

CURATOR'S STATEMENT  
GENRE: HISTORICAL NARRATIVE, WITH NOTES \*

*"Raphaël Huppé Alvarez, Vincent Bonin, Marie Claire Forté  
and David Tomas have agreed to participate in an  
exhibition organized by Sophie Bélair Clément, who has  
accepted an invitation by curator Eduardo Ralickas."*

In January 1969, art dealer/curator Seth Siegelaub took a photograph of Adrian Piper sitting behind a desk while she was talking on the phone without her glasses on. Piper did not look at the photographer when the picture was taken and seemed to be as unaware of his presence as she was of her own body image. (The resulting photograph thus conveys a sense of historical truth, perhaps only because both photographer and model overly theatricalize their respective performances of the act of documentation.<sup>1</sup>) No clear purpose seems to have dictated Siegelaub's decision to take this particular picture.<sup>2</sup> For her part, Piper has no recollection of the event. Siegelaub had hired Piper to work as the secretary/gallery assistant during the so-called *January Show*, one of the New York conceptual art movement's pivotal exhibitions, which was held in two contiguous spaces in the McLendon Building (44 East 52nd Street), near the Museum of Modern Art, from January 5 to 31, 1969. Siegelaub's preparatory notes attest to the importance of the show's "office" space, which he paradoxically regarded as being "empty," despite the fact that the room was meticulously furnished in a highly aestheticized fashion. Thus, in the photograph one can make out a modernist desk, a file cabinet, an Eames chair (model DAT-1), a coffee table on which several books and catalogues are displayed, as well as utilitarian objects usually found in offices (such as a brief case). "General floor plan for Gallery," Siegelaub writes in his notes

as he was projecting the two spaces, “2 rooms equal size, 1 empty,” to which he immediately adds: “with secretary, phone, desk, file cabinet and catalog.” As for the other space, it was to contain “2 works of each artist.”<sup>3</sup> One can read Siegelau’s description of the January Show’s display apparatus and administrative perimeter as a symptom of the ambiguous role the conceptual art movement held in store for its short-term “*secret-ary*”—etymologically: the individual who is both the depositary and mediator (and, perhaps, the one who “secretes”) the very “secret” of conceptual art, i.e., art as the mediation of information. Hence Adrian Piper, who is here at once artist and secretary, transmitter and receiver (receptionist) of information on art and art as information during the initial stages of the conceptual paradigm. In the final analysis, Siegelau’s photographic act can be regarded then as the *figural* operator that denies the performativity of administrative space as well as the agency of the individual who dwells there.<sup>4</sup>

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\* In his *Problems in General Linguistics* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966; trans. Elizabeth Meek, 1971), Émile Benveniste posits that there is a difference between *discourse* (*discours*) and *historical narrative* (*récit historique*). The latter type of text is generally written in the preterite and diligently effaces all traces of the subject of enunciation. Thus, to read such narratives is to believe that the historical object speaks of itself *by itself*—without being mediated by a speaker or writer. It goes without saying that the “reality effect”—the narrative’s very truth value—depends on such a process of simulation.

1. The photograph in question is an enlarged version of an image that can be found on one of Siegelau’s contact sheets. In the other images Adrian Piper is seen wearing glasses. This fact seems to support the theory of an intentional pose.

2. “I took the photo (I took all the photos) but its purpose is not clear (like the photo itself).” Seth Siegelau, correspondence with Eduardo Ralickas, 31 July 2012.

3. Seth Siegelau, guestbook pages and follow-up notes, file I.A.43, “January 5–31, 1969,” Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. The “gallery” space contained two works by each artist (Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner), whereas the catalogue, which was displayed in the “office” space, contained the sum of works in the exhibition, each artist contributing eight works in total (cf. *January 5–31 1969*, New York: Seth Siegelau, 1969, 24 pp., 17.6 x 20.9 cm, boards, spiral binding, 9 b&w ill.; see the Artexite “Conceptual Art” subject file, 700M). Siegelau later spoke of this show as having taken place *within* the catalogue. But more can be said. In fact, more *should* be said: *the catalogue itself was exhibited*. To some extent, Sophie Bélair Clément’s project draws on this “meta-exhibitionary” fact and merely “extends” Siegelau’s exhibition of books on the coffee table (which remains unaddressed within the latter’s conceptual logic). The difference of course is that the *entire* office space is now displayed as a kind of “remembering exhibition” (see Reesa Greenberg, “Remembering Exhibitions: From Point to Line to Web,” *Tate Papers* 12, 2009). As a result, the exhibition apparatus underpinning the display of conceptual art is brought to the fore as that which denies its own conditions of mediation—which is to say its own conditions of enunciation. One of the project’s aims is thus to recover the “voice” (in the narratological sense of the term) underpinning the document, the exhibition as discourse and the agents who sustain it. It bears mentioning in this respect that photography here silences such a voice as it displays the overabundance of the visible world for all to see—on glossy paper to boot.

4. The word *figural* is used here in reference to Jean-François Lyotard’s early aesthetic writings (in particular, *Discours, figure*, Paris: Klincksieck, 1971). Siegelau’s image is thus a symptom: it figures the return of the repressed (Freud’s term), within and by means of the very apparatus of repression.