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REFERENCES

From Conceptualism to Feminism: Lucy R. Lippard's Numbers Shows 1969-74, Londres: Afterall, 2012, (Exhibition Histories)

Materializing "Six Years": Lucy R. Lippard and the Emergence of Conceptual Art, Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum; Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012

- 1 The *Exhibition Histories* series—within which we find the volume devoted to Lucy R. Lippard's *Numbers Shows* that she curated between 1969 and 1974—is an attempt to offer a response to some of the challenges of contemporary curatorial practice by examining a selection of key shows drawn from the last fifty years of exhibition history. The selection the editors of *Afterall* have offered so far—*Magiciens de la terre*, the third *Bienal de la Habana* or *Op losse Shroeven* and *When Attitudes Become Form*—sketches a plural and contradictory genealogy, one that responds to the complexity of the present while promoting a specific curatorial tradition: one that is critical, de-centring and willing to intervening in the symbolic weave of the present.
- 2 Their latest offering, *From Conceptualism to Feminism: Lucy R. Lippard's Numbers Shows 1969-74* coincides with a growing interest in the career of the North American activist and curator in the early 1970s within the context of conceptualism, exemplified, among other things, by the scholarly exhibition *Materializing "Six Years": Lucy R. Lippard and the Emergence of Conceptual Art*, organised by the Brooklyn Museum in 2012 and curated by Catherine Morris and Vincent Bonin. Needless to say, such interest is related to the "museumification", archiving and historiographical revision of the non-objectual art of

the 60s and 70s that large museums both sides of the Atlantic have been engaging in for over a decade. Nevertheless, the Afterall editors have wanted to point to other reasons why these episodes should be revisited; reasons that are to do with the current dismantling of art institutions in Europe and of any form of public engagement that is not mediated through the market elsewhere in the world.

- 3 A voice from Central Europe, that of Austrian critic and art historian Sabeth Buchmann, introduces the volume underlining the significance of the practices of dematerialisation and de-hierarchisation of art that *Numbers* embody for a generation of art workers who are locally situated but globally connected, engaged in an urgent process of reinvention and self-organisation due to the growing precarisation and commodification of artistic labour.
- 4 This double perspective—combining a historicist view with one that sets out from a present in conflict—creates a tension that is felt throughout the different sections of the book. The main essay (“Women – Concept – Art: Lucy R. Lippard’s Numbers Shows”, pp. 16-69) by North American writer Cornelia Butler, a champion of feminist historiography based at MoMA, provides an exemplary piece of exhibitions history. She is rigorous in her commitment to throwing light on Lucy R. Lippard’s real motivations regarding the *Numbers Shows* while providing a detailed account of a number of contingent circumstances that affected their development. It amounts to an effective and sympathetic archive narration that runs through Lippard’s whole trajectory, from *Changing*—her first curatorial attempt in 1966—to the tour of c.7,500, the feminist show that closed the *Numbers* series. Butler’s background as a feminist art historian shows through in the centrality she assigns to Lippard’s conversion to feminism and the subsequent feminist emphasis of her curatorial work from 1970 onwards. Sadly, at no point does Butler attempt to signal what relevance Lippard’s decisions and position-taking might have for the present, neither from a feminist perspective nor from an activist one more generally. Unlike Sabeth Buchmann in the introduction, Butler restricts herself to carefully retelling a chapter that has remained untold within the hegemonic narration of contemporary art.
- 5 Pip Day’s text (« Locating ‘2,972,453’, Lucy R. Lippard in Argentina », pp. 78-97) provides a welcome counterpoint. Day—who has worked for years as a freelance and nomadic independent curator—embodies the dilemmas that Buchmann sets out in her introduction. Her object of study is the last but one *Numbers* show, the one that was held in the newly inaugurated CAYC in Buenos Aires in 1970. The singularisation of this episode, which would have been sidelined as an exotic anecdote in more conventional narratives, is in keeping with Afterall’s interest in Latin American non-objectual practices. The real object of study is not so much the exhibition in itself, as the almost total lack of documentary traces of its reception in Buenos Aires which has meant that the show remains unrecorded not just by local art historians, but also by North American ones. As a contemporary researcher, Day is faced with the opacity of events that take place outside the hegemonic centres of discourse production, a challenge that is repeatedly taken up by those who remain committed to producing de-centred narratives of artistic episodes located at “the margins” of the art system.
- 6 The intrinsic precariousness of the other *Numbers*, including the exhibition conceived as a vehicle for feminist discourse, acquires a particular meaning when we relocate to Buenos Aires, one that forces us to revise a number of common places in the canonical narration of conceptual art. For example, the “exhibition in a suitcase” that Lucy R. Lippard deploys

in the CAYC project has nothing to do with Marcel Duchamp's *Boîte en Valise* or with the French influence on the North American avant-garde that is so often remarked upon by conventional art history. As Lippard herself makes clear, the use of the suitcase was related to her personal experience of travel and was a way of circumventing the high cost of transport to Argentina. It had nothing to do with a reflection on the "neo-avant-garde". Even the "dematerialisation of art" acquires a specific inflection in the Argentine exhibition, as the protocol of remotely sent "instructions for realisation and installation" characteristic of conceptual works is mapped onto the dynamics between the centre and the periphery of the art system. Both the artists and the curator herself lacked even the most rudimentary information about the context in which their works would be received. Jorge Glusberg, director of CAYC and a key agent in the relationship between the Argentinean avant-garde and wider international scenes, would prove crucial in managing this lack.

- 7 If conceptual art always leaves perishable traces, this is even more so in this case, so that historical narration is forced to negotiate with their absence. Neither the participating artists nor Lucy R. Lippard herself can provide an account to what happened, given that neither of them actually travelled to Buenos Aires to install the show. There is also no documentation pertaining to the local reception of the show. In lieu of an analysis of the exhibition itself, we find an interesting approximation of the contact that Lucy R. Lippard might have had with the heated Argentinean scene during her previous visit to the country, from the quasi-mythical *Tucumán arde* to the protests against awards that Lippard herself was involved with in 1968.
- 8 Cornelia Butler's text offers precise facts and first-hand accounts, mostly from the artworld. Pip Day's is speculative and hypothetical, so that the presence of a historical conjuncture takes on a central role. Day's concern is not so much with establishing the specific nature of the show, as to with assessing how much Lippard's previous visit to Argentina in 1968 informed her growing politicization. On her return to the US she would go on to join the Art Workers Coalition and Guerrilla Art Action Group in 1969 and feminist art group Ad Hoc Women Artists in 1970. But even though Day's text inverts the usual direction of the vector of influence centre-periphery, it continues to situate the "Argentinean case" as an exceptional episode that is only inscribed in the narration through its impact on the hegemonic scene.
- 9 Perhaps the most revealing texts in the book are the interviews that Antony Hudek conducts with Lucy R. Lippard and Jo Melvin with Seth Siegelaub (a collaborator and central character of *Numbers*).
- 10 It is here that the tension between those who are attempting to narrate a history of exhibitions from a historical and artistic standpoint rooted in the present and the resistance of those who played a part in those "heroic" events to be framed by that narration comes to the fore. Despite the insistence of the interviewer, the idea of the exhibition as a paradigmatic model of artistic action is repeatedly rejected by Lippard, who justifies her turn towards curating as an expansion of her critical writing arising out of her lived political commitment to artists' works and the militant demands of the time. In fact, after *Numbers* the exhibition ceases to be a privileged field of action for her, and she turns to the book form with her celebrated *Six years*.
- 11 Seth Siegelaub's interview is particularly interesting in this sense. The maverick harbinger of independent curating explicitly rejects the possibility of analysing the dematerialisation of conceptual practices and projects in exclusively linguistic terms,

directly alluding to Benjamin H.D. Buchloh. Instead, he argues that they have to be understood within a context of political and vital rebellion that had the civil rights and anti-war movements as inevitable backdrops. In Siegelau's testimony, sociability, personal encounters and the coming together of a community of knowledge and affects out of a shared way of life are tightly weaved into these artistic practices. He is particularly insistent that they should be read in relation to the fractures that were inflicted in the art-world by people like Lucy R. Lippard and himself—who had different backgrounds and agendas and were scrutinising the forms of communication that art and its agents engaged in, in a bid to contribute to their de-centralisation and de-mythification. He goes even further in his crusade to extract the analysis of conceptual art out of the strict domain of art history, not hesitating to bring out his Marxist arsenal and connect its development with the general logic of capitalism and the expansion of the service economy, advertising and communication, that which others would later call “cognitive capitalism”.

- 12 If Lippard and, even more markedly, Siegelau reclaim their centrality in the definition, formulas and formats that gave rise to what we call conceptual art today, this is not so much in order to inscribe their parental authority within a pre-established narrative, as to destabilise that very history that has tended to privilege the autonomy of conceptual operations and marginalise those processes in which such autonomy is compromised. A history of exhibitions appears like a good antidote to the latter tendency and has given rise to some of the most promising art historical approaches to the art of that moment. However, the insistence with which Lippard rejects her work being framed within a history of curatorial practices should remind us that her legacy offers something more than a sustainable model for a new generation of precarious art workers. *Numbers* was conceived as a strategic intervention in the artworld within a wider context of gestures and actions directed against the status-quo. Her transition from critical writing to curating and from curating back to writing with the publication of *Six Years*, as much as her return to a more conventional format with the feminist *Numbers* and Lippard's later works away from curatorial practice involve a reflection on her own practice which is much more radical than the new expanded figure of the contemporary art curator would allow.