

Nothing Personal... An Interview with Seth Siegelau

SETH SIEGELAUB Off we go, home James, and don't spare the horses.

ALICE MOTARD How did your interest in textiles come about?

SETH SIEGELAUB My interest in textiles? If you're talking about a date, as opposed to some mystical inspiration...

ALEX SAINSBURY Possibly mystical inspiration as well...

SS I don't recall anything dramatic in my life. I mean I didn't rip my mother's dress while breast-feeding or anything like that. Although I have a picture of me with a piece of lace when I was maybe two months old.

AS Well, was there a more practical starting point?

SS Yes, the practical starting point was probably in the early sixties in New York, when I started to look specifically at rugs, which was more or less coincident with my early experience in the art world. I wouldn't call these complementary by any means, but I think chronologically, it was at the same time.

AM Did you own these rugs?

SS No. I did try to buy rugs, but due to lack of money and also experience, I didn't make any serious effort. Much of that interest moved from actual rugs to books about rugs, which is what I really concentrated on and which at that time was more accessible, more practical, and probably more interesting – because you feel you are developing your expertise and your knowledge about certain things. In the case of rugs, it is to understand the history; how they looked or were used since antiquity. Methodologically that appealed to me more. Also there's absolutely no pretence to have every possible kind of textile in the world, but with books you can still have the illusion of finding every possible book on Coptic, Iranian or Islamic textiles and so on. So this seemed like a much more rational thing to do. Books also required less care, and were quite beautiful in their own right.

AM Is it through this channel that you got to meet your future business partner, Robert Gaile?

SS Yes, Bob Gaile worked for a small rug dealer in New York on Sixth Avenue, and we got on fairly well. He had experience in the carpet business, and was also a jazz pianist. As strange as it may seem, I was sort of the rich backer, in that I had the five hundred dollars or something that he didn't have, and he had the experience in identifying rugs and knowing their value to collectors and buyers, and so we put it together.

AM So when you started your art gallery in 1964¹, was Robert Gaile part of it?

SS Not directly. He was only part of the rug-dealing attempt, a part of which was shown at the gallery.

AM In the first chapter of his book *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* Alexander Alberro describes how your gallery dealt not only in fine art but also in oriental rugs, which would have been through this partnership with Robert Gaile. He speaks about the rugs being sometimes incorporated into shows. He writes: 'This coupling provided the dealer an appropriate setting to project the image of the art collector as a highly cultured individual surrounded by refined objects'. Was that what you had in mind?

SS Not exactly. He gives me too much credit for thinking 'strategically' about collecting which was not the case; it was more like a possible combination.

AM So the rugs and the art were well exhibited together?

SS Yes, they were definitely shown at the same time. Probably because at the beginning I didn't do any one-person shows, just group shows. So I was just looking at artists, consigning works, putting them on the walls, and trying to be an art dealer, whatever that meant to me when I was 23 years old.

AS But you'd regard that coupling as a coincidence?

SS Well, not a coincidence in the sense that we definitely showed oriental rugs at the same time as we were running an art gallery. If I recall, the rugs were put on moveable panels and there may have been three or four rugs up there at a time. Unfortunately I do not have any photographic record. There was even a sign on the door that said 'Seth Siegelaub Contemporary Art' as well as 'Oriental Rugs', in a scroll-like hand. It is now in my archives, which I gave to The Museum of Modern Art in New York. It was our intention to do both at the same time, but after a few months, I stopped doing the Oriental rugs. It probably didn't look right, and it was a focus that didn't help. We also weren't making any money either so it stopped.

AM Did you continue buying books on rugs even when the business stopped?

SS A little bit, yes, I did. But at that time there was hardly any activity in the gallery. It was one of the most boring things I have ever done, in the sense of lack of contact with people coupled with an uncertainty about what I was doing. I probably did continue to buy books

but not many more, and at some point I stopped and loaned these books to Asia House Gallery².

AS In the following years, after you closed the gallery³, you became a pioneer of an art that was of the least material kind.

SS Yes.

AS And then you moved into the examination of textiles, which by their very nature are material.

SS When you say 'moved into', do you mean fifteen years later? There was a period in between⁴, which I wouldn't exactly call a 'transitional period' because it had a life and character of its own. It introduced me to the theory and practice of bibliographic work, and more generally to political culture. The art world is of course less directly affected by political or ideological struggles or questions. I think my interest in textile history coming out of this experience in political research seems perfectly logical. 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.

AM Actually, that was exactly the question I was about to ask. Was it via politics that you got back into textiles?

SS Yes, it was definitely a factor. Although I'm constantly trying to figure out textile collecting, being about as bourgeois and 'apolitical' as you can imagine. You can come up with ideas about saving culture, and the sorts of things rich collectors and even poor collectors talk about: preserving, conserving, analysing culture. But essentially it involves people who have enough money to live and eat well, and are having a good time and enjoying themselves, maybe in a very sophisticated way. So I've always had a hard time understanding textile collecting. I can justify and understand doing bibliographic research on the history of textiles, which is a social and cultural and eventually political practice, but I've never been able to fit this logic into textile buying. I can buy the things that please me or that I can afford, but it's not like I have some pretext of saving the world. So I've never been able to find a justification – progressive political justification – for collecting textiles. It 'would be a stretch', as we say in English, to suggest that it has some meaning for humanity, not to mention political or class struggle. Maybe I'll come up with a story, but my recollection is that I had no such inclination at that time. Even today, when I continue to put so much more emphasis on book collecting than textile collecting

I have a very clear intention to work and develop a library. It is not only just possessing books in a materialistic or selfish way but it's also about making a bibliography, which is a social activity, providing access to this material via our internet database and presenting an understanding about textiles in economics or social life or amongst the different classes, and all sorts of other things. So I have a more or less clear political, social vision in collecting books and working with books on textiles. But on textiles themselves I have no such vision. Maybe one day I will understand this better.

AM But that's all about disseminating knowledge in a way?

SS Yes, it is. But that could mean anything too. I'm sure the worst collector or art dealer thinks he or she is doing that. You're talking about collecting?

AM I'm talking about this strategy that you have, the same that you have adopted for politics as well as for textiles, which consists of mapping a subject through its bibliography.

SS Yes, but it doesn't relate to collecting textiles. I mean, I really don't think I have the experience or the knowledge in that area to say that I'm doing any important, critical analytical research. I can't see myself having that level of knowledge. Whereas for books, I know *a lot* about textile books, probably more than anybody. But I have no such pretension about my knowledge of textiles as physical objects.

AM But when you publish a bibliography on textiles and when you make it available online, that's all about sharing?

SS Yes, it's also about sharing too, but you could say that about any rich person; 'aren't rich people nice?'

AM In the eighties were you collecting books about textiles and textiles at the same time?

SS In the early, mid-eighties when I re-started, I thought collecting textiles complemented the collecting of books about textiles. But I had no intention of collecting textiles comprehensively. The emphasis was on books, and I might say continues to be on books because I'm still fascinated by that history. I mean, I'm really into books; textiles were a subsidiary interest to the textile history.

AS Could this be somehow compared to your approach to book production when you were active in the art world, i.e. how you found a way to make the book (which is normally the secondary information about an artwork), the primary information, or even the artwork itself? I wonder in what way this strategy relates to your collecting books about textiles, which is also a larger project than your textile collecting?

SS In the art context at that time the emergence of a new type of art called for a new, different type of presentation, and in *that* sense we are speaking about the book as a primary work; as a primary vehicle for showing art or for communicating art. In the case of my textile research, the bibliography is basically about documenting the history of how the 'West' i.e. Europe or European language civilisations, thought about textiles, from whenever books first started to be produced probably in the early sixteenth century. My job – my self-created job – is to find these books, describe them and to try and put them into relationship with one another. I wouldn't even call it collecting. It's a much different kind of research than just arbitrarily buying or not buying certain textiles.

AS Did factors such as the availability of particular kinds of textiles at a certain moment play a role in your approach to textile collecting?

SS Absolutely. I bought certain kinds of silk and velvet textiles, especially Italian, in France because that's what I was seeing. However, there were also many others types of textiles, including Coptic, Islamic and African, etc. Then going to Belgium and looking there, I suddenly got struck by African textiles. Previously I hadn't wanted to get too involved with African textiles, although I recognised their beauty. But then I began to see many of them and said, 'these are great, why don't I get involved with collecting them?', which is what I did, but only on a small scale. Even now, out of 650 items – with exception of the African barkcloths – I don't think the CSROT owns twenty woven textiles from Africa. And later, after numerous visits to the Pacific region, I began to look at tapa from Oceania. The range of material has greatly opened up. Also my interests and knowledge is perhaps being pushed to other new areas. Frankly, I don't see many sixteenth or seventeenth century velvets anymore. The CSROT has a very good collection, I must admit. It's probably a good small museum collection. That's what I liked at the time, and I really found them to be extraordinarily beautiful, which I still do. But that's also what I was seeing around me which I could afford, so that's what I bought.

AS What kind of pleasure do you take from collecting textiles?

SS Oh, I love it.

AS Is it a different kind of pleasure to that of creating a bibliography?

SS It's really difficult to say. There's always the egotistical pleasure of possession.

AS A different kind of a possession to owning a book?

SS Yes. I don't know if it's that different really, but it is impressive to have 7,200 volumes on the history of textiles, that's very impressive.

But it's also – as Alice pointed out – about sharing this material too. So in other words, these textiles are now coming out from under our beds, our basements and warehouse, and this exhibition provides a means to share them. I'm very happy to do that, but I can't really say that's the purpose of buying textiles; to share all this beauty with the world. It's really a very personal thing. It's different to book sharing, or book information sharing, because with the books I have the impression that I really made a difference to the world of textile literature and how textile history is perceived. With textiles, my intention is not to produce the most important collection in the world even if I had the means.

AS So you'd describe it as a private pleasure?

SS Yes, it's just pleasure. I also love the hunt.

AS Do you like the barter as well? The negotiation with the dealer?

SS I don't really get excited about bargaining as such. The excitement is finding the object; hopefully with knowledge that is greater than the person who's selling it at a price that is incommensurate with what it is we are buying. Does that happen often? Sometimes yes, sometimes no, but it's not a reason for collecting.

AS Did you ever collect art per se? Would you ever have called yourself an art collector?

SS No, I never called myself that. Of course I do have an art collection as you know, a third of which is now at The Museum of Modern Art⁵. But I never went about collecting art. The art that I do have comes from people I worked with very closely for a number of years, much of it in lieu of commission because the artists were very free to go about doing their dealings with other dealers⁶. I never thought to even ask for a commission. In that sense, I do have a collection of works but I never went about making 'a collection'. I mean, there are lots of people whose work I thought highly of but I didn't go and buy from them. It wouldn't have occurred to me to go and buy work from even someone like Sol LeWitt, who I saw frequently. Although I did buy a painting from Ad Reinhardt, but that was my first 'big' deal (and my last one as well), and it was also a lot of money: 750 dollars. It was a pile of money for me and I think a little bit for Ad too. But if you look through the list of works the foundation owns they were from people I worked with, people I had regular contact with. There may have been one or two exceptions. I bought a small work by the painter Neil Williams from Dan Graham for 25 dollars or something, because Dan had even less money than I had at the time, if that was possible. But you couldn't call

that collecting really. The fact that this lack of art collecting many, many years later made the rest of my collecting possible, is a little twist of irony you might say...

AS Textiles are more affordable than art in that sense?

SS Yeah, absolutely. You get a better bang for your buck, so to speak; more value for money. But even then I'm not quite so sure if you're buying or speculating on young artists. It's probably just as affordable to buy contemporary art. It's how you want to spend your money, if you have any surplus. Although textiles as a field of collecting has become more appreciated, not just economically, over the last 20 or 30 years, it still remains a very arcane and very specialised kind of interest. In the major museums, textile collections usually have the lowest budget of any department. It's been the most minor of the so-called 'minor' arts. When you look at books of general art and cultural surveys, textiles are always the last chapter, if there *is* any chapter at all.

AM Is this because they have a use value in the first place?

SS We can speculate that they were so much thought of as practical things they weren't taken particularly seriously as 'art', and even when they *were* taken seriously it was only because of aspects exterior to their nature. For example, tapestries have been taken seriously because they were attached to kings and queens and castles, and liturgical garments have been taken seriously because of the importance and riches of the church. This is also the case for the increased value of clothing and costume worn by well-known historical figures. I remember a few years ago, the V&A bought an embroidered wedding suit that belonged to James II, for a six-figure sum, and although it was beautiful, this was only because it was attributed to James' wardrobe.

AM Do you think textiles have been taken less seriously than ceramics, for instance?

SS Oh yes, absolutely. Especially when you think that textiles are one of the most ubiquitous craft forms, and how little you really see about them in terms of exhibitions. For example, if you limit yourself to the auction record, I would say that for every textile sale there are probably about 50 ceramics sales. That's the downside in textiles, but it's also the upside in being able to collect them; they don't appear to have this kind of value. They are just bits of cloth. I mean, where else can you buy an antique Coptic or sixteenth century textile for a few hundred dollars or thereabouts? It's only with textiles. With ceramics this is not possible.

AM Do criteria such as rarity play a role in your acquisition of a textile or what is the balance between your taste and the fact that you are trying to assemble a collection which has historical pertinence?

SS I'm not too sure that I'm trying to assemble a collection that has some kind of pertinence, or what that pertinence could possibly be.

AS Can you name a favourite item or two in your collection?

SS Yes, I think so...

AM With their SST numbers⁷, please!

SS Recently I bought a Fatimid textile⁸, which is quite unusual, at least for me. It's from a well-known family of textiles but one rarely sees them. I bought it over the web from a Japanese dealer who I'd never even heard of; I took a wild risk. Some of the velvets I also find extraordinarily beautiful. Because these things were bought 20 or 30 years ago, I barely remember them in detail, but if you show me a list, I would go 'wow; that's fantastic!' Some of the Turkish towels, or table covers are extraordinarily beautiful even though they are probably from the fifties or thereabouts. Several of those would be top of the pops.

AM Will this exhibition be the first time you will really be able to see all your silks and velvets altogether?

SS Not all, but certainly an important part. Normally they get looked at for just a few days, mostly because I'm too busy to put them away. I put them out on the floor and hope someone doesn't spill coffee or a mouse doesn't run across them, and then I roll them up in acid-free paper to protect them and put them away, and that's about it.

AM Did you ever buy something you didn't like but thought it would be important for your collection?

SS Good question. I can't really say that I ever did. As the cat said: 'I never met a mouse I didn't like', I don't really think I ever bought a textile that I didn't like but felt was valuable and should be acquired. Because building a collection of textiles is not – and I've said this on several occasions – like building a library of books or a bibliography of books, in the sense that you certainly don't know all the history of textile books but you know something could fill a missing area, even if you've never seen the book, or it's totally new to you. Whereas with textiles there's an endless amount, so there's no way you can have all the velvets, or all the brocades, or all the printed textiles from a particular period; it's absolutely impossible to do that. So comprehensiveness is a futile thing.

AM That's why your book collection and textile collection are complementary?

ss Yes, definitely. I can probably say that our book collection has most of the major literature in the history of textiles since 1800. There are probably a few I know, a few that come to mind, which I don't have and I've never even seen for sale and probably if I did they would be outrageously priced. But it's a finite number. Because literature has been picked over, looked at and has been referenced in exhibitions and other bibliographies. But with textiles there is no way you can say you can have every type or every colour of velvet produced, say, in Florence in the sixteenth century. Every textile is unique, unlike most printed books.

AM We'd like to ask you some questions about the exhibition itself now. It seems to me that you are distancing yourself from curatorial decisions about it.

ss But that's a position that I used in the art world too. Little by little, over my life in the art world, I gave up curating or making certain kinds of decisions, called 'quality decisions': Who's better than this? Who's more important than this? This was a conscious decision I made; to create a sort of framework and then have other people make decisions, or choosing critics to choose artists, etc. Little by little, I tried to remove myself from the 'quality question' in art.

AS There's an interesting problem with the exhibition at Raven Row in relation to the comments you make in your introduction to the bibliography⁹. The exhibition orders your textile collection in a way that reflects the problems you describe with the literature of textiles. The exhibition will be divided into silks and textiles of the European rich and the church, archaeological textiles, and ethnographic textiles, these being something you are conscious of as a very biased categorisation based just on what has been preserved.

ss Is there another way to do it? I don't know. Perhaps by displaying an arbitrary mix of textiles by size or colour? In trying to build a textile collection I've never thought about how it could possibly be shown. It was and is a private pleasure. I'm not really focused so much on the presentation of textiles, although it is a very real practical problem.

AM So your ultimate goal in buying them was not necessarily to show them?

ss No, it wasn't to show them. Marja¹⁰ and I had talked about the fantasy of, at some point, opening a small private museum. Yes, we kind of had the means to do it but it would be like a rock tied around our legs; we'd never be able to go anywhere. After my initial experience in the art world I was really not ready to be a shopkeeper, whether you call it a museum or

an art gallery. So it never occurred to me that one day I would show these things, or that if I did maybe my kids would have to worry about it if they wanted. Maybe an institution would take it and run with it. But the fun is definitely the hunt and the learning experience too, I must say.

AM But still, you are provisional caretaker of these textiles? *You* have to take care of them whether you like it or not.

SS But I try to do that within my means and within my knowledge. In practical terms we've lost remarkably few textiles; in fact mostly feather hats to moths; there's been at least two eaten. Moths really love feathers. And you know, I was really mad because one of them was a real favourite. Of course they became even more of a favourite once they were ruined.

AM But would you like to donate them to a museum?

SS Yes. This is definitely my intention, as it is with our other collections.

AM So, ideally, which institution?

SS I have no idea.

AM Where? A big museum, or a new museum?

SS Where? Maybe in the Far East: Japan or China. What about that? I have no idea; we'll just have to wait until someone walks in the door. But I'm not going to spend too much time worrying about this. The CSROT does have the means to be able to conserve and keep them and to continue to catalogue them, so it's not like there is a situation where the foundation has to get rid of the collection. This is true of all the collections. The foundation will just keep going on until I'm dead, or until I lose interest, which is highly unlikely. We'll just see what happens. But you're doing the exhibition and that will bring some attention to it; people will think about it.

AM Given the fact that people don't know so much about this activity of yours, although this is what you are devoting so much time to, are you excited that people will get to know this part of your activities, which has so far remained remote and quiet?

SS Yes, absolutely, you wouldn't go to all this trouble. I wouldn't and you certainly wouldn't. We wouldn't be doing it if it weren't for the excitement of being able to show them and to share them. But it's not my intention to say 'anybody want a textile collection for free?' There are also certain conditions if the foundation were to give it away: developing it, cataloguing it extensively, making acquisitions, keeping it open for the public where there's a study collection. So there are five or six criteria all of which can be discussed. Many years ago the Bibliothèque nationale de

France wanted the political media library, but all they were going to do was put it in the basement and wait until some day, when someone would catalogue it and make it available. So I kept it and later gave it instead to the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, because they agreed to catalogue it, and to provide access to it, and that's OK with me. I'd be a little more demanding about a textile collection or a library of our books on textiles.

AM I have a final question. Just out of curiosity, if you give your collection of textiles to a museum, would you like the books to be kept at the same place?

SS Although they are interconnected, they are two independent things. The problem with the books is that there would be many duplicates for any existing major library. There might be a 40 percent overlap, so if they are gifted 7,000 books, and they have 3,000 of them already, then what's the point? They would just take what they want and give the rest away. The other alternative is to find an institution that is just starting up, has a small decorative arts library, and wants to have the major textile library as a part of it. So far I have not made any effort to offload it, but I say very clearly on the website of the Stichting Egress Foundation that I would be very happy to do that. But like the textile collection, there would have to be some serious commitment to keep it going, to catalogue it and to keep it online, etc. It would have to involve a continuation of the project.

AM Great, thank you so much.

AS Shall we say now that we stop? Thank you so much.

SS That's it? I was just getting warmed up...

*Interview conducted by Alice Motard and Alex Sainsbury,
London, 28 November 2011*

1. Seth Siegelau Contemporary Art was located at 56th Street, New York.
2. In 1969 Siegelau made a long-term loan of hundreds of rare books on rugs to the library of Asia House Gallery in New York.
3. Seth Siegelau Contemporary Art closed in 1966.
4. After leaving the art world and moving to Europe, Siegelau founded the International Mass Media Research Center (IMMRC), an open-access library of leftist and progressive books on communication and culture, publishing books on the subject between 1973 and 1986 while living in Bagnolet (a suburb of Paris).
5. In 2011 the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) acquired a major group of works from the collection of Seth Siegelau. In addition, Siegelau and the Stichting Egress Foundation donated his own extensive archives, containing correspondence, photographs, notes, exhibition proposals, and many other significant documents.
6. Including the gallerists: Leo Castelli, Konrad Fischer, Yvon Lambert, Paul Maenz, Gian Enzo Sperone and Hans Strelow.
7. The textiles assembled by Seth Siegelau for the CRSOT all have a SST (Seth Siegelau Textile) number. The collection starts with the item SST 001 and, as of January 2012, contains 654 items (SST 654 being the most recently acquired textile).
8. This is also known as a 'tiraz', which is a form of luxurious decorated linen with a line of inscription – usually a blessing – located on the upper sleeves of a robe or on a turban sash. They were given as a mark of honour in official ceremonies to a deserving subject by the caliph. It dates from the Fatimid Period (909–1171) in Egypt.
9. Center for Social Research on Old Textiles and Seth Siegelau (eds.), *Bibliographica Textilia Historie. Towards a General Bibliography on the History of Textiles Based on the Library and Archives of the Center for Social Research on Old Textiles* (New York: International General, 1997). [CRSOT 5100].
10. Marja Bloem, Seth Siegelau's partner since the early nineties.

Coptic tunic fragment (close-up detail of back). Egypt. 6th century? 8 × 9 cm. Wool, linen. [SST 030]