

MoMA 2013, Seth Siegelaub Memorial

I met Seth at my opening at a gallery in Amsterdam three years ago. I was exhibiting a series based on found images, many of them taken from art-history books. In a few pieces I used a photograph of his “conceptual artists”. That was the famous image of Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner, the artists who took part in the “January Show” that Seth organized in 1969.

Some of the works from my exhibition in Amsterdam are now on view here at MoMa upstairs, in the “New Photography 2013”. The image of the conceptual artists is there. It is quite a coincidence to cross paths with Seth in this institution in this way.

That day when I met Seth he shook my hand. I remember his firm grip. He had, what I would call, a sailor’s hand. The skin was rough. Holding his hand made me think of “Lord Jim” and of “Moby-Dick”; I felt that Seth had the intensity of the sailors Jim and Ishmael. To me his hand was of someone who had been exposed to a lot of wind; someone who knew how to control the wind.

I said, “You know that some people have tears in their eyes when they talk about you back in New York.” Seth laughed. “But really, why did you leave?” I asked. Art and the art-world at some point became repetitive, he answered.

The way he talked impressed me – strong but gentle. He was uninterested in posing as a hero. He was uninterested in any myth making. “As time passes, he said, the past becomes misinterpreted.” Seth seemed to say that it is tempting to write grand narratives about oneself and about history; he seemed to resist doing that in our conversation.

Referring to the decisions he made in his life he said: “I wanted to stick with what really interested me and moved me.” That surprised me. I expected him – an “Institution of Art” dissident – to give a more political answer. He gave, what

sounded to me like a personal answer. It was only later on that I understood the depth of what he meant.

Seth knew that the personal is political. To him “to stick with what moves one and interests one” meant to stick to oneself. I think he believed it to be the basis of disobedience towards the repressive dominant order. Only when things matter personally can actions matter. Only then is there a possibility for influencing the repressive dominant rules. To stick to oneself demands commitment and virtue. It ain’t easy – the outside reality pressures, the inner self wavers. To resist people’s judgments and to follow one’s own judgment is the challenge.

Throughout his life Seth has proven that to “stick to oneself” as resistance against conformity and hypocrisy, was and is possible. Resistance seems to take an impossible amount of courage, determination and intelligence. But all what it takes is “to stick with what really moves one and interests one.”

This idea and the memory of Seth holding my hand return to me sometimes. He helps me navigate my lifeboat in times of storm and in times of despair.

A life of a person can matter – Seth’s life did matter. That is why he is not gone. He stays to show how to stick to oneself. Thank you Seth.

Anna Ostoya