

RE-DISTRIBUTION:  
A FABLE

E. C. Feiss



I want to consider this exhibition's positing of an arc – from the representation of distribution to its material enactment – as an access point to the potential question of art's involvement in the redistribution of wealth and resources. Where 'distribution' could be read against or through any set of objects, its meaning endlessly contextual, the present text is concerned with the term's centrality to theories of social and economic justice. The utility of this arc is that it allows a divergent vantage point (from art history and thus from the question of both representation and material) on two political tactics aimed at equitable distribution: one which attacks legally or via contractual representation, and one which valorizes the practice of communal life, an integral form.

Seth Siegelaub, following his trajectory from agent of Conceptual production to collector of textile, can act as our transitory guide. To be clear, and as is evident in the fact that I rely on a canonized (Western male) figure in the construction of this trajectory, this is still a potential or as of yet unapproached dimension in the question of art's relation to distribution: as has been established, the institution of art is both a concrete<sup>1</sup> and speculative<sup>2</sup> facilitator of neoliberal reality and rationality, an infamous concentrator rather than 'distributor' of resources<sup>3</sup>. The category of 'distributive justice' itself, particularly whether this framework could contain a sufficiently radical paradigm for its professed ends, is a historically important point of contestation between divergent feminist theories of capital<sup>4</sup>. To overly summarize, 'distributive justice' has generally been a phrase used in Left liberal reform propositions, such as Nancy Fraser's<sup>5</sup>, which sustain the idea of centralized power in some form (the idea of the state). A well-known recent example would be Thomas Piketty's Keynesian call for a global wealth tax, which pushes for the generation of policy around financial distribution as the central problem for the 21st century. I mention Piketty to point out the pervading centrism of arguments for economic distribution. Fraser's 'non-reformist reform' in contrast to Piketty's theory is responsive to the limitations of reform, attempting to take structural hierarchy (based on race, gender, class) into account, and to instigate legal reform while 'changing the terrain on which future struggles are waged<sup>6</sup>,' i.e. with the attainment of economic redistribution immediately, identity based struggles will follow. In opposition to all of this, theories of the commons don't mobilize the terminology and organizing principle of 'distribution' to that end because they don't accommodate the centralization of power that

'distribution' as such entails. Therefore, this essay doesn't seek to suggest that art can have a hand in resource re-distribution, both because art is a compromised set of institutions and practices in relation to financial capitalism and because the meaning and political valence of the term 're-distribution' remains unstable. Rather Siegelaub's trajectory assists in coming to the question of distribution at two points of 'materiality' (of Conceptual art and textile, or 'administrative' representation and integral, abstract form) at two historical junctures, thus advancing on the concept's potential exterior – which is easiest to name as 'redistributive' but perhaps the point of the exercise at hand is to seek something otherwise. My use of Siegelaub's narrative is not meant as biographically deterministic but rather as a historical fable with which to explore the question of distribution and justice, 1968-2008.

To clarify what I mean by Siegelaub's trajectory and its framing of 'distribution' in two forms, at two points in history: first I'll address the Siegelaub of late 1960s Conceptualism and then Siegelaub as contemporary textile collector. Siegelaub is most infamously a central actor in the development and coming to prominence of Conceptual art in New York in the late 1960s. Conceptual art, specifically in this canonical moment, has been prominently interpreted as having an aesthetic of distribution, in which 'distribution' is rendered as a (administrative) form<sup>7</sup>. Siegelaub, as a curator, publisher and art dealer in this period, propagates (distributes) a set of practices, which are themselves concerned with social systems, the imaging of mechanisms of distribution a primary investigation. To quote Lucy Lippard: 'Apologies to Lawrence Weiner, Bob Barry, Joseph Kosuth (and Doug Huebler, wherever you are), but I've always felt that Seth was the co-inventor of our particular brand of Conceptual art because distribution was such a huge part of its trajectory, built into the innovative forms many of you came up with<sup>8</sup>.' In its 'dematerialization,' it didn't produce but it distributed: it circulated in text, sound or video, it gave out rules and managed situations (distribution as the physical positioning or organization of bodies in space). All this to say that it was not immaterial – if distribution implies both a system and an object, Conceptualism made art objects out of the former. Its negation 'replaced the object of spatial and perceptual experience by linguistic definition alone,' thus constituting 'the most consequential assault on the status of that object: its visuality, its commodity status, and its form of distribution<sup>9</sup>.' In departure, I interpret 'linguistic definition alone' as still entailing the production of objects (textual and physically realized forms as well as ancillary material) although take Benjamin H.D.

Buchloh's assertion that Conceptualism reconstituted 'the visual' and its capabilities. As a destabilization of representation, Conceptualism's intervention consisted in the challenge to both the traditional artwork (its institutions, its audience, etc.) and the formal objects of administrative (and legal) function. In an extension of this practice, Siegelau is active in the Artists Worker's Coalition and the writing of The Artist's Reserved Rights Transfer and Sale Agreement, which he understands as an attempt to 'level the playing field' between artists and what we can now recognize as the beginnings of a global financialized art market. Thus, Conceptualism's experiments in the aesthetic formalization of distribution as system is linked to this articulation for justice – specifically a more equitable distribution of power through legal reform. The Artist's Reserved Rights Transfer and Sale Agreement is formally and politically produced by the artwork of this period. Framed by Siegelau in the late 1960s then is a notion of 'redistributive' justice as promised by the contract form: an investment in legal indictment at the level of representation in a merger of aesthetic and legal regime.

Imbedded in Conceptualism's contract is a critique of Nancy Fraser's 'distribution vs. 'recognition''<sup>20</sup>, her codification of the still prevalent liberal conception of 'identity politics' as hindering, or needing to be only 'delicately embraced' in relation to work towards economic justice, or justice conceived on a model of re-distribution. Conceptualism's contract holds that any attempt at 'leveling the playing field' must come from a critique of representation – that the two are inseparable. While feminist and of color critique of Conceptualism would point out that it was not radicalized in terms of 'identity' at this historical moment, we can posit its capabilities in a critique of liberalism (against Fraser's dichotomy) just as artists like Adrian Piper, as a prominent example, would utilize the potential of its representational vocabulary for her own ends<sup>21</sup>. Conceptualism held that any intervention seeking to rewrite the terms of distribution must by definition interrogate the parameters of representation of both the mechanism it endeavored to change (law, policy, capital) and by extension the form of its own contestation (through interrogating the contract form). By extension, the composition of inequality, which a politics of 'recognition' or in better terms, a politics which recognizes the centrality of racism and patriarchy to the means and execution of the maldistribution of power and resource, is not divisible from struggle for 'redistribution.' Where Fraser concedes that 'properly conceived, struggles for recognition could aid the redistribution of power and wealth,' Conceptualism contends that any

contestation in opposition to a system of distribution is itself a contestation of the current terms of recognition, and of the existing scene of appearance. 'Recognition' (representation) doesn't 'aid' redistributive struggle, or follow its attainment: it is what it consists of.

This mobilization of the contract however, even as it contained a potent critique of law, operated within a logic of reform. It appealed to the law for change. Its legacy, rather than one of 'leveling the playing field'<sup>12</sup> established art law as part of intellectual property law, enveloping it into the development of multinational mechanisms of wealth concentration and privatization. This narrative certainly dovetails with the influential account of Siegelau as an entrepreneur and Conceptualism as part of the development of 'immaterial labor.' The art historian Alexander Alberro formulated Conceptualism in this vein as: 'a linguistic turn, meaning that language and (inter)textuality have become increasingly privileged and important, in art practice, the staging of the discourses around art, the aestheticization of discourse, (as well as) the new knowledge-based industries such as marketing, PR and services. Similarly, and also simultaneously, as art has become dematerialized and expanded, labour itself has become dematerialized and expanded... and production shifted towards a cultural industry and the so-called knowledge economy.'<sup>13</sup> I don't completely dispute this reading. Following Silvia Federici, however, who has complicated the autonomist reading of immaterial labor as precisely not 'immaterial' (as sustaining the division of labor in capital and reproducing its very material dispossessing effects) my alternate focus on Conceptualism's objects seeks the political vistas of a 'rematerialization' aligned with her thought. Rather than solely a bedfellow of 'cognitive capital,' Conceptualism's objects sought physical and spatial effect, or at the least the reading of it for objects (legal and administrative forms, governing the organization of bodies in space) entails that they did contain this drive, and that it was directed further than the enactment in the context of art. Further, the total vision of Conceptualism (and Siegelau and the contract), as subservient to emergent economic globalization and its affects, doesn't account for more complicated political allegiances.

In a renowned 'fall out piece' Siegelau leaves New York for Europe, abandoning Conceptualism and its mode of address by the mid 1970s. I choose to read this decision as aligned (not consciously) with the militant critiques of legal reform coming to fruition during this period. For example, at the end of a response to Buchloh's article on Conceptual Art, Siegelau includes a list

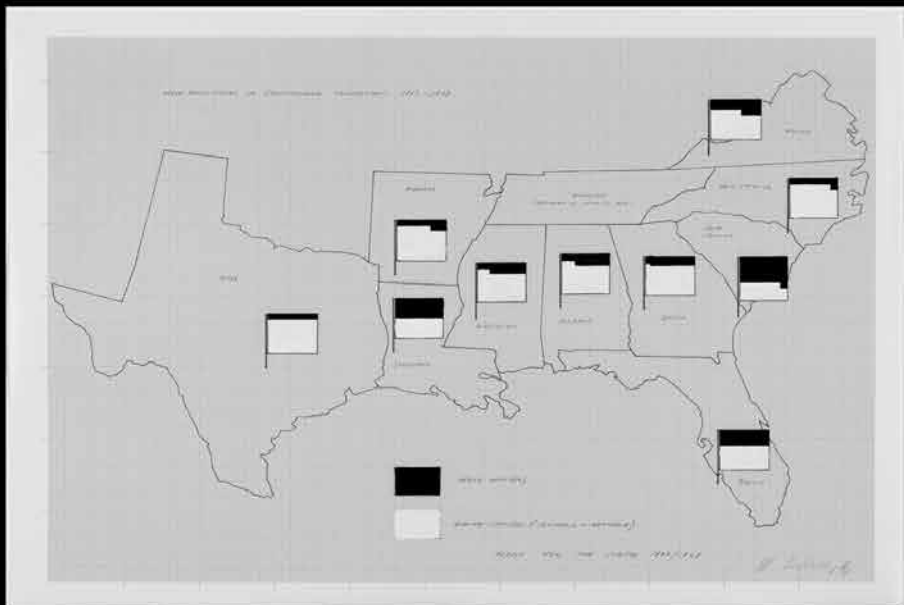
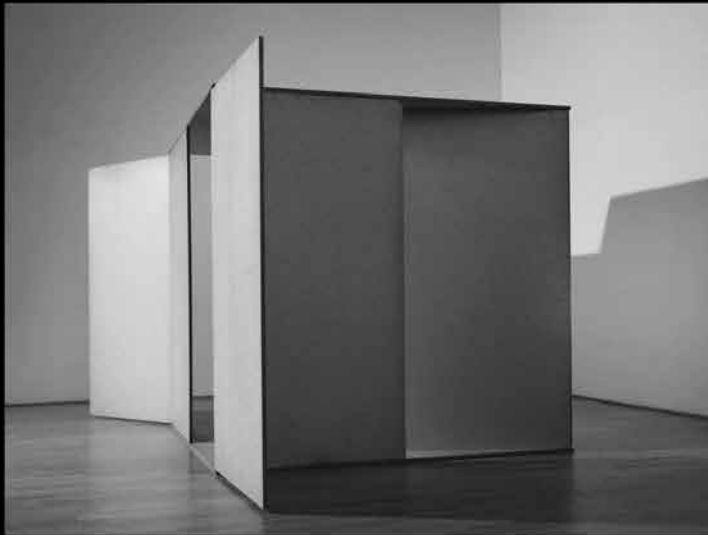
of events, people and groups 'left out' of Buchloh's canonization attempt. This list, which is ordered randomly or at least not by type, includes the Black Panthers, the Bay of Pigs, the Vietnam War, May '68, and numerous other events and organizations of interest to a Left position of the period. Siegelau is then situated within a climate actively questioning the limits of legal reform, towards the end of the social movements of that decade, such as the Black Panther's militant organization outside the State and legal retribution, for example. This moment also saw Siegelau, as our case study, turning away from the formal critique of legal and administrative representation in Conceptual art. He begins to collect textile, establishing the Center for Social Research on Old Textiles, citing an interest in the material's historicization as offering a social history of capitalism. I am less interested in Siegelau's own understanding of the meaning of textile than in this transition from Conceptual to textile form. As he articulated it: 'yes, if I evolved directly from Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner or Carl Andre into textiles that would be a far-fetched and dramatic jump. Of course you can change girlfriends or boyfriends from one day to the next, so it's not impossible, but it doesn't have the same logic that it has, to my mind, coming out of political research.'<sup>14</sup>

What if we understand textile as a political response to the limits of legal intervention of the earlier period? Not just reduced to Siegelau's decision making itself, but extrapolated, given this is a fable, to symbolic size. Textile is clearly 'distributive' in the sense that it is made for travel and shipment. It would be straightforward to do a history of imbrication between the development of industrial textile production and maldistribution – Marx, among others, has already done this for us.<sup>15</sup> Rather, following on from Conceptualism's distribution of bodies in space, and its connection of representation (the contract or the appearance of the 'rules' of a particular work) to materialization (how a contract is enacted), how might textile's weave indicate an embedded distribution, in so far as its existence necessarily entailed the coordination of laboring bodies in (past) space. If Conceptualism generated 'documentation' as a formal relation to a prior event, could we see Siegelau's collection of textile works (i.e. not useable textiles but for the frame) as remnants akin to documentation? It is significant here that Siegelau specifically collected hand woven textiles. What past organization, in addition to the outcome of an activity that we see before us, do they document? To quote Siegelau: 'I was also struck by the fact that, unlike art making, the production of textiles is a social activity – it is always a collective endeavor.'<sup>16</sup> Textile indicates then, within





low percapita income  
low productivity  
high birth rate  
short life span  
many poor, few rich  
low education, high illiteracy  
much corruption  
very violent conflicts  
unemployment and underemployment



its very material, that social coordination (in cooperation, in domination, in many potential varieties) was necessary. While industrially fabricated textiles contain a process we can recognize in the weave, the framing of pieces of textile in Siegelau's collection, valorize conditions of fabrication which are obscure, the 'handmade.' Particularly as ancient textiles, we may know something about their provenance and what that indicates (such as their relation to the Silk road for example, and the extrapolations to contemporary trade that this entails) but the minute terms of the social organization that produced them as 'handmade' objects eludes precision of knowing. Like the contract, textile is a form which by definition required a certain distribution of bodies in space, unlike the contract, the weave is an abstraction – it does not spell out its terms of necessarily distributary production.

If Conceptualism sought a representation of distribution, and mobilized this representation in good faith but ultimately towards undue ends, textile abstractly posits an un-imagined collective coordination. It is also a symbolic 'collectivity' of individual parts (thread) in a particular configuration (distribution) to form a whole. The textile works are not representative, but are literally a piece of an enactment of a certain (which again could be a knitting circle or a scene of enforced labor) distribution of labor and resource in space and time. Siegelau's construction of these objects into a collection allows their isolation, becoming held up as evidence of a past moment of coordination and distributive action – at the same time they are reified as art objects, in display and placement within institutional infrastructure. As an owned collection they become valued objects for aesthetic and material values (provenance, rarity, material worth) divorced from the distribution of social relations that labored to produce them. They become 'abstracted' from that process, symbolically and in terms of the weight of value, in becoming aesthetic objects. This charts the separation between what Marx termed 'useful' vs. 'abstract' labor, or the process of becoming something other than textile for human use.

Textile and Conceptualism (certainly at its emergence) both occupy/occupied a liminal relation to art – both are almost art but are also something else: craft, performance, or administration. More specifically: both inhabit an in-distinction between being aesthetic objects and objects of use value. This potential mutability between aesthetics and utility is temporally wrought. Whereas for both in their infancy (Conceptualism during Siegelau's tenure, textile at its time of making) that indeterminacy was active,

today both are comfortably classified as art. This prior instability, between objects of aesthetic value and objects of use value, perhaps present an alternate method for considering the question of aesthetics and distribution. To return to the question of inequality of distribution specifically, in its time of active utility (as an instrument of the Artists Worker's Coalition) Conceptualism represented a specific course to justice, which has since (like the legal gains of other social movements of that period) waned with neoliberal restructuring of legal and governmental institutions, although the question of rights and of working with rather than outside the law is a much older impasse (see Marx's critique of bourgeois rights, for example). In opposition to the contract, textile, as an aesthetic and object of use, doesn't offer an articulated path to justice. However, framed as they are, abstracted from their past lives, these textiles perhaps proffer an image of turning inward, of refusal to communicate the terms of past situations of social distribution. We could see them as protecting what Silvia Federici articulates as the 'creative work of the means of our own reproduction'<sup>17</sup>, to re-install in my discussion of Siegelau's textile handicrafts the gendered status of that labor. To turn away from the contract and towards textile, specifically as 'political research,' posits that imaginative work, in opposition to instruction and letter of law, is required in trying to construct new distributions of social life. At the very least, textile challenges a rearticulation of Federici's use of the word 'creativity,' towards abstraction and integral form (form as primary substance and total content) in the development of commons. Or, rather than directed 'redistribution,' an integrally equitable distribution of resource, akin to the weave.



- 1 For multiple angles on this assertion, see: Hito Steyerl, 'Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy.' *E-flux*, no. 21 (2010). Accessed October 30, 2015. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/politics-of-art-contemporary-art-and-the-transition-to-post-democracy/>
- 2 For an argument on the influence of the art market's subjective value generation in relation to financial speculation (property and other commodities) see: Suhail Malik, 'The Value of Everything,' *Texte Zur Kunst*, no. 93 (2014).
- 3 For a concise overview of neoliberalism's role in the consolidation of wealth, see: 'Dean Spade: Impossibility Now' (Barnard Center for Research on Women. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OU8D343qbdE>)
- 4 For a recent text and an indication of the vast historical basis of the opposition between Western Left-liberal feminist calls for 'redistribution' and Black and Third World feminist 'critiques of capitalist forms of property, exchange, paid and unpaid labour, along with culturally embedded and structural forms of patriarchal violence,' see: Denise Ferreira Da Silva and Brenna Bhandar, 'White Feminist Fatigue Syndrome.' *Critical Legal Thinking*, 2013. Accessed October 30, 2015. <http://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/10/21/white-feminist-fatigue-syndrome/>
- 5 Nancy Fraser, and Axel Honneth. *Redistribution or Recognition?: A Political-philosophical Exchange*. London: Verso, 2003.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 82.
- 7 See Benjamin H. D Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions.' October: 105 and Alexander Alberro's work, such as the introduction to Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999, in which he discusses systems of distribution in relation to Conceptualism at length.
- 8 Lucy Lippard, 'Seth Siegelauab (1941-2013).' 2014. Accessed October 30, 2015. <http://artforum.com/passages/id=45178>
- 9 Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969,' 107.
- 10 Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking Recognition.' *New Left Review* 3 (2000). Accessed October 30, 2015. <http://newleftreview.org/II/3/nancy-fraser-rethinking-recognition>
- 11 Piper's use of 'the materials of language and conceptual symbols' sought to situate 'racism' as beginning 'with you and me, here and now, and consists in our tendency to try to eradicate each other's singularity through stereotyped conceptualization.' See: Adrian Piper, 'On Conceptual Art' in Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999, 425.
- 12 Matthieu Laurette, Vivian Sky Rehberg, and Seth Siegelauab. 'The Real World.' *Frieze*, no. 154 (2013). Accessed October 30, 2015. <http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/the-real-world/>
- 13 Alex Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003).
- 14 Alice Motard, Alex Sainsbury and Seth Siegelauab, 'Nothing Personal... An Interview with Seth Siegelauab.' Accessed October 30, 2015. <http://www.ravenrow.org/texts/37/>
- 15 Marx wrote on the uprising of the textile workers in Silesia, Germany, in 1844. Siegelauab cites textile as the context of 'the first working-class history (Henson's history of the framework-knitters in 1831)' see: Seth Siegelauab, 'A Very Speculative but Brief Note on Textiles and Society.' Accessed October 30, 2015. <http://www.ravenrow.org/texts/35/>
- 16 Andrew Russeth, 'Seth Siegelauab, Pioneering Dealer and Curator of Conceptual Art, Dies at 71,' June 17, 2013. Accessed October 30, 2015. <http://observer.com/2013/06/seth-siegelauab-pioneering-dealer-and-curator-of-conceptual-art-dies-at-71/>
- 17 Silvia Federici and Marina Vishmidt, 'Permanent Reproductive Crisis,' *Mute*, 2013, Accessed November 2, 2015. <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/permanent-reproductive-crisis-interview-silvia-federici>.

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DISTRIBUTORS

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Exhibition: KP Brehmer, Fred Lonidier, Wendelien van Oldenborgh,  
Seth Siegelaub (Stichting Egress Foundation Amsterdam),  
Hannah Weinberger, Charlotte Posenenske

Roundtable: Marja Bloem, Willem de Rooij, Sven Augustijnen.  
Moderated by Natasha Hoare

Curator: Remco Torenbosch

Text: E. C. Feiss

E. C. Feiss (USA, 1986) is a writer. Her work has appeared in *Afterall*, *Open!*, *Texte zur Kunst*, and *Radical Philosophy*, amongst others. In 2014–15, she was a resident at the Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht and an instructor at the Sandberg Instituut, Amsterdam. Her work has been presented at institutions including: CASCO Utrecht, ICA London, W139 Amsterdam, and BOZAR Center for Fine Arts, Brussels. She is currently a PhD candidate in the History of Art Department at UC Berkeley. With Karisa Senavitis, she co-organizes the research and publishing platform *Policy People*.

Images:

KP Brehmer, *Flags for the States 1867/1868*, 1976 Courtesy Vilma Gold London. Fred Lonidier, *Confessions of the Peace Corps*, 1974, Courtesy of the artist and Silberkuppe Berlin. Wendelien Van Oldenborgh, *La Javanaise*, 2012 (photography: Bárbara Wagner) Courtesy of the artist, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and Wilfried Lentz Rotterdam. Seth Siegelaub, *Stichting Egress Foundation Amsterdam* (photography: Remco Torenbosch). Charlotte Posenenske, *Prototype for Revolving Vane*, 1967–68, Courtesy Mehdi Chouakri Berlin, Dr. Burkhard Brunn, the Estate of Charlotte Posenenske, TATE Modern London.

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