within this traditional physical realm, stating that aura is a "unique phenomenon of a distance however close it may be" (Benjamin, 1935:21, 24). 'Aura' can only exist within an original work of art and is created through the viewer's unique one-time experience of the artwork,

along with the works inaccessibility and the desire of ownership.

Mechanical reproductions of famous artworks have changed the way we imagine them in our daily lives. According to Benjamin these reproductions would diminish the aura, removing its uniqueness and authenticity and in turn the aesthetic experience. Benjamin does refer to the reproduction in terms of photographic reproductions that are dispersed to the public. In *The Records Room* the term 'reproduction' is applied in a very abstract manner to a wide range of practices related to the painting as the primary visual referent. The paintings are reproduced but not in the physical sense, as they have not been photographed and then dispersed. The paintings are rather reproduced through their archival documentation and not dispersed, but rather still kept singular, as original artists' books. Yes, the original aura of the paintings has been lost, but an alternative aura is created through the artists' books.

The paintings still exist within their documentation and the aura exists differently within each book. Benjamin only saw the aura function within formalist tradition, and neglected to see aura within the cognitive realm. Even though these documents and images are themselves digital reproductions, their value and aura is focused not on the physical document but rather on how that document functions and what it reveals. The books aimed to liberate the paintings from their formal limitations where new meanings and traditions are created. 'Aura' can exist within these books, as their aura is generated by mystique, and a sense of changed presence. They gain meaning just from their presence, through their iconography and their materiality. (Drucker, 1996:93). Through the book the aura can exist now within a cognitive realm created by Conceptual art traditions.

Many Conceptual artworks are based within a linguistic structure similar to *The Records Room* artists' books, and they are reimagined when they are experienced by the reader. There is still a "one-time experience" of the artwork created through the intimacy of reading the books, where the artwork now exists within the imagination of the reader. The inaccessibility of the artwork also still exists, if not more so. Since the artwork is no longer physical but in an imaginative form, it becomes even more impossible to possess or value.

An artwork's aura, value, intention, interpretation and context shifts between the artist, the museum and the viewers, where each artwork is experienced differently. Within *The Records Room* the four paintings are curated in an unconventional way to provide the viewer with an alternative understanding of these paintings and how they exist within the museum and providing a voyeuristic view into the inner functions of the museum and its collections. Viewers become readers, paintings become text and passive becomes active. Expanding the limitations of interpretation, these paintings already exist within the mind, however, they are limited by their physicality within the formal visual language of painting. The artworks can only serve mind within those formal limitation (Atkinson, 1972: 17). The paintings now exist through their documentation, deconstructed in the intimate form of a book. They are then continually being recreated by each individual active reader who takes on the role of author. *The Records Room* books become the exhibition. A curated gallery spaces functions in the same way as the 'book as exhibition'. It is there to showcase artworks, provide viewers with information and give viewers the opportunity to critically and imaginatively engage with the gallery space and the artworks. Thus the reader replaces the original role of the artist, with the reader recreating the art form anew.

Reference Images



Figure 1

Walter Battiss. *African Rocks and Figures*. 1958. Oil on canvas. 81 x 101 cm. Cape Town: Iziko South African National Gallery Collection.



Figure 2

Irma Stern. Girl with Recorder. 1951. Oil on Board. 82 x 38 cm. Cape Town: Iziko South African National Gallery Collection.



Figure 3

Dorothy Kay. *The Glue Pot*. 1951. Oil on canvas. 44.5 x 34.5 cm. Cape Town: Iziko South African National Gallery Collection.



Figure 4

Edward Wolfe. *Aishia*. 1938. Oil on Canvas. 91.5 x 73 cm. Cape Town: Iziko South African National Gallery Collection.



Figure 5

Henri De Toulouse-Lautrec. *At The Moulin Rouge*. 1892-1895. Oil on Canvas. 1.23 x 1.41 m. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago.

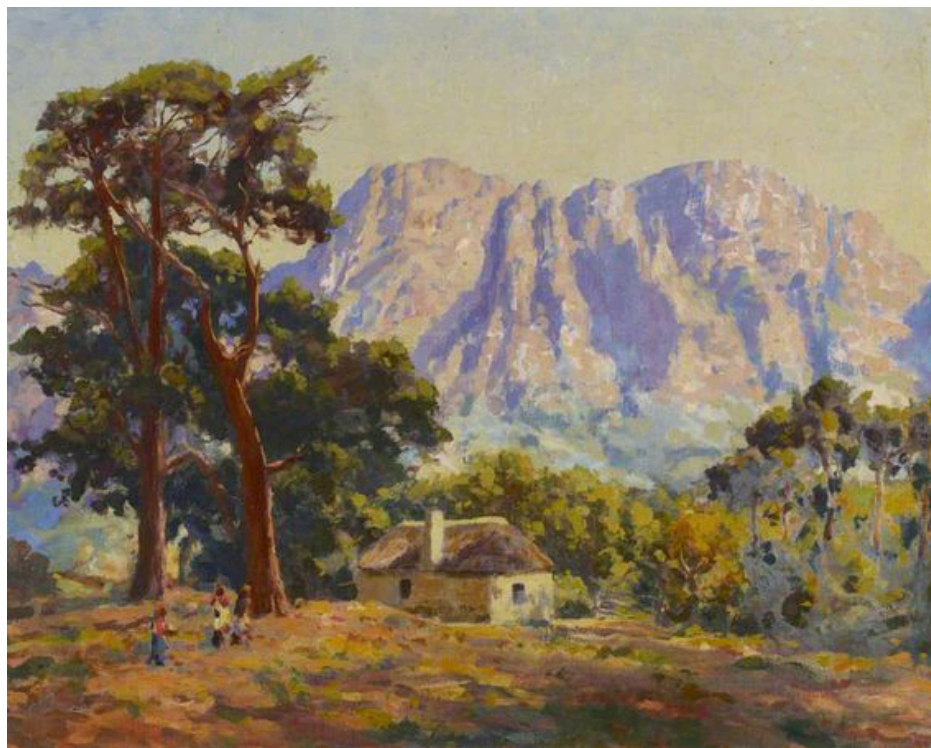


Figure 6

Edward Roworth. *The Track of the Storm, Wynberg Flats*. 1916. Oil on canvas. 44.5 x 60 cm. Private Collection.

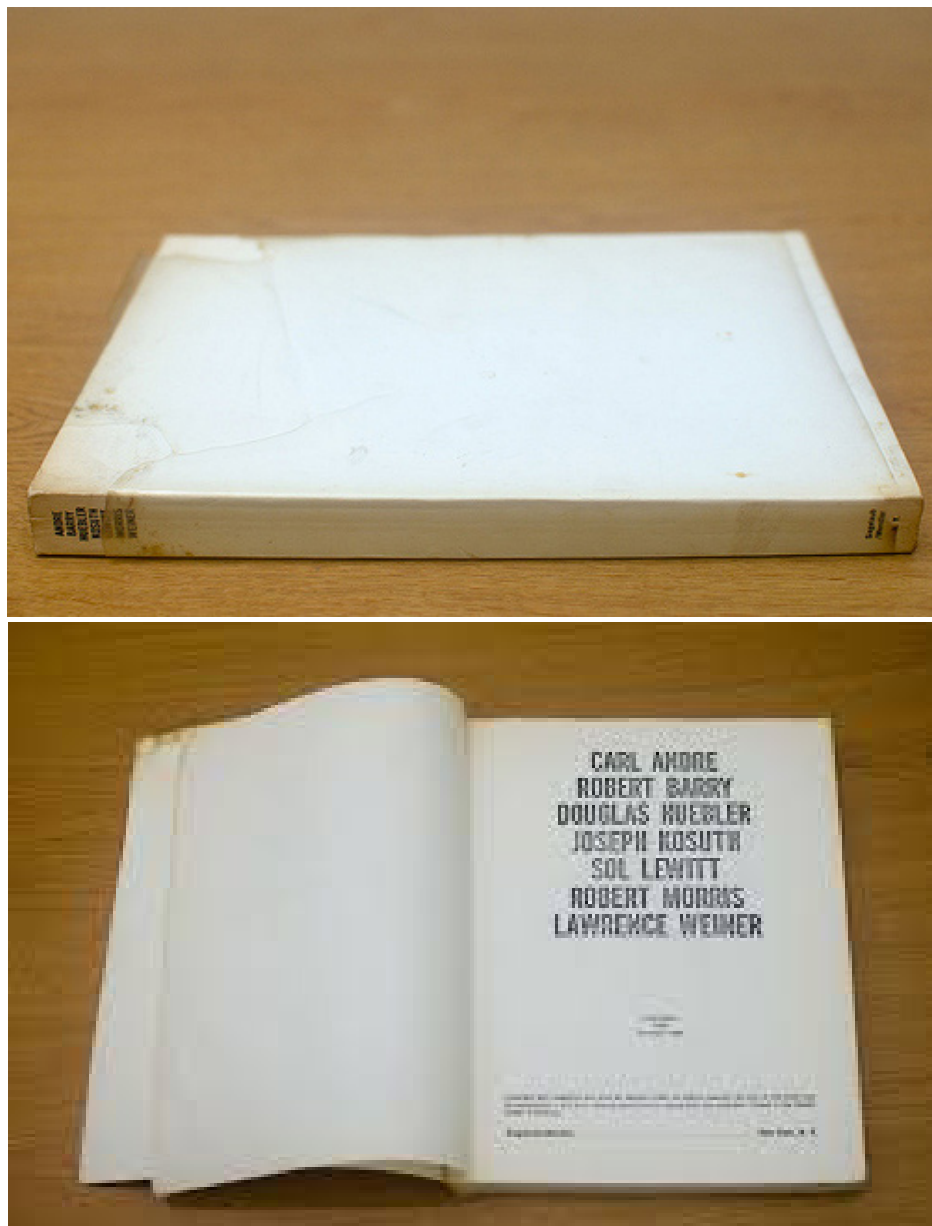


Figure 7

Seth Siegelaub. *Xerox Book*. 1969. 21.27 x 26.98 cm. 190 pages. New York: The Museum of Modern Art Archives.

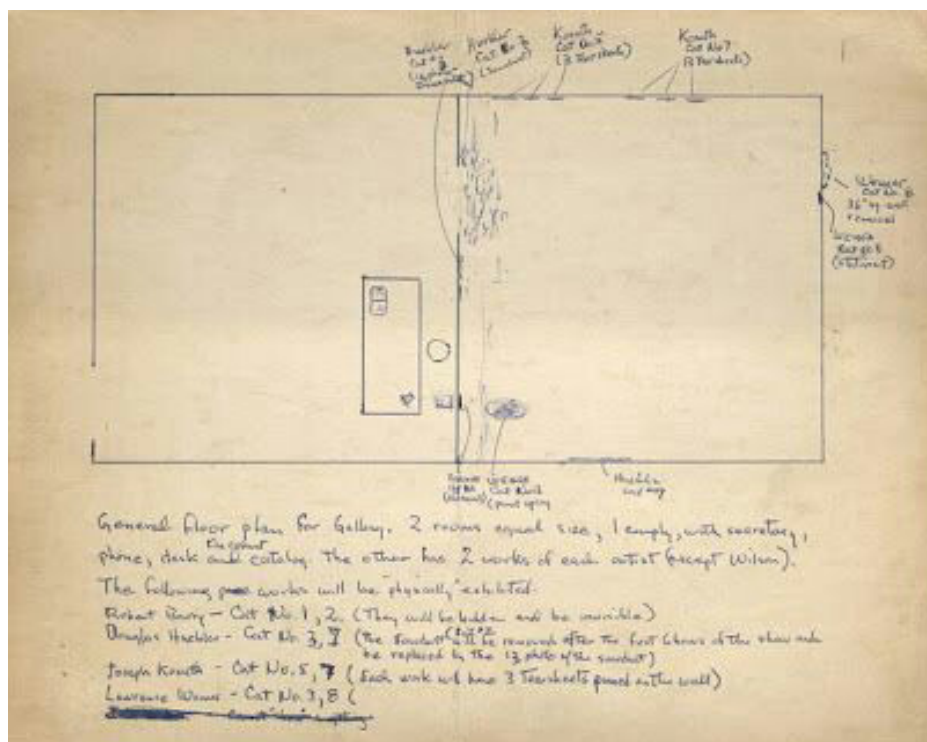


Figure 8

Seth Siegelau's gallery floor plan of January 5-31, 1969. 1968-69. New York: The Museum of Modern Art Archives.



Figure 9

Ian Burns. *No object implies the existence of any other*. 1967. Synthetic polymer paint on wood, mirror, lettering. 64.5 x 64.5 x 3.0 cm frame. Rudy Komon Memorial Fund 1990.





Figure 10

Kosuth. *Information Room*. 1970. Tables, chairs, newspapers, books.
Dimensions variable.

Eclipse
6:43 AM March 7, 1970

<u>Minutes</u>	<u>Activity</u>
0-6/41	From IRT local train brushing past to stop further up the depot to Grand Central Station
0-12/9	From traveling with your wife \$34.76 to thirty minutes from now
0-2/52	I like mine black to whosoever is first
0-4/41	From breakfast start to the thrill is gone
0-10/13½	From fatty and sticky sweet to frere jacques
0-21/35	How do you spell frere jacques to ticket punch
0-8/29	From diminishing obelisks through graveyards to cutting through lush green vines to find the temple steps for our picnic
0-19/32	From hot wetness through a universal like time to Stamford Connecticut
0-12/25	From gate slam to killing the cockroach in the middle of the square floor
0-12/52	From watering the trough of the inner path to history is the evidence of activity
0-0	From the reflection of the other side of the train in the near window on my left to sitting in the dining car drinking over-brewed coffee
0-20/14	From the red dot redder on the outside yellow inside orange pushing out through waiting on a slant to pass by three small windows flash green from on going train to stepping from one point to the other
0-12/13	From an accumulation of finite points to return to coach seat

<u>minutes</u>	<u>Activity</u>
0-14/22	From return home through crossing a frozen pond and meeting friends to passing through to leave a note no soap radio
0-19/3	From 11:30 hurtling towards the eclipse passing piles of rusty metals through rain spattered dusty windows to the truth is right underneath my fingernail
0-17/4	From finding the truth through searching it out by reading words and believing in signs expressing my state of being
6/48	From teeth gritting relax to return frozen marshes uncrossed ponds holding on to time I'm the philosopher you are the navigator where is the place yet to come?
0-7/10	From on going that's where irrevocably irrepressibly irretrievably
0-7/31	From 12:20 bringing it to them don't let them in yet we are gathering it all together we may just thrust it out the door and close it fast Goethe's girlfriend was not Mephistopheles Dante had Beatrice but who did Goethe have?
0-13	From 12:30 PM cloud darkening snow patched forest to why bother crossing ponds? It's all on your side anyway. Hey you with your head in the trunk of your car. Would you pay me to take another train trip to Boston?
0-1/6	From dumping ground to arrival in Boston
0-29/35	From ecktachrome slides snatches of color through the darkness of the station under ground

Figure 11

Rosemarie Castoro. *Eclipse*. From catalogue of *Art in the Mind* Exhibition, 1970. Edited by Athena T. Spear. Allen Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio.

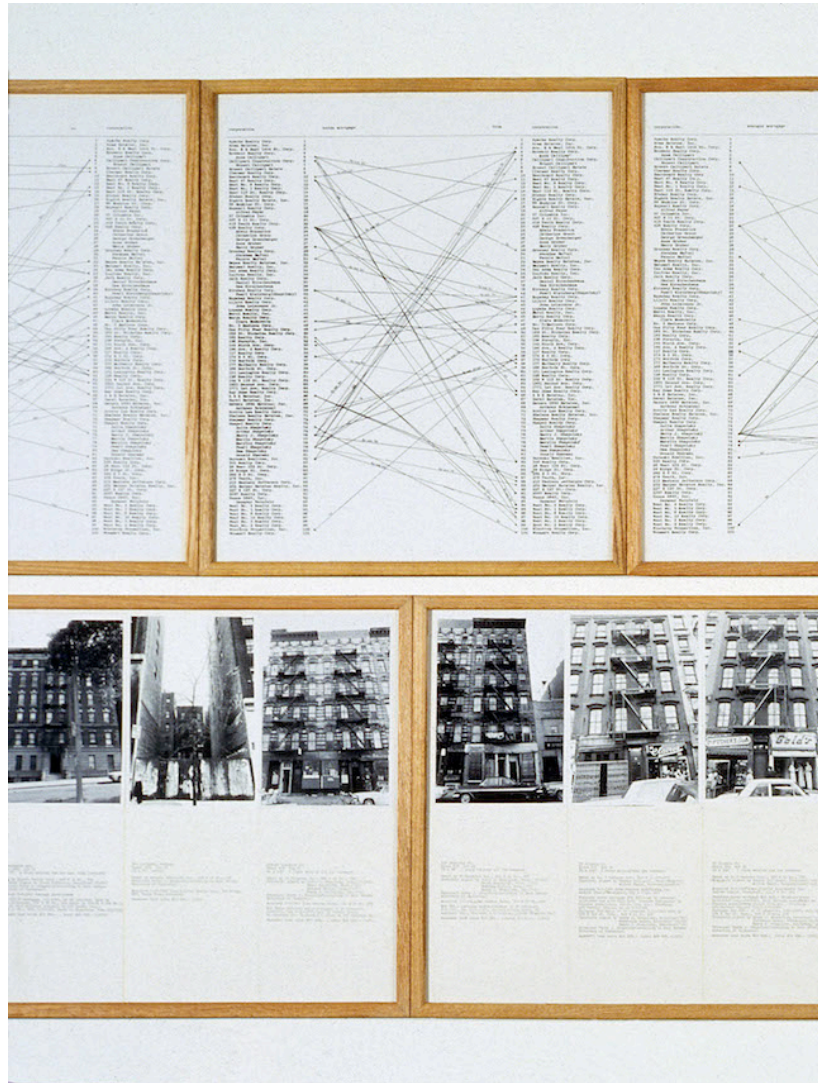
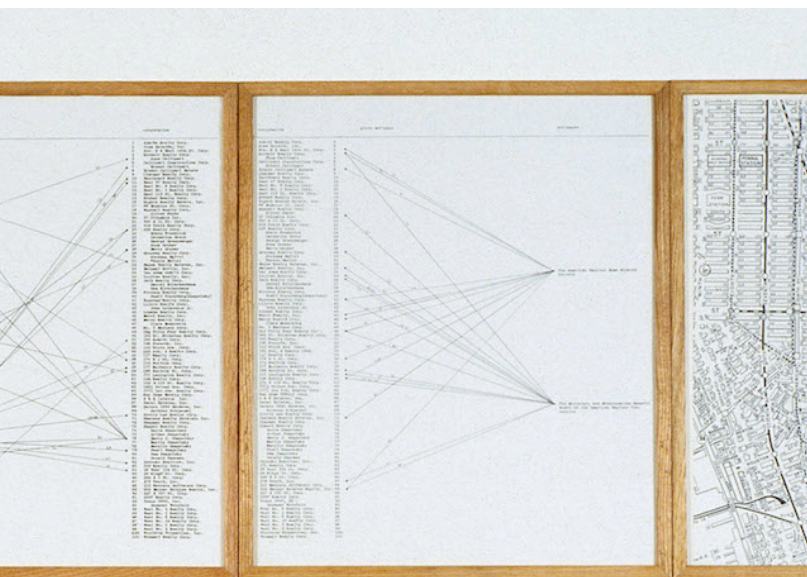


Figure 12

Hans Haacke. *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (detail). 1971.

Edition 1 of 2: Paris: Collection of Centre Pompidou. Edition 2 of 2: Barcelona: MACBA and New York: Whitney Museum of American Art.



Location Piece #2

New York City - Seattle, Washington

In New York and Seattle an area was arbitrarily selected within which a person in each city photographed places that he, or she, felt could be characterized as being (1) "frightening" (2) "erotic" (3) "transcendent" (4) "passive" (5) "fevered" and (6) "muffled".

Within each area each person made two entirely different sets of six photographs after which all four sets were sent to a third person (the artist) with no information that would make it possible to key any one of the photographs with any one of the words originally specified. The four sets (24 photographs) were then scrambled altogether and 12 of these arbitrarily selected for this piece; to those were added 4 photographs that had not been made to characterize any kind of place.

16 photographs, a Xerox map of New York and another of Seattle join with this statement to constitute the form of this piece.

Douglas Huebler

July, 1969

Figure 13

Douglas Huebler. *Location piece #2, New York City-Seattle, Washington from Artists & Photographs*. 1969. 17.8 x 17.8 cm.

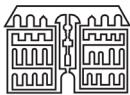
1969 Courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.

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Iziko South African National Gallery



Michaelis School of Fine Art



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