Seth Siegelaub interviewed by **John Slyce**

The **Playmaker**

Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner: the four participating artists in the 'January 5-31, 1969' exhibition organised and published by Seth Siegelaub in New York

John Slyce: *Could you say something about the particular context of New York in 1965-66?*

Seth Siegelaub: Firstly, a rich, developed, capitalist country exports its culture more easily than a poor country. I mean, that's part of its power, to be able to impose its vision of the world on the rest of the world.

There were other, contingent factors: the rise of technological communication media in general – an important new sector in capitalist society which was in the process of replacing manufacturing. Much of the international success of, say, Abstract Expressionism and postwar American art had to do with the success of the US. Europe was battered by the war and the need to rebuild, and the US was able to exploit that. Its cultural institutions, which include the

Museum of Modern Art, were in a position to export art and a lot of the exhibitions that came over to Europe from the US were encouraged, in one way or another, by fiscal incentives or subsidies during the Cold War.

These were some of the factors backgrounding our activity, or my activity. Another one, of course – quite conjunctional – was the Vietnam War, and the student uprisings in the US and Europe which created a critical atmosphere that opened up the possibilities for what is today called 'institutional critique', concerning the role of institutions and to what degree, if any, artists should collaborate with them in a world that divided rich and poor, oppressors and oppressed. So my art world activities all fitted into that framework or context.

The questions opened up by these contemporary problems were reflected in responses to, for example, concerns about art as object and as commodity, the permanence of the art object, the one visual canon, and what makes a work of art 'ownable' or not 'ownable'.

One should keep in mind that it was the period of Marshall McLuhan's 'the medium is the message' and the idea of the 'global village'. This is something that is, in a way, in the process of being realised today with the internet, and with the same kind of images of a free world with everyone communicating – happy, happy, happy – when in reality it is controlled by very few people, but it is made to seem like some kind of revolutionary possibility. Which, to a certain degree, it is: but in a way that is similar to Brecht's analysis of the radio as a medium of propaganda, as opposed to a medium of communication between people.

So all these questions were floating around in the air and each artist, in his or her own way, took the ball and ran with it.

JS: *How did you come into contact with what would become your 'stable': Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Lawrence Weiner.*

SS: That's a relatively easy one – particularly in retrospect. I met Lawrence Weiner, then I met Joseph Kosuth through Lawrence, and then Carl Andre and then Bob Barry and then Doug Huebler. Curiously enough, by way of history here, Doug was introduced to me via Dore Ashton.

And so this nucleus developed, little by little. Each artist in his own way. But obviously the interaction between them led to a breakdown of what their work had been before. It was the beginnings of that kind of art: there was Daniel Buren in France, Germano Celant and Arte Povera in Italy, so what we were doing wasn't totally unique. It is just what we did. All I would do is try to organise interesting exhibitions, and I usually had very close connections with the artists I was working with.

I had a gallery for a while on 56th Street in New York. 'For a while' means about a year and a half. One should remember that at that time the art world was relatively small, there was relatively little gallery traffic. It was barely possible to make money making art unless you were very rich to begin with, or your father was Matisse, or you were connected to a very rich or well-known family or something.

So, besides the fact that it was hardly a way to make a living, it was extremely boring because you just sort of sat down and did an exhibition, and then you'd have an opening and give people drinks and all that stuff – and I really didn't like it. Although I did some interesting exhibitions – this isn't an auto-critique or something – I wasn't cut out to be a salesman. I really didn't have a feel for that, and I really didn't want to approach my relationship to art as that of a dealer.

Although I was still closely attached to a small group of artists, after the gallery closed in the spring of 1966 my role gradually broadened and developed into what would now be called an 'independent curator', but I was still very attached to a certain aesthetic, a certain approach to art. In other words, I started out being closely associated and working with four or five artists, and then it became a little bigger, and the exhibitions became more general, more international. The special issue of *Studio International* in 1969, for instance, involved me asking other people to do the selecting. In a way, I just wanted to get away from the problem of selecting great artists. And I wanted to deal with the whole framework, or how society gets the artists it deserves.

JS: *But that's a shift that was being played out in the work as well, from work to frame. So in a sense you were following or moving along with what the artists were doing.*

SS: Yes, exactly. There was definitely an interaction there. I suppose I thought of myself as a playmaker – like in basketball. Again, not to be a dealer, I never had much success from doing that. Some people do it very well – but not me.

In any case I had a definite predilection towards printing and publishing. That is something that has carried me through my whole life. But at the beginning, I never thought of myself as a publisher. Books were just vehicles, in the way that space was a vehicle for a traditional gallery. But later in my life, after I left the art world sometime in 1971, and moved to Europe in 1972 where I started political publishing and critical research, it became clear that I really liked publishing books.

But publishing also had a specific role vis-à-vis the kind of art that was being produced by these artists – that was a very important nexus. So that's my trajectory, or at least how I see it 40 years later. I didn't start out thinking that we were revolutionaries. It was just another kind of art confronting what I considered – or rather what we considered – basic issues concerning the nature of art, the relationship of producer to the consumer, and all these kinds of questions. Although we theorised about what we were doing, the dramatic impact the work had probably only became clear 20 or 30 years later. And part of that dramatic impact is related to the next generation of people who, in their own way, picked up on it.

JS: *And what is your reading of that reception?*

SS: I don't really feel it in the first degree. Apparently, the work has had a very great influence on a great range of art; I think one of the great strands of history, including art history, is this kind of influence through generations. I've become aware of it – probably more so because I'm so distant from the daily life of the art world. I mean, I have art I admire, I go to the Venice Biennale. Occasionally I give a lecture. But I don't really follow what's happening.

JS: *What prompted you to reply to Benjamin Buchloh's essay in that first survey 'L'art conceptuale: une perspective' in 1989 at the Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris?*

SS: Buchloh, who I consider – who considers himself – to be a man of progressive intention, wrote a hermeneutically sealed, ahistorical, traditional text which was totally lacking in any feel for the period. That is why I felt compelled to respond. I also felt that his treatment of Joseph (say what one will about Joseph – he is an important figure in all of this) was not very fair.

JS: *It was important, I suppose, that the show took place in Europe?*

SS: There is nothing surprising about that whatsoever. Most of the interest in the work – in the context of institutions and collectors and money to finance projects – came from Europe. It's only in recent times that there have been one or two exhibitions, particularly at MoCA, Los Angeles, that focused specifically on the project – although one shouldn't forget the 'Information' show in New York at MoMA in 1970. It wasn't a total void, but there was – and still is – a remarkable disinterest in this period in the US.

But to get back to Buchloh's specific text – although I was involved with a certain group of people in New York, there was certainly activity in Europe. I had some contact with it, but I certainly wasn't the same kind of motor

or force that I was in New York. And there was also Latin America, where things were going on, too, which I had relatively little to do with. And there were antecedents in Japan. I think one of the reasons, perhaps, for the relative success of the group of people I was involved with had to do as much with the power of American capitalism as with anything else.

JS: *What was your take on Alex Alberro's book,* The Politics of Publicity?
SS: He's done more hardcore research into that period than anybody. That is very important because many of the critics who were active at the time are no longer really interested in it. From what I understand of the book, Alex thinks of me as some kind of advertising super-promoter. But he's part of that generation which values the ability to generate publicity and what would now be called 'merchandising' and, of course, I've never really seen myself as an advertising genius promoting artists. I think I do have a certain awareness of the mechanics of the art world and I do try to work with it, but we're talking about 40 years ago: we were just happy to show the work, get some money in, and be able to continue to live and to do work. Alex, I think, gives, not quite a mythological, but certainly a more conscious dimension to my activities than I probably would have admitted to at the time. It is a slightly different reading.

So, what do I think of it? I remember being very happy that someone had spent time going into this history because, although everybody now has a Conceptual Art book in a series about modern art movements, there are not many serious studies around. And Blake Stimson did a lot of hardcore work on it, too, while Alex spent a lot of time on interviews and conversations to get all the primary material together and the dates right, and who was where and when, and what this one said and what that one said. So I think that's been important. He is the only person who has gone through my archive.

JS: *And where is that archive now?*
SS: It is in the US. It hasn't been donated or sold, but Alex used it as a resource, which gave him a certain amount of concrete data for that period.

You have to remember that I was only in the art world for like six or seven years. The interest people show in the work is obviously flattering, but it is only one part of my life. It is history.

Recently I found myself in a history of contemporary art dealers where I was referred to as 'Siegelaub Projects'! I mean, I have had a lot of projects but that wasn't what I called myself. It wouldn't even occur to me to think that way. But when this book was produced three years ago, 'Siegelaub Projects' followed on from Deitch Projects, and that must have seemed the logical way to define my work.

Carl Andre *Joint* 1968 Windham College Vermont

JS: *Seth Siegelaub as a brand was something that was, in a sense, developed after the fact.*
SS: Yes, I think this whole idea of branding was totally beyond my experience then. It is certainly true that you get known for a certain thing in the same way that, if I mention Clement Greenberg, you think of colour painting – that's his brand, that's what he is known for.

It is doubly curious because the use of branding is like establishing a certain aura and keeping it as stable as possible. In other words, don't move too much, make it clear and put it on T-shirts. It is basically to sell, of course, but also to be known for a certain kind of thing forever – and ever, and ever.

And this is also a problem in artistic creation, too, because capitalist values have infiltrated artistic thinking and artistic development. It is difficult enough to advance as part of your normal aesthetic development or your thinking, but it is doubly so if you have a dealer who just wants you to keep producing what they know, and what you became successful with.

JS: *Is that something that, in a sense, precipitated your exit in 1971?*
SS: No, my exit was really a personal thing. I went as far as I thought I could go or wanted to go. But it became very clear to me, after having been involved with a certain kind of art-making moment, that the only choice you had was to do it again. I mean, either you stay with it and become the master connoisseur for Conceptual Art and bullshit your life away talking about that, or you take in a whole new stable of artists and, using all your contacts, you try to do the same thing with another kind of art – or what they call a 'second generation' – and I don't think that was really worth the effort. That wasn't fun.

The specific nature of the art I was involved in led me to more political concerns. When I left I was definitely planning to do some kind of journalistic work. The information side really tickled me.

When I left the US, the first project I tried to develop was some kind of news agency, but it became even more hectic and frenetic than the art world. Imagine having to come up with something new every 24 hours. I was still watching the journalist community closely. I was trying to follow what was going on. There was a lot of talk of doing some kind of leftist newspaper – the *Village Voice* wasn't that old – so I was inspired. I was definitely thinking in that direction.

Also, I was very lucky in that the artists that I was involved with were taken on by a very great dealer: Leo Castelli took on all four guys. That was important to me. Of course, I had an obligation to them too. I mean, I didn't bring them lots of money, but I was very helpful in getting their work into the world and the fact that Leo – or anybody – had taken them on made it possible for me to leave with a clean conscience. There are probably very few people even at that stage who would have been interested in dealing with them, as a group or even individually. Not because they were difficult (through certain of them are) but because they wouldn't 'fit'. But Castelli always had an interest in younger people. He always had his eye open.

That was an important step for me – an important burden for me. It didn't provide me with any money. People think I became rich suddenly.

JS: *A finder's fee!*
SS: No, no – even Lucy Lippard had the idea that I made some sort of money from Leo by selling my ex-stable of artists. I didn't get anything from him. We had lunch.

They didn't all prosper. I think Lawrence did best of all. I think Joseph did a little bit. Bob had good contact with Leo, but Doug was out in California at Cal Arts. He certainly got lost in it all.

But Leo was interested and he would do a show every year or two with the guys, and he would try and sell their work – but I don't have the impression he was very successful in dealing with the work. It's not really his thing. Of course, that was perfectly normal because I wasn't successful either. You would think that they would have better luck. I mean, Richard Serra and Bob Morris, they were fine. But the others, I think they had difficult times.

Again, most of the interest and money came from Europe: Konrad Fischer in Germany, Gian Enzo Sperone in Turin and Yvon Lambert in Paris and a few other people. And a few collectors. That was it. There was never a great interest from within the US.

JS: *Can you talk a little bit about how your activities found an influence and expression in a second generation?*
SS: That I don't know, really. The UK has a teaching tradition, like a studio system, but of the artists I worked with, only Doug taught. He did have a big influence in Cal Arts on younger artists who have now become famous, like Mike Kelley.

I think it is very difficult to see how artists are influenced by other people. But that they were influential is definite, not least because it has been acknowledged by subsequent generations.

When I give talks from time to time, people say, 'Oh, it must have been great. A free time when anything was possible' making it into some kind of Paradise Lost, or paradigm lost. People romanticise the period as being one of great freedom – May 1968, 'Make love, not war', blah, blah, blah. They have an exaggerated idea of the kind of freedom that we could possibly have under any regime.

JS: *But the stakes, in a sense, were different then.*
SS: Yes, yes. There has definitely been a dramatic change in the expectations artists have and what they expect art to do for them. And a lot of it has to do with, what I consider, the capitalist integration of the art world.

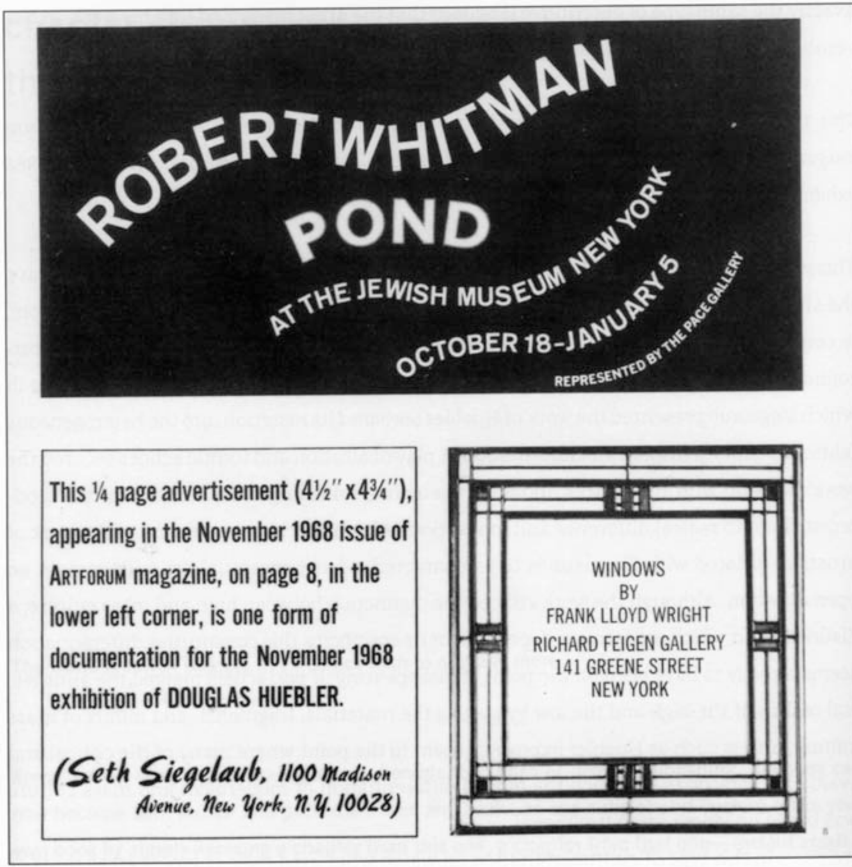
I used to refer to the art world as a pimple on the arse of capitalism – an object of ridicule. But the professionalisation of art as a liberal profession, equivalent to other kinds of liberal professions, means that today you can be a painter and be a respected member of the community, have two houses and send your kids to private school etc. This was totally, totally, unknown in the 1960s.

JS: *I want to talk about the artists you worked with but also some that, in a sense, got away. You mention Carl Andre and how Andre, in some respects, fits in very well – or could have fitted – but somehow it didn't come off.*
SS: I've been thinking about this. You have to remember that Carl was much more successful than any of us. He had shown quite a bit and was well known, like Sol LeWitt in a way.

There was a certain element of friendship. If you misinterpreted his work, he could fit in very well. Carl is very definitely a materialist. He believes in, and works with, the specificity of material objects. But on a certain level, I would say he was quite influential in the evolution of what we now call Conceptual Art. It really was a combination of happenstance – particularly between Larry and Carl – and friendships. They would go out drinking – classic artists in a way.

But I also think that, and this is what I have been trying to deal with – at least to contextualise – his influence was probably much greater than his being pigeonholed as a minimal artist would suggest. I think his work is far more expansive than Judd's or Morris's. I mean, philosophically, aesthetically, his work opens up whole areas of ways to make art – what an artist should be doing and how he or she should be doing it. It would be false to say that his work was directly related to work we were doing. I mean, Carl has a definite respect for the work, but it was just not his thing. I think when you referred to people that I've lost along the way, you were probably referring more specifically to people like Ian Wilson.

JS: *Yes, exactly.*
SS: Carl – there's no reason to think he fitted in. He participated in shows and he was a close friend, but there is a very good reason why he wouldn't be part of it. Ian, on the other hand, was a part of the activities in the early years. Why he didn't get involved with it is not entirely clear, but he is very much a loner –



Douglas Huebler Advertisement in *Artforum* announcing his exhibition November 1968

quiet – he keeps to himself. There was definitely a certain amount of tension between him and Joseph – well, there is between Joseph and a lot of people – and he just didn't want to participate in the 'January' show in 1969. But we were all interested in him.

>> One thing is very clear to me – that art really is a social activity. It is not just one person who comes up with great ideas and everyone else follows.

JS: *And the invitation was already out for the 'January' show?*
SS: Yes, it was well before January that we started working on it – September 1967. It was very clear that he didn't want to participate. I mean it wasn't a last-minute decision. He was basically absorbed in his own work. And maybe he didn't want to identify himself with other people and with the movement – he was somewhat aloof from that. Maybe (and this is speculative) he didn't want his work to be confused with the kind of language questions which all the other artists were involved with in one way or another.

So he is the one that comes to mind as somebody who was there, but went somewhere else or did whatever he wanted to do. There weren't many other people.

JS: *Mel Bochner?*
SS: Bochner, yes, was one of them. I've been asked this on several occasions. I don't know why. Now that I think back on it, there was a problem between him and Joseph at the School of Visual Arts. I mean, Joseph being a student of his – and not being a student of his – and who did what first. Sol wasn't involved either and, eventually, Carl wasn't. You could speak about Allen Ruppersberg, too ... I mean, if you look at the period, and you go down the list of artists, you can ask yourself, why not? You could invent a whole story about it, but that's just the way it was.

JS: *And of that core group – Huebler, Kosuth, Barry and Weiner – what, in your mind, was the gel holding them together?*
SS: I don't know exactly. Language has been put forth as the sort of cement, as it were, between their work. But it's all quite different. Lawrence's, at least at the beginning, was about words and things, people's relationship to things. Doug was definitely involved with the relationship between what we see and what we know, or what we know linguistically, in any case. Bob was involved with more spacey things, completely ephemeral ideas. He was thinking of radio waves which couldn't be perceived and things like that.

What is certainly very clear, like with any group of artists no matter who they were and when, is that their interactivity gave mutual encouragement and stimulus. The discussions and debates with your peers, or with your friends, would obviously have a very great effect – especially when you weren't getting any kind of informed feedback from the public or from other people.

So I suspect a lot had to do with the artists being together, talking and drinking together, and planning projects together, which we often did.

JS: *Yes. But you added something very specific to that sibling culture which was external.*
SS: Yes, in a way it was external. It had a lot to do with space – the physical, sociological and cultural space – that we see art in. Remember, it was a time when many of us were attempting to bring art into the world in a much more direct fashion, to take it out of apartments or museums. Whether you want to talk about the beginning of video or street theatre or even graffiti – things which were not directly related to us – these kinds of things brought art out into the public reality.

There were a lot of things that were bubbling around, but it is very difficult to say why, in 1967 – maybe Joseph was slightly earlier – all these artists suddenly stopped making paintings or drawings and decided to develop a whole other, different kind of art.

JS: *There must have been specific conditions of possibility there to produce that shift from a painted object to information – to the dissemination of information.*
SS: The question has been asked many times, why then? There were a lot of factors that fed into an art that became dematerialised, a more ideated kind of art.

But you really started out to say what my situation was. I was an organiser. That's what I was. Because of my unsatisfactory experience with the gallery, I was looking for the possibility of getting out of a gallery situation. There were no models except maybe private dealers – people selling objects privately like dope dealers or book dealers.

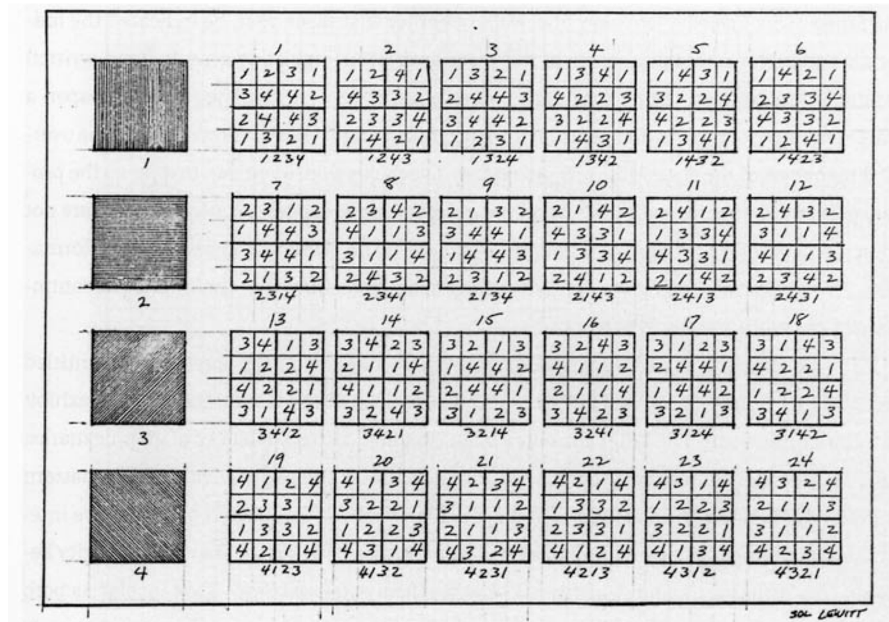
So, I was looking around, trying to think of new modes of presenting art which, of course, are related to new types of art that could be shown in other kinds of environments, and in other conditions. It was my self-imposed job in the group to find these new situations. And once I found them, to then find a way to do them – to pay for them.

In a certain way again, retrospectively, my interests dovetailed very closely with theirs, so I could see my way through to another kind of art relationship, another kind of art dealing or exhibiting practice. It made it easier – not easier for me – but it gave a practical focus for a problem that I was trying to deal with. And I'm sure the fact that I could realise things encouraged them to be able to do things. So the collaborative nature of the exhibition projects formed part of it. It was very complementary.

JS: *One of the moves that can specifically be ascribed to you was a move to bring the secondary forward to absolutely displace the primary. For example,* The Xerox Book *with Jack Wendler in 1968 (**see Review p24**) and, further to that, the catalogue – or the interviews – that were put forward in place of anything more concrete.*
SS: It was also, in part, to do with the realisation that many people knew art (rightly or wrongly – I would say mostly wrongly) from what they saw in magazines. In other words, more people know art from reading about it, or looking at pictures of it, than they ever do from seeing the physical object. And, obviously, seeing the physical object is absolutely critical – with sculpture it is scale, size, place and that stuff. But also, for my part, it was to do with going some place – I mean, the whole cultural situation.

These people were producing work – other people were too – which wasn't information about something, it was the thing itself. And so you didn't have to go any further. You didn't have to go to a space to see a Huebler, it was presented to you and me in the format of a book – which obviously led me to work on the idea of the book as an exhibition space, if you like.

JS: *Also the form of the advertisement. The ad for the Huebler show, combined with the page, is the final form of the piece.*
SS: Yes. The idea of the specificity of place got picked up and became a very important aesthetic issue. Before us, to a large degree – maybe entirely, now that I think about it – an artwork was more or less autonomous. Obviously it related to artworks before and



Sol LeWitt *Untitled* 1968 from 'The Xerox Book'

alongside it, but basically you could just stick it anywhere. The Huebler ad is a documentation, but it is also a documentation that only makes sense in a certain space, in a certain time, and is defined in terms of that.

JS: *It established a radical equality between the work and its publicity.*
SS: Yes, though for me publicity has a negative ring.

JS: *Well, not if it's combined with 'public', in the sense of creating a 'public'.*
SS: Right. But still, the word 'publicity', like in publicity or public relations, always has a hyped-up sense. I was not overwhelmed at Alex's title for the book: *The Politics of Publicity.*

JS: *Your address may have been Madison Avenue, but you didn't consider yourself a Madison Avenue man.*
SS: No. I've said I worked in the R&D department, not in the merchandising, advertising or sales departments! Yes, maybe I did have several tricks that I would use, but I don't think they were super clever – mailing things out and so on. It's not an original idea. Today, I would use the email which, in fact, is exactly what I do. I'm sure in 40 years' time there will be some other means of communicating on an even broader scale. But I never thought of myself as an advertiser.

It kind of has a negative feel to me because I was brought up that way. You know, when I was starting my work life, advertising was sort of for hucksters. It was a very negative thing. I'm sure Alex is being complimentary. He's not saying that this guy was a huckster or a hustler, or a snake-oil salesman, but it is not a term that I would use in a flattering way. If I said so-and-so is a great promoter, I'm being negative. I mean for my generation, that is.

JS: *How did you create some sort of basis on which the work could be evaluated, absorbed, taken in? It couldn't have been easy. It is one proposition to put a piece of Formica before someone; it is quite another to put some information before them and get them to see value in it. Looking back, how do you see negotiating that shift?*
SS: I don't know how much I had to do with it, or what my role could possibly have been in that transition. Really the problem was getting the work seen, getting the work discussed, looked at and, eventually, digested and used or reacted to by the next generation of people. And I don't know how you can really do that in a conscious way.

There's one way that is very clear – it is with money. I mean, you just make enough noise and get the highest auction prices. That is one of the steps towards – short-term – immortality. But other than that, it's kind of like a crapshoot. I was never in a position to think very seriously about how an artist's career is made because there wasn't that kind of interest in the work. I'm sure there are certain steps that need to be followed. You could appear in certain books, in certain kinds of anthology, people have to write about your work, certain collectors have to own you, certain museums have to show you, and things like this – you could probably draw a diagram. But you have to have work that can really get the ball rolling – and I never had the impression that that's what we were involved with at that time. It never would have crossed my mind to create value in that sense.

One of the things that I think is really important for an artist is how other artists look at him or her, and especially how the next generation looks at you – how you influence them. This is not given, but I do definitely believe that it is how the younger generation of art makers are influenced by your work that matters, and how aware they are of who they're influenced by.

Basically, it comes down to having other people see the work as much as possible and arguing for it. You really had to claim your intellectual property rights – for lack of a better phrase – especially if you were not building something, or if the work was not some physical object – or at least a picture of it – that everyone can concur about seeing somewhere.

JS: *You still have to claim that turf.*
SS: Yes, you still have to. And a lot of that takes place talking in bars and talking between artists. In fact, you make it real even if it hasn't been done, or if you didn't have the means to do it or even – especially – if it was not intended ever to be made.

JS: *I'm thinking of the Windham College Show, 'Dissociated Objects: The Statements/Objects of Lawrence Weiner' in 1968. It seems to me that this was a pretty crucial point at which things were established in a tangible way, a kind of staking-out of territory – almost literally, in the case of Weiner.*
SS: Yes, now that you mention it. That was Lawrence's moment of realisation. It's nice you said that. I suppose it's true. Who remembers? It's not like angels come down from heaven or something. It is difficult to understand, or to pinpoint when these things actually occurred. But one thing is very clear to me – that art really is a social activity. It is not just one person who comes up with great ideas and everyone else follows. When you look at it – when you live it – it is a very complicated mess. The question 'who did what first' and all those kinds of art-historical non-questions do have to be dealt with, but it really becomes very, very difficult to appraise. It is very difficult to see who is really making art history – and that's a value too – and it's up for grabs. The work has to correspond to a moment, to a sensibility, to a life *'geist'* or spirit of the time. ■

Part 2 will appear in the July/August issue.

Seth Siegelaub has lived in Europe since 1972 as a researcher and publisher on left communication and culture.

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