Action Man: Paul O'Neill Interviews Seth Siegelaub

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PAUL O'NEILL: Looking back now, how would you define your activities from 1966-1972?

SETH SIEGELAUB: First I had a gallery, which was a very ordinary gallery, from the fall of 1964 to the spring of 1966. The period that you are talking about, however, is somewhat later because I didn't get up to speed until probably late 1966. Although I showed a few interesting works at the gallery I wasn't very clear about what I was doing, why I was doing it, or even how I got involved with it. But the period that you are referring to is the exhibition-making period, and that really began to come together in 1966, 1967, 1968 with the exhibitions themselves taking place from early 1968 to 1971, after which I gradually began to leave the art world, and then New York itself in 1972, to live in Europe. The height of my activities was between 1968 and 1971, when I independently did 25 exhibitions or so. At first I thought of myself as a dealer, linked to the interests of the four artists Robert Barry, Douglas Heubler, Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner, and to a lesser degree, Carl Andre. My interests were very closely allied to working with them to devise exhibitions structures and conditions that were able to show their work, which would reflect what their work was about. In other words, it became clear to me that the solution to the problems that were posed by the nature of their work and the ideas behind it, that a gallery was not necessarily the most ideal environment to show it. By that I mean not just the physical gallery but also the social idea of a sort of "semi-religious" sacred space, everyone knew and visited regularly, a sort of "art space". Part of the problem was to present the work in a different, broader framework that was not a "consecrated" art space. Thus my "job," so to speak was to find those formats, to find those new structures and conditions to be able to show their work. Initially, it started with these four men and Carl [Andre] too, although his work was based on a very different set of aesthetic principles. To be able to do this meant showing their work, say, indoors or outdoors, dealing with art-making

problems, or art and exhibition environment problems and things like this. In my own history it is clear that my interests moved from a very specific group of artists to a more general group of artists, to a more general art problematic, to a general social problematic framing the art problematic etc. By the time I was doing the Studio international exhibition [in July-August 1970] I wasn't even selecting artists anymore, I choose 8 art critics who would in turn choose artists. I was always trying to move away from the individual "art genius" or the personal quality choices that are essential for an art dealer; to choose what he or she thought was the "best" art, etc. My history thus moved towards the more and more general, to artists' contracts, to political fund-raising, etc., which eventually of course led me entirely away from the art world. Many of the aesthetic problems or issues that were being dealt with at the time led me personally to think about questions of the media, the left media, cultural imperialism, etc. Everything was going in that direction.

PON: Were you working with artists and not primarily artworks?

SS: Definitely. I've always said that my relationship to the artists was collaborative. It was a very close thing. No one would come into the gallery and ask me to sell a painting, because it wouldn't have got them very far. I was never a good businessman dealer in that sense. It never really occurred to me while I was dealing that one could make real money. It was about the excitement, intellectual ideas, or changing the world which was the turn-on. But it never really occurred to me that the point of Lawrence Weiner or Carl Andre was to by one at $5 and sell it for $500. I am not dumb, but this was not why I was doing it. I was always more interested in the problems of art-making and exhibitions, and finding situations for the artists to work in, or working closely with the artists to be able to realise projects. Many of the projects that I did were in fact collaborative. This relationship was probably a new, perhaps revolutionary, one. Not in a literal sense that we all sat down in a room, but in the case of the January show ["January 5-31, 1969"], we actually did all sit down and decided how we were going to do this project: should we show any work at all or should we just have a catalogue as exhibition, etc.? I also decided that no works were to be available for sale to remove it

from the usual gallery business environment. Collectively we eventually came up with a format that the four artists and myself were happy with. I went out and found the money to do it, but not all the projects were like that. I tried at the very beginning to be a sort of agent without the need for a space. Most of the projects I did were inexpensive, just like the work itself was inexpensive to make. The projects had to be something manageable, something I could handle without being involved with too many people. Projects I could finance myself, or with help of a few close friends. The projects I did then –as well as all the projects I have done since– were relatively inexpensive, which at least gave me the means to have the allusion of freedom to be able to do what I wanted at the rate I wanted. More like research & development as opposed to merchandizing or mass marketing.

PON: Was this a critique of the dominance of the "White Cube" at the time?

SS: No it wasn't a critique of the white cube in that sense, but it was the fact that the work that these artists were doing was not fundamentally related to an art gallery type of space, and not just as a physical thing. The space of the art gallery is one of prestige, a social space created by a group of collectors, promoters, dealers over a period of time try to build up a kind of "prestigious" environment whereby that anything you put in it would hopefully absorb a kind of quality by virtue of the gallery space it is shown in. Of course the museum's trick too is to make itself appear as prestigious as possible so that no matter what art is put into this space its quality is upgraded dramatically, thus becoming a self-fulfilling prophesy. It poses the troubling question: is an artist great and thus his work is shown, for example, at the Museum of Modern Art, or does the work become "great" because is shown, for example, at the Museum of Modern Art? It follows this logic. It wasn't so much in terms of the physical space of a gallery, because I would agree that a gallery could well fulfil the spatial needs of a painter. But what I was more concerned about because of the nature of the artist's work was that they were doing something else which could best be seen out in the world, on billboards, street corners, paperback books or anything else. I was constantly searching, along with the artists, for new ways of getting this work out in to the world without requiring people

having to come to a "sacred" space or art-shrine. This was also the spirit of the time when you think of "guerrilla theatre", graffiti, and many other things at the time. It was about being able to confront a more general public, not necessarily an informed art public. Along with this were inherent new qualities of the work, not just the de-materialized and physical aspect, but that the works were trying to question their status as commodities, saleable objects or permanent collectible objects. Thus I was constantly searching for ways of dealing with this material that would best reflect the material itself. This also corresponds to the fact that I was –and still am— relatively not rich, so I didn't have a problem with not having a gallery on Madison Avenue or something, as I could never afford it anyway.

PON: In Alexander Alberro's recent publication 'Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity,' which focuses on your practice, Alberro appears to be careful not to use the term 'curator' to define your practice from 1966-1971. Would you have called yourself a curator at the time, or how would you have described what you were doing?

SS: I probably wouldn't have used the word "curator" at the time, although I have recently done so in retrospect because there is a whole body of "curatorial" practice that has quantatively evolved since then. During the 1960s there were few people like Harald Szeemann around at the time. He was director of a museum in Bern, but this guy was all over the place (and he still is in fact); he was a true one-man show. I am not familiar with the history of curating, but I am somewhat familiar with my contemporaries, people who were working at around the same time as me, like Harry. But the first thing want to say is that all the different art world categories were breaking down at the time: the idea of gallery dealer, curator, artist-curator, critic-writer, painter-writer, all these categories were becoming fuzzy, less clear. In a certain way, it was part of the 1960s political project. The "information society" was up and running, and many of these different areas were very touch and go, people were moving between things and doing many different things. If there wasn't a critic available or interested, artists would do their best to explain, write and publish what they were doing. While I can look back now and say that curating is probably what I was doing, it is not a term

that I would have used when I was active for one simple reason: the dominant idea of the curator at the time was basically someone who worked for a museum. Since then, the definition of the term curator has changed. This is just another facet which reflects how the art world has changed since the 1960s/early 1970s; the art world has become much bigger, richer, more omnipresent; there are many more museums, galleries, artists, art bars, art schools, art lovers, etc. It is has also become more central and more attached to the dominant values of capitalist societyYears ago, when we were active, the art world could be considered like a pimple on the ass of capitalism. It was thought of as a marginalarea, or a ghetto, where strange people did crazy "avant-garde" things.It is clear that, in the last thirty years or so, art has become a more acceptable profession, even a type of business, a more acceptable thing to do, both as a practitioner, as well as an art collector. One can think of becoming an artist as a possible "career choice" now, which just didn't exist back then. One just didn't have this opportunity. The question of the curator, in this context, is also related to another modern phenomenon today: the need for freelance curatorial energy to invigorate museums that no longer have this kind of energy. On the one hand there is a multiplication of people who are involved with curating and exhibition organizing etc., while on the other hand the people working within many institutions are becoming more like employees working for a big business. So the idea of independent curators can also be used by these institutions too, because many of the people working in big museums are more and more concentrating on practical fund raising, organizational issues, budgets, administrative tasks, etc. So in the past, people who were serious curators, say, like Alfred Barr, who was involved with selecting, buying, curating and collecting are now involved in fund raising, trustees, all sorts of business-oriented activities. In that sense the growth of independent curators also gives the museums a source of energy to do interesting things, if they choose to do interesting things.

PON: Are you saying that these larger art institutions and the role of independent curating has become inter-dependent within the art world?

SS: Yes, I would think that there is a definite symbiosis in many ways. I have the impression that we are seeing much more of the creative exhibition energy is coming from outside the institution. There is a new inter-relationship between the museum and curator, because there are now many new museums, a hundred times more than there were 30 years ago. Now every little town almost has to have a modern art museum of some sort. So independent curators are one way to use these exhibition spaces without having to keep people on the payroll, or to pay pensions or health insurance, etc. It's like all freelance work or outsourcing in any profession, it can be a very cheap way of keeping the creative energy flowing without the fixed payroll overheads.

PON: Did you have a sense of isolation within what you were doing in the sixties or where there other curators or art dealers were you influenced by or in dialogue with during that period?

SS: It was a very small but active community. There was no sense of isolation. People may have thought someone was a little crazy, but there was a very active bar life, exhibition life, and travel, especially between Europe and the U.S. This was the beginning of a generation who travelled regularly; even people without much money were able to go to Europe a few times a year, which was totally unthinkable before this period. All that was in the process of changing. From New York there was much excitement about what was going on in Germany, Italy, France and England. There was no sense of isolation, particularly in New York, where there were great art bars where you would hang out and talk all hours of the night on all possible art and political subjects with a wide range of people. There is always a kind of isolation for a group who consider themselves as an unappreciated "avant-garde" because they feel they are not getting the recognition they feel they deserve, but that is really bullshit, of course, and often, temporary.

PON: Did you think what you were doing at the time as particularly unique or where there other people doing similar curatorial projects?

SS: There was Harry Szeemann as I mentioned earlier, but he was doing something very different. He has always worked within a very broad spectrum, from the avant-garde to Swiss bankers, advising collections, working on museum boards and things, so he would not really be an example that I would refer to at that time, but there were interesting dealers active at the time, like Konrad [Fischer}, or Gian Enzo Sperone, Kasper König, and especially, Dick Bellamy. I also remember in a more general way there was a good critical environment; people always interested in writing about the projects and coming to the exhibitions and talking about the work and the ideas behind the work. We weren't lost in the backwoods; it was really very active; there were a lot of people around even though it was a relatively small community. There were four or five art magazines or something like that.

PON: Your practice seems much more atomised geographically than say the new kind of international curator, travelling from biennale to biennale?

SS: This came much later; we were only at the beginning of these phenomena in the 1960s. There were connections between New York and Los Angeles, but the New York-European relation was the new horizon, between what Carl Andre called the NATO countries. One was constantly seeing people coming and going, dealers, critics, people like Germano Celant, Harry Szeemann, Charles Harrison, etc., but the whole international, biennale thing that exists now, just didn't exist. The one important thing, for me at least, was the link between United States and Europe, and to a certain extent, Latin America too, but I was much less aware of this aspect.

PON: How do you think we suffer from amnesia with regard to a curatorial history?

SS: I don't think it is amnesia but rather ignorance, but I am probably one of the amnesiacs. Although I was vaguely aware of Alexander Dorner's work and that of El Lissitsky, mostly from the political publishing as he was important for many other things. I knew Alfred Barr existed and in Amsterdam there were very important activities with the work of people like Wilhelm Sandberg at the Stedelijk Museum who were also very

imaginative museum people, but I was more like a newborn baby and I was just concerned with my artist friends and the problems arising from their work. I didn't have to look for inspiration. There are one or two people, however, who come to mind as influencing my practice. Dick Bellamy, a dealer, although I was not particularly interested in his artists, he was close to many artists and could get things done, and was highly thought of. The other person was someone a little older, who in fact he died almost on the same day as Douglas Huebler, was Gene Goossen, [Eugene C. Goossen], who was basically a critic but also, in his way, a kind of an independent curator. He did a number of shows at MoMA in the 1960s, including Barnet Newman, among others, and also curated a show called "The Art of the Real", around 1970. He was involved with younger artists, such as Carl Andre, Robert Barry, and a number of other artists, and did one of the very first shows in 1964 of what would later be called "Minimal Art". But most interestingly he was the head of the Hunter College art department and he was able to give artists teaching jobs, which was very important for survival. For some reason I don't think he realised his full potential, but was highly regarded by many artists, and like Dick Bellamy, looked closely at art. I suppose I was mostly inspired by their close relationship to artists. Most of the other people, including Harry Szeemann or Germano Celant or Kasper König, were more like contemporaries so I wouldn't have looked to them as predecessors eventhough they may be somewhat older. There was also dealers like; Konrad Fischer who, with Hans Strelow and Jürgen Harten, did the "Prospect" exhibitions, which was another example of the breakdown of boundarieswhich was going on at the time.

PON: You are often cited as one of the first "creative" curators. How significant do you see your contribution to the idea of the curator as a creative component within the production and mediation of art and what influence, or impact do you think your projects had on altering the perception of what the role of the curator could be?

SS: I would agree with that. I think more in action than in theory. In other words, I didn't theorize my position, and if you look back at the interviews I gave in the sixties and early seventies the word "curator" probably didn't even come up. I thought of

myself in terms of an organizer, a publisher, exhibition maker, and things like that. Also the word curator at the time didn't have the open meaning as today, as curators were basically people who had jobs working in the museums. Thus it wouldn't really have occurred to me to be a "curator" at the time because a curator worked at a museum, so how can I be a curator when I am not working at a museum? But I probably was not very involved in a very self-reflexive practice in that sense. Furthermore, much of opinion or analysis I am giving you now is over 35 years after the fact. But if you look back on any of the interviews I doubt I thought of myself as a "curator"; more like an exhibition organiser, project maker, things like that.

PON But you would have thought of yourself as a creative component within the process and not merely a facilitator?

SS: Yes, but not too much and I always avoided the "are you an artist?" question as being irrelevant. I was not making art, and my materials were not Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Lawrence Weiner and Joseph Kosuth or something like that. But this idea seems to have become today an important issue, where curating may have become a kind of manipulation of other people. Yes, I was very creative but only in the sense that one can be a creative bicycle rider, plumber, or anything else; one can be a creative in anything if one approaches one's work with a certain kind of imaginative spirit. It's strange; it is as if only artists are creative, so if you are creative you must be an artist or something like that. I think the work of a dealer or exhibition organizer can be very creative, but I think what people are really referring to, in my case, is the fact that I am very closely identified with the artists that I worked with and it was indeed a very close relationship. It's a little more difficult to separate the nature of the art making process and how it's linked to very site-specific situations, inasmuch as my role was to try to provide the situation. In such a close collaborative relationship my work could be misunderstood as that of another artist. But it's also a more contemporary concern; during the last ten or fifteen years this idea of the "curator as a kind of artist" is become an issue. This also goes back somewhat to the break down of categories I mentioned

earlier. But I think it is only retrospectively that the term curator is something that I am comfortable with in relation to my work.

PON: A key word you used to clarify the changing role as a dealer/ curator in the late sixties was “de-mystification”. How relevant do you think this term is to evaluating contemporary curatorial practice?

SS: It is difficult to say, other than it was definitely a hot word in the late sixties, but I am not sure of its relevance today. On the one hand today there are large exhibitions that include many artists from the so-called “third world”, but it is not clear if the purpose is to show the aesthetic energy and ideas of these people who twenty years ago wouldn’t have been seen or rather to harness their energy into an understandable capitalist context? I am not so sure if “de-mystification” is a key concept today. I was very surprised when I walked through Documenta XI in 2002, although there was much work that I had never seen, many of the artists from these “third world” countries lived in London, New York, etc., apparently in order to be able to produce their work and have it seen. Is that bad? Not necessarily, but it certainly does not de-mystify capitalist values and its art and culture. By integrating more and more artists throughout the world into capitalist values, its aesthetic systems, into its machinery, I would not refer to as a de-mystification of the relations between what was called the “first world” and the “third world”.I think, in our generation we thought that we could demystify the role of the museum, the role of the collector, and the production of the artwork; for example, how the size of a gallery affects the production of art, etc. In that sense, we tried to demystify the hidden structures of the art world. I am not so sure if that is what I am seeing today. Mostly what I see is an explosion of different personal and cultural sensibilities, which has a more “free for all” character; itself not a bad thing. But I don’t think curating today is about making the hidden mechanisms more visible now. Maybe they are about promoting unknown artists from Africa or Asia or elsewhere, but not necessarily de-mystification. Perhaps a types of subversion? I am not sure that we ever de-mystified anything, but many activities also had a clear political dimension, artist’s rights, anti-war, etc. linked to the art exhibition project.

PON: In 1968, you curated the “Xeroxbook”. Was this a means ofcurating a large group exhibition without a fixed gallery space?

SS: It could have been, but there were only seven artists; it wasn’t that large. What it was really was a curatorial project in which I proposed the parameters for the artist’s participation in the exhibition: each artist had twenty-five pages to do what they wanted with it. I later tried a similar project in which each artist was given a day to do their work (the “One Month” exhibition, also referred to as “March 1969”). I wanted to be able to provide a standardized metric to the exhibition environment with the thought that if everyone had the same basic parameters to do their work what they would do would be their art. In this case in the format of a book, but it could also have been a space somewhere. I always found it strange that often in group-exhibitions some artists have more space or the means to have larger works than others, showing a clear preference by the organizer, making it more difficult to look at the art and the exhibition as a whole. Or when one artist is on the cover of a catalogue for a group show; I have always found that it is unfair for the other artists in the show, as if this one artist “symbolizes” or “represents” the exhibition.But the “Xeroxbook” exhibition, in fact, was never published as a “xeroxed” book, it was printed in offset. I have never liked the term “Xeroxbook” as it gives the misleading impression that the Xerox Company had something to do with it, which is not the case. Furthermore, as an aside, it should be remembered that in the 1960s the word “xerox” was then virtually synonymous with “photocopy”. A few years ago the art bookshop Printed Matter wanted to do a retrospective about the book and how artists have been influenced by photocopying, and I said it had nothing to do with the technique of photocopying, it was just a practical way to get the project done very inexpensively. That was the primary reason. The idea was to produce an exhibition project. I like the term project because it is never clear what exactly is meant by it. I am currently beginning to work on a project related to a certain aspect of physics, and for many years now I have beeninvolved with a bibliographic project on the history of textiles and it was only after a number of years did I have an idea what form this project could take. I would have preferred to keep the

potential of the so-called "Xeroxbook" as open as possible. I wouldn't have referred to it as a book necessarily. I would have stayed with the word "project" because it covers lots of different things; it is more open and full of possibilities. For all I know, the book could have done as a radio program or a film or newspaper or wallpaper or today, as an Internet site, who knows what; I have no idea.

PON: At the time, you also talked about catalogues as "containers of information" that were "responsive to the environment". What did you mean by this?

SS: Probably what I meant was that in general catalogues illustrating traditional artworks like painting and sculpture were "secondary information" about an object that is "primarily" somewhere else. But for the kind of work that these artists were making and the ideas they were dealing with, the catalogue could function as something very different because the information it contained was primary information. It wasn't information about something that was somewhere else, it was all there in front of you, it didn't have to be bigger or smaller or in colour. This is what I probably meant by a "container of information". For example, the Xeroxbook was primary information. This was probably the intention behind many of my publication projects. Publishing was and still is very important for me. I really like publishing things. I have been able to use publishing over the years as a way to support myself and to engage with the world. In the 1960s I always tried to distribute and sell the publications that I produced to be able to support myself, and eventually, possibly the artist, but the publications were very inexpensive, around $2 or $5. They weren't particularly successful to say the least, but it was possible to sell a few to some interested dealers such as Gian Enzo Sperone, Konrad Fischer, Leo Castelli or John Weber, and they were always an important potential source of income for me because I wasn't really very good at selling art. I had no independent income and that was a way to survive. Publishing was also a way of publicizing the projects we did. At the time, there were no bookstores selling these types of projects, with the exception of George Wittenborn in New York and Walther König in Cologne. I was also a great believer in mail order, and I would often send announcements and things via the mail, but less so now since the advent of e-mail. But

as a means of supporting myself at that time the income from the sale of publications, although no one was running around buying these books, $2 here, $2 there really helped to pay the rent.PON: Was the publication an equivalent site to the gallery?SS: Yes, after I had the gallery on 56th street, I realized that didn't like sitting in the gallery, and after a year and a half, from the fall of 1964 through the spring of 1966, I decided I would never want to be trapped indoors like that again. No only were there were very few people around at the time looking at art, but for a small totally unknown gallery like mine you would get about five people in a day, and four of which would want to use the bathroom, have a glass of water, ask directions, and the fifth would be Lawrence Weiner dropping by to talk. It really wasn't at all like the galleries in Soho or Chelsea today; where even the least-interesting gallery today would have hundreds of people walking through in an afternoon.

PON: So your public was very localized?

SS: It wasn't just localised, there were just very few people in the art world at the time. If you were an unknown gallery there was even fewer, and even when they knew who I was there still weren't many people; even at the now well-known "January Show" [1969] there were not many visitors. It wasn't like it was a great fantastic success. One had to be very publicity conscious, like a Warhol, a person who couldreally sell themselves, which was never the case for me and the type of projects I did.

PON: Why do you think there has been a resurgent and insurgent interest in conceptual art over the last 5-10 years?

SS: Difficult to say, as the old joke goes it's now our turn in the barrel. Maybe nostalgia for the good old days and its struggles? Maybe people think of it as the "golden age" of contemporary art? Maybe people and institutions wanting to increase the value of their collections? But there does seems to be a more serious reason. There is little doubt that the kind of artistic practice, questions and possibilities that were opened up by the generation of artists working in the mid-late 1960s, including the group of artists I was

working with, as well as others, is still today both a very important historical reference and a contemporary point of departure for many young artists, and its influence is still being felt. Our generation of artists made it possible that anything could be art. It may have been Donald Judd who said it, but it was artists like Lawrence Weiner, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler or Joseph Kosuth, and a few others, who actually did it. At that moment the whole nature of the art-making process changed, not just the subject matter of art but the very relationship between art and life. It was very different than Fluxus and Surrealism, which in spite of their attempts, were still operating within the art world context. I don't think this current interest comes from economic speculation in works from the period, as perhaps was the case with "Pop Art", as there is still relatively little money to be made from these artists. It seems that the works and the ideas generating them are still very close to young artist's hearts and that's where I think most of the energy and interest comes from. I think a number of artists are a bit let down by the period because we promised so much –to get rid of capitalist art values and the commodification of the object, etc.- and didn't quite do it, but the promise is still there. I think this interest is really an artist-generated phenomenon, even though they may not always aware of much of the actual work that was done during the 1960s, but they do get the sense of the period and its possibilities.

PON: Does it seem to you that this is the moment that the history of this period is being written?

SS: One of the things that have always struck me is the fact that there is no critic that lived this period that is still interested in writing about it. Lucy Lippard and others were active in it for a while but moved on to other things, which is normal. Although he was not personally involved in the period, the research of Alexander Alberro has become absolutely invaluable as he has made a great effort to re-discover and document the basic historical sources of the period,and he certainly knows more about the period than anybody else. It is not like you have a Harold Rosenberg who wrote over a long period on Abstract Expressionism or Michael Fried on colorfield painting, etc. There is no critic attached to our moment for a long period so most of the interest has come

after the fact. There are good books and catalogues by Anne Goldstein or Anne Rorimer, among a few others, but you don't have the critical continuity that goes with somebody having being involved and fighting for it over the years. So most of the critical interest has come from people who write about it from time to time. It is possible that a lot of the historical facts are getting lost, but nevertheless between the work of Alexander Alberro and Lucy Lippard you have a pretty good idea of what went on at the time. I am not really involved in this kind of historical research accepts maybe to participate in conversations like this. I do have my personal archives, which Alexander Alberro has organized and used for background for his book "Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity". Part of the archive is still here in Amsterdam, but most of the material is in New York.

PON: How involved were you in the Art Press publication on Conceptual Art called "The Context of Art" from 1996.

SS: Very; it was a great project, but it was done independently not for Art Press, they just published the material in French with additional visual material. Over the years I have been asked many times to do a "conceptual art" exhibition and I have always refused, not wanting to become a professional "Mister Conceptual Art". But when I was approached by the German art dealers Marion and Roswitha Fricke from Düsseldorf in the early 1990s I again said no, but that I would be interested in doing a project dealing with what happened to all the artists involved in the art world in the late 1960s and their attitude about the art world between then and the early 1990s. I thought it would be interesting and perhaps significant to have their opinion about how the art world has changed, because one of the things which is most striking about the art world to me is how much it has changed during this period, and they agreed to do it. They did most of the administration and artist interviews, and it was published several years later in French in Art Press, partly in Dutch in Museumjournaal, and has just been published in English and German by Navado Press (early 2005). It was kind of sociological project; I was happy to be able to do it. I wanted to get a sense of the period, not just via the successful artists but also those who have since been forgotten, and their opinion about

the art world and their own life. It was very interesting, and at one point we were going to do an exhibition, but decided that it was too complicated and unnecessary. To do the project I selected 120 artists active during the period and who showed in 5 "avant-garde" exhibitions in 1969, including "When Attitudes Become Form", my "One Month" project, etc. We found that ten or twelve were dead, another ten we couldn't even find, another twenty or so wouldn't reply, and finally we were able to get around seventy replies. Most of the replies were not written, but the result of the work of the Fricke as they went after people and did interviews with artists like Mario Merz, John Baldessari, Victor Burgin, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Lawrence Weiner, among many others, and it is thanks to their efforts that this project became so interesting.

PON: What did you think of Alexander Alberro's 'Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity' which very much focuses on your specific role within the development of Conceptual Art from 1966-71?

SS: It is an important historical contribution to the period,especially, my work. However, I just didn't like the use of the word "publicity" in the title. I think it is a generational thing. For me it has negative connotations which suggest that I was some kind of advertising huckster or a Charles-Saatchi-type hustler. Yes, I did do lots of mailings and tried to use whatever media resources I had, but I never thought of myself as that sort of person. It's clear the way he writes about it that "publicity" is some kind of virtue. I gave him many suggestions for another title, but I think someone at MIT Press insisted on using that word. But most important, he certainly has done his research and I personally learnt a lot from it as it contains many hard facts which I had long forgotten.

PON: Have you read the early interviews book "Recording Conceptual Art" that Alexander Alberro co-edited with Patricia Novell, who had interviewed you in 1969? How do you feel about your interview with Novell being published now? What do you think now about your responses to her questions?

SS: Yes. I wasn't unhappy about it being published and it was a long time ago, but I don't think I said anything particularly dumb in it. Some of the people who were also interviewed at the time, like Carl Andre wanted to edit parts or Joseph Kosuth, who wanted to re-write his interview, so eventually these two interviews weren't published. As for my participation I couldn't even remember what I said at the time; 35 years ago!

PON: With much of the artists you were working with, the work was often quite invisible or ephemeral and there were significant issues of how the projects could be seen, or how works could be experienced or disseminated? Was this one of the key issues you had to deal in an innovative way?

SS: One of the basic problems was certainly how could you could communicate to someone there was a work of art there, period. We never had a final answer to this problem because the works are so different and thus call for different solutions. Probably the most difficult problems were posed by the work of Robert Barry because he really works on the edge of these kinds of problems more than anybody else with his radio wave or radiation pieces. I mean, how do you tell somebody there is a radio frequency in a room, how do you label it, how do you put it in the catalogue etc. Even when one walks into the room you don't know its there without some kind of prior information. It was definitely one of the problems we had to think about carefully. For example, in the "January 5-29, 1969" exhibition, there is an overall installation photograph which contains one work from each of the four artists, but I just couldn't find the Lawrence Weiner work for a long time. It was only when I referred back to the catalogue/exhibition that I realized that the work was a stain on the rug on the floor which was barely visible. Those kinds of problems were sometimes very important. It is somewhat easier when you are dealing works within the context of an interior space, but it really becomes a problem with outdoor works in the countryside or on city streets or walls, etc. You really had no feedback with these types of works, or even if people experienced the work, it was just out there in the world. It is somewhat less of a problem with an object one cannot situate, like Douglas Huebler's photographs which do not have any inherent pictorial value in themselves (they have been referred to as

the “dumb photograph”), but can only be understood as part of a whole linguistic and visual structure.But there was also many works where it was obvious where the work “is”. The publications were one way of dealing with this “visibility” issue.Furthermore, far more people will see a catalogue/exhibition or a catalogue of an exhibition than will see the exhibition itself, if there is one. But it solves some aspects of this kind of art. In other words, to see a painting in a magazine only gives a little indication of what the object could possibly be in its primary real life. It definitely was clear that many more people were going to see a catalogue than will ever see an exhibition. No matter what exhibition it is. A book or a printed piece of paper circulates and communicates far more than the “objects” it describes.

PON: Do you think that the catalogue has almost replaced the exhibition as the main means through which we now experience art?SS: Yes; its importance has definitely increased. And this aspect was an important part of our project. For us it was essential because it was a logical outgrowth of the art work itself. Also there weren’t that many catalogues around at that time, so that one was much more aware of them. But also it related to the work in another way; when one received an invitation for a Robert Barry exhibition you would have to ask yourself what am I looking at here, is it an invitation, or is it the work itself? This was the case for some work of the other artists as well. There were all kinds of these questions being discussed. Although catalogues have become more important for all types of art, Alexander Alberro is right to say that our publications could be considered as advertisements directed towards people who wouldn’t see the exhibition, if there was one, of course.

PON: Do you think a ‘curated exhibition’ can be a work of art in itself?

SS: I would say no. It seems like a very manipulative thing to claim unless all the artists have agreed to be the curator’s oil paint. But there are also museum interventions by artist, such as Joseph Kosuth’s “The Play of the Unmentionable” at the Brooklyn Museum or certain projects by Hans Haacke, which use the pre-existing works in a collection to make some kind of political or cultural statement, but this is quite

something else. These are two different things. I don't agree with the manipulation of others, but if the artists agree to be part of such a project, why not?

PON: Why did you decide to stop your curatorial activities in 1972?

SS: I left New York in spring 1972 to live in France and I was interested in other things. As I said earlier, I moved from working with specific concerns relating to a group of specific artists, to working with more and more different artists, to asking critics to select artists, to a generalized interest in the conditions of art exhibitions, to organizing a projects concerning artist's rights. I gradually moved towards a more and more general interest in art, which eventually led to an interest in left media theory by the time I left for Europe. By 1972, I was interested in the practice of journalism, and thinking about doing some kind of left newspaper in New York. I was certainly moving away from the "artist as genius" thing, and I looking at the more sociological, political and economic questions concerning the artist's relationship with the art world and to the wider world. That was my trajectory in a nutshell.

PON: Was the "Artist's Contract" a part of moving away from the art world? It seemed like a perfect end point.

SS: Absolutely. As a matter of fact, I have been reproached by Lawrence [Weiner] who was against it at the time, as he felt that by trying to protect the rights of artists the contract was in effect making their work into another type of capitalist merchandise. However, there were other artists who were for it and used it, and still do use it, I am told. To me it seemed perfectly logical final project to end my involvement in the art world, although I couldn't have foreseen this, of course. But I definitely wanted to get away from the promotional business of individual artists. This is also logical as I was never a good art businessman, and I only did it for the challenge and the excitement.

END OF INTERVIEW