

Invitations / Postcards / Business Cards / Works of Art

Barbara Preisig interviewed by Maja Wismer

Zürich / Basel, September 2015

Maja Wismer: What is your definition of ephemera?

Barbara Preisig: Ephemera are printed matter that are produced for a certain occasion and therefore have a fairly short shelf life, but are nevertheless collected beyond their expiration date. This also includes things such as plane tickets, admission tickets, and print advertisements. But in my work I only deal with a small subset of ephemera: exhibition invitations and newspaper or magazine advertisements. I'm also mostly interested in ephemera that are intended not only as advertisements, but also as artworks. These include works by Eleanor Antin, Robert Barry, Daniel Buren, Dan Graham, Adrian Piper, and Yoko Ono. By this definition, ephemera have emerged as a genre in their own right in contemporary art since the 1960s.

MW: So, to you, ephemera are more objects than temporal phenomena?

BP: Ephemera are objects with a specific temporality. They announce events and exhibitions. In this role, they accompany, frame, and comment on the production of art at a certain time and in a certain place. Ephemera make it possible to understand art in its historical ties.

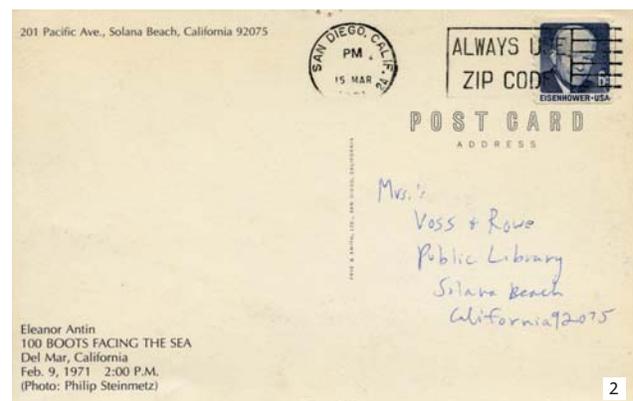
MW: Why do you limit your research to invitations and advertisements?

BP: I took this decision because posters were not used very often in conceptual art in the '60s and '70s, which is my area of research. But the decision also had very practical reasons: namely, because posters have their own form of distribution. While

advertisements and invitations reach their recipients by post, posters are often found in public spaces; the reception takes place "directly," by eye contact, so to speak, and this could be the subject of another study altogether.



1



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MW: To you, being sent by mail is a condition of ephemera. Does that mean that proofs or artists' copies of the same document, for example, don't belong to the category of ephemera?



BP: These elements are part of the production process, but I don't consider them ephemera. But proofs, sketches, etc., are important for other reasons. Artists have always looked for ways to define individual copies of mass-produced items as unique works, to sign and sell them. Such elements, which often also bear the artist's handwriting, are ideal for this.

MW: To me, designing an advertisement seems to be an active part of being an artist, and when a design was brought to the printer, or even just laid on a copy machine, one copy was always kept for the artist's personal archive, and it was not necessarily signed, since it was simply evidence of one's activities, of a project, or of the fact that this project took place. I would claim that later, when this archive has been entrusted as an estate to a museum, a research library, or—as has recently become common—a gallery, for example, this document should be classified as ephemera. But perhaps this doesn't contradict your argument at all, since these copies still have the potential of being sent, or they are documentary evidence of ephemera.

BP: I think that such documents are simply elements of work within the corresponding production process. They are like a sketch that ultimately

leads to a painting. In this sense, the sketch is not a painting, but part of the production process.

MW: How do you explain your fascination with ephemera?

BP: I like the fact that a small disposable object can become a space for artistic activity under certain circumstances, and that, for example, an invitation itself makes the journey to the recipient. Then there is my fascination with the large number of copies, which were scattered into a thousand pieces and sent hither and thither by mail, and no one really knows how many copies of a work still exist and where they are. I also like the relation to pop culture. I have a great passion for postcards, since they are a medium that is used outside of art as a form of communication, quite unlike giant paintings, which belong to the domain of art.

MW: I would say that this is a paradox: conceptual art ephemera are anything but products of pop culture.

BP: I fully agree.

MW: So it has nothing to do with pop culture.

BP: That I would disagree with. Ephemera absolutely have to do with pop culture. For one thing, artists used a popular form of communication. Then, the medium of the postcard, and indeed also the idea of the large number of copies, expresses the desire for the democratization of art, though this aim was not realized. The practice of conceptual art was extremely elitist. Only those who belonged to a small professional network or important institutions were sent this exclusive mail.

MW: In that respect, posters, which are hung for everyone to see on advertising columns, are much closer to pop culture and the idea of democratic access to art.

BP: In a certain sense, that's true. There are, of course, also exceptions among the ephemera that I study. Dan Graham and Adrian Piper, for instance, placed advertisements in widely circulated tabloids or weeklies in the 1960s and 1970s.

MW: To what extent do you see communication by postcard as being rooted in pop culture?

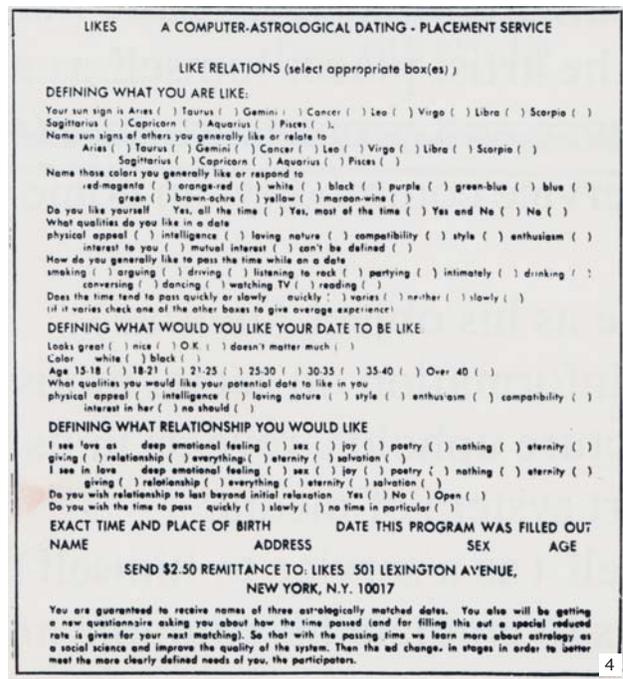
BP: In the '60s picture, postcards were still a popular form of communication. Archival materials show that artists, gallerists, and curators conducted some of their business correspondence by postcard. The categories overlapped in some cases: invitations became postcards, postcards became invitations, and invitations in a sense also became artists' calling cards. So their uses were very fluid.

MW: Could you say that the same thing happened with postcards as with various other new media over the course of history? For instance, with photography, which at first was only accessible to a few and then became increasingly available and thus arrived as a pictorial medium in art. Communication by picture postcards seems a logical consequence for the context at hand. One that furthermore carries within it the desire for an art that is democratic, in a way.

BP: Yes, although the postcard was already destined to decline in the '60s, and I have often wondered why the use of such printed matter experienced such a boom at that time, and why artists didn't work with media such as fax or telephone, or with video, as others did. After all, it was a time in which technological developments had a strong influence on everyday life in society.

MW: And what are the reasons for this?

BP: I believe it has to do with a skepticism of the media. In the United States there were several art and technology exhibitions, such as *Software, Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art* at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1970. But the media euphoria turned into a rejection almost overnight. This happened because people realized that there was a connection between the military industry and military interests of the American government and the very companies that also sponsored exhibitions. The famous exhibition *Information* at MoMA in New York in 1970 can be read as an expression of this skepticism. My assertion is that the ways these new media worked—especially the virtual possibilities of television, and the networked society that Marshall McLuhan dreamed of at the time under the term “global village”—were actually already realized and reflected in analog form in ephemera.



MW: In your view, was this also due to the fact that postcards made a kind of private reception possible, in the spirit of mass communication?

BP: Yes, I believe that it was a kind of imitation of the new electronic media. We are all familiar with the pictures from the '60s that show families sitting in their living room and watching the Vietnam War on television. Art, and thus ephemera, also sought to enter this private domain. The idea was that the media would find their way to the recipients, and

Dartmouth's Rezoning Problems Solved?

By CLYDE HORNER
Staff Writer

Dartmouth's rezoning problems may be solved forever. A motion by Alderman Allen Stockall passed by city council this week that requested the planning director draft a master plan outlining the sections of the city where multiple and low income apartment complexes could be constructed. The plan would clear up the city's apogee rezoning problems.

Explaining his motion yesterday to The Mail-Star, Ald. Stockall said over the past several years citizens of Dartmouth have continually lived in fear of having property in their immediate area rezoned for some type of high density apartment building.

He said people who spend 25 or 30 years beautifying their home don't want property adjacent to their house rezoned to multiple housing or commercial.

GOOD FAITH

Ald. Stockall said it is very unfair to rezone an area comprised completely of single family dwellings. Residents built and purchased homes in good faith with the understanding that the area was zoned R-1 (residential).

The master plan will designate the areas of the city where multiple and low income apartment complexes may be constructed, he said.

Ald. Stockall said it is apparent Dartmouth requires high-rise apartments but suggested that they be located on undeveloped land close to existing facilities.

There are quite a number of areas within the city where this type of housing can be established.

RE INFORMED
He said residents constructing single-family dwellings in an area specified high density have little to complain about because they will be informed of the zoning by the planning department prior to starting construction.

"Homeowners," he said, "should be assured that their area cannot be rezoned after purchasing or building a house."

Ald. Stockall said it is a step toward establishing an overall development plan for the city. "If the master plan is adopted by council the developers will be guided to sections of the city designated for multiple housing."

He said ownership changes and lack of consideration by developers cause some apartment complexes to deteriorate to slum conditions. It's the neighbors living around apartment buildings who suffer when the owners are only interested in profit, Ald. Stockall said.

Mother Fears For Children

By JIM GOURLAY
Staff Writer

The city of Dartmouth's financial inability to install paved sidewalks on city streets is a dangerous hazard to children according to mother of three school-age children Mrs. Sandy Dewar of 32 Mount Edward Road.

Mrs. Dewar says she can be seen most mornings in her "housecoat and curlers" in the middle of the road directing dense traffic to allow her children to cross on their way to school.

Parked vehicles and the lack of a crosswalk in the area are posing the main problem, she said. "The kids have to stand for ages waiting for a gap in the traffic, then dodge between parked cars to cross."

She said when cars did stop for the children there was always the danger of oncoming vehicles failing to stop, or cars overtaking the stopped vehicle.

The irate mother says she has complained "countless times" to Dartmouth City Hall, various aldermen and the police department, all without result.

"They're very nice about it and pleasant to me but nothing gets done... I'm sick of it."

She instructed her children, ages five, seven and ten, to walk on lawns - which are city property - instead of the roadway, "but people just change them."

The question of sodding the portion of land from the street to the property line in place of sidewalks outside city homes was the subject of discussion earlier this week at a meeting of the Dartmouth town planning board.

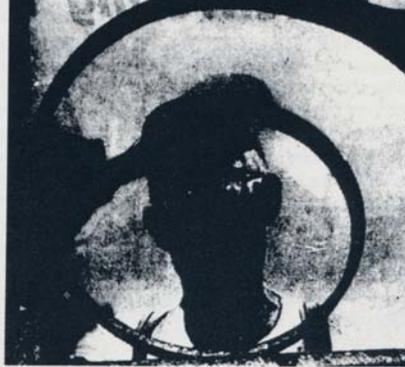
Ald. Daniel Brownlow said the city was not in the financial position to install paved sidewalks. Ald. L. W. Grandfield said the time was coming when the city would only install sidewalks where there was a definite hazard to children.

The matter was referred to the city clerk and engineering department for a detailed study.

No accidents involving children have occurred as yet in the Mount Edward Road Spring Avenue area, said Mrs. Dewar, but we've had a few near misses.

THE MAIL-STAR Dartmouth News

Saturday, October 11, 1969



JUST PAINTING AROUND - Irving Keady spent part of yesterday "just painting around." His job was to paint the gate of the ornamental fence around Christ Church Cemetery, Park Avenue. A car had damaged the gate extensively when it rolled from its parked position on Victoria Road. (Horner)

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HALLIDAY Craftsmen

SCOTIA SQUARE NEWS

By Betty Church

Well, we're right into the last minute rush and preparations for our Grand Opening on Wednesday, October 15th. As you've seen by the paper and heard on the air, our office staff, even General Manager Bill Harman, is on the site, sweeping and cleaning in order to have everything as nice as possible on Wednesday morning.

I'd be there, too, except for one important job. That job is to clear up the misunderstanding about the parking rates in the Scotia Square Parkade. I've been told that many people think that the basic rate for parking at Scotia Square is 65c. That is wrong!

The rates are as follows:
...first half hour 15c
...first hour 25c
...first hour and a half 40c
...first two hours 50c
...first two and a half hours 65c

Thus, a car can be parked in the Parkade for two and a half hours for 65c. However, for each additional hour, after the first two and a half hours, the charge will be 45c per hour - no maximum. So, if your car is in the Parkade three and a half hours the total will be \$1.05.

Now, a few of the benefits of parking in the parkade at Scotia Square:

- a. An assured place to park - no driving around and around looking for a vacant spot on the street... where, mind you, it costs 25c an hour with a two hour maximum.
- b. IMMEDIATE, UNHINDERED access to the shopping malls, theatre and restaurants. The rain won't dampen you, the wind won't blow you, the sun won't blister you.
- c. Protection for your car from the elements... one thing in particular, that appeals to me, is that the seat of the car won't be hot when I slide into it. Also, the car won't feel like an oven on a hot summer day because it's protected from the rays of the sun.

Just before I finish, a word about so-called free parking. Is it really free? I know better and I hope you do. Just who, do you think, pays for paving the lots? Keeping them clear of snow? Acquiring the land, in the first place?

The next column will be about things that are happening at Scotia Square, see you then. Now it's me for the broom...

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LIKE RELATIONS (select appropriate boxes):

DEFINING WHAT YOU ARE LIKE:

Your sex type is: Aries () Taurus () Gemini () Cancer () Leo () Virgo () Libra () Scorpio () Sagittarius () Capricorn () Aquarius () Pisces ()

Home sun sign of where you generally live or relate to: Aries () Taurus () Gemini () Cancer () Leo () Virgo () Libra () Scorpio () Sagittarius () Capricorn () Aquarius () Pisces ()

Home moon sign of where you generally live or respond to: Aries () Taurus () Gemini () Cancer () Leo () Virgo () Libra () Scorpio () Sagittarius () Capricorn () Aquarius () Pisces ()

What qualities do you like in a date: intelligent () being native () compatibility () style () enthusiasm () interest in you () mutual interest () can't be defined ()

How do you generally like to pass the time while on a date: smoking () drinking () talking to each other () partying () intimately () drinking () conversing () dancing () watching TV () reading ()

Does the time tend to pass quickly or slowly: quickly () slowly () neither () slowly ()

Do you wish relationship to last beyond initial infatuation: Yes () No () Open ()

Do you wish the time to pass: quickly () slowly () no time in particular ()

DEFINING WHAT YOU WOULD LIKE YOUR DATE TO BE LIKE:

Looks great () nice () O.K. () doesn't matter much ()

Color: white () black ()

Age: 18-18 () 19-21 () 21-25 () 25-30 () 30-35 () 35-40 ()

What qualities you would like your potential date to like in you: physical appeal () intelligence () being native () style () enthusiasm () compatibility () interest in her () no choice ()

DEFINING WHAT RELATIONSHIP YOU WOULD LIKE:

I see her as: deep emotional feeling () sex () joy () poetry () nothing () intimacy () going () relationship () everything () intensity () affection ()

I see her as: deep emotional feeling () sex () joy () poetry () nothing () intimacy () going () relationship () everything () intensity () affection ()

Do you wish relationship to last beyond initial infatuation: Yes () No () Open ()

Do you wish the time to pass: quickly () slowly () no time in particular ()

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Mr. Dreritt had the circumference of Penhorn Lake ditched so the lake wouldn't be ruined again as the mall project developed. The land, owned under the name of Lawrence Manor Investments (Nova Scotia), and site preparation have already cost more than \$1,000,000.

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Laity Sunday At Grace United

Laity Sunday will be observed at Grace United Church tomorrow at 11 a.m. in conjunction with the church's Thanksgiving celebrations.

Elder Philip Whyntch, assisted by Mrs. Mabel DeBaie, past president of the United Church Women, and Harold MacPherson Jr. will conduct the service.

The message will be given by the church subminister, J. J. Nichols.

Ballet Classes

Ballet classes for the 8 to 11 and 12 to 16 age groups start Tuesday at Friday School, Dartmouth. Lessons are scheduled to take place 4:15 p.m. until 6:15 p.m.

The season for the classes takes in 25 weeks of instruction.

they would no longer go to the theater or the cinema or the museum, for example.

MW: Target group-oriented communication.

BP: A very important term for the discussion of ephemera in conceptual art.

MW: What do you think is the significance of ephemera for or in art history?

BP: Ephemera have an enormous significance for contemporary art in the 20th and 21st centuries. Representatives of conceptual art recognized that the creation of value no longer took place only through material and object-based works. In advertisements and invitations, communication becomes the focus of artistic interest. The work itself serves to promote the artist. The way in which artists communicated was just as crucial as the strategic, project-oriented cooperation with various participants in the art business. In the 1960s, artists established “immaterial” working methods and an artistic self-conception that today are ubiquitous not only in art, but in our so-called service, information, or networked society. Interestingly, however, this economized innovation to which artists contributed had a very different significance than it does today. It was part of a social critique of the rigid, centralized, and hierarchical forms of administration during the post-war era.

MW: What does your work as an art historian consist of?

BP: I see my job as tracing a historical line and thus demonstrating that a certain form of artistic thought was practiced much earlier than was previously believed to be the case. But an important part of my work as an art historian is also to show that art does not take place in an autonomous space that is closed to the outside world, but participates in economic, social, and cultural developments, reflects them, and sometimes even questions them. I really do believe in the idea that the history of art can explain the present to us.

MW: Why have you focused on the United States and the city of New York?

BP: I see the United States and New York as an important Western center of conceptual art. This doesn't mean that all the artists that I deal with are Americans or that they lived there, but many works

were produced and exhibited there. Considering that conceptual art participated in economic innovations through the use of ephemera, this choice is not very surprising. In major cities such as New York, economic processes of innovation generally began earlier than in other places. Advertising was reinvented, so to speak, in the 1960s on Madison Avenue. The campaigns show striking similarities to works of conceptual art.

MW: Although conceptual art had its first successes in Europe.

BP: Absolutely, the reception did in fact take place in Europe. New York was an important place for its production.

MW: Doesn't this in a way local limitation contradict your observation that ephemera are something that is meant to be sent?

BP: As a contrast to the claim of mobility and decentralization? I would definitely say that there were and continue to be centers, and that New York was an important one. This is evident, for example, in the work of Eleanor Antin, who moved to California, and then between 1973 and 1975 made her postcard series *100 Boots* because, as she says, she could no longer go to every opening herself due to the physical distance, and so she needed to find another strategy in order to remain in the spotlight. It was a very effective strategy. After all, the work made the artist famous, and the series culminated in a solo exhibition at MoMA. Art became mobile, but not the power centers of the art business. MoMA is still MoMA, regardless of how many postcards are sent.

MW: Did Eleanor Antin continue to work with postcards after her strategy succeeded? Did she use postcards as her own stylistic device, so to speak, like On Kawara?

BP: The work with the boots spanned three years. Afterward she mostly worked with film. But, interestingly, this is still her most famous work.

MW: So not like On Kawara, who wrote a postcard every morning, almost as a meditation, or as proof of his own existence.

BP: On Kawara is a major exception. Interestingly, there are hardly any artists who worked exclusively with ephemera. That remains the case today.

Strictly speaking, however, *I Got Up* is not a work of ephemera. He sent only two cards at a time with the same motif and stamped them by hand.

MW: Presumably, if we take the meaning of ephemera seriously, the work of someone who only created ephemera would be quite ephemeral. Could you say a bit more about how you see your position as an outsider, as a non-native speaker in the context of New York as a center of production for ephemera?

BP: The only thing that comes to mind is that I had to do a lot of work to familiarize myself with the entire discourse, which is very American. On the other hand, at university in New York, I realized that I enjoy something like the privilege of fools. Especially because I attack very powerful positions, such as those of Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and the entire *October* school, and take an opposing position. American art historians don't think they can afford to do this, since these positions are still so powerful today.

MW: Your decentralization is an advantage!

Captions

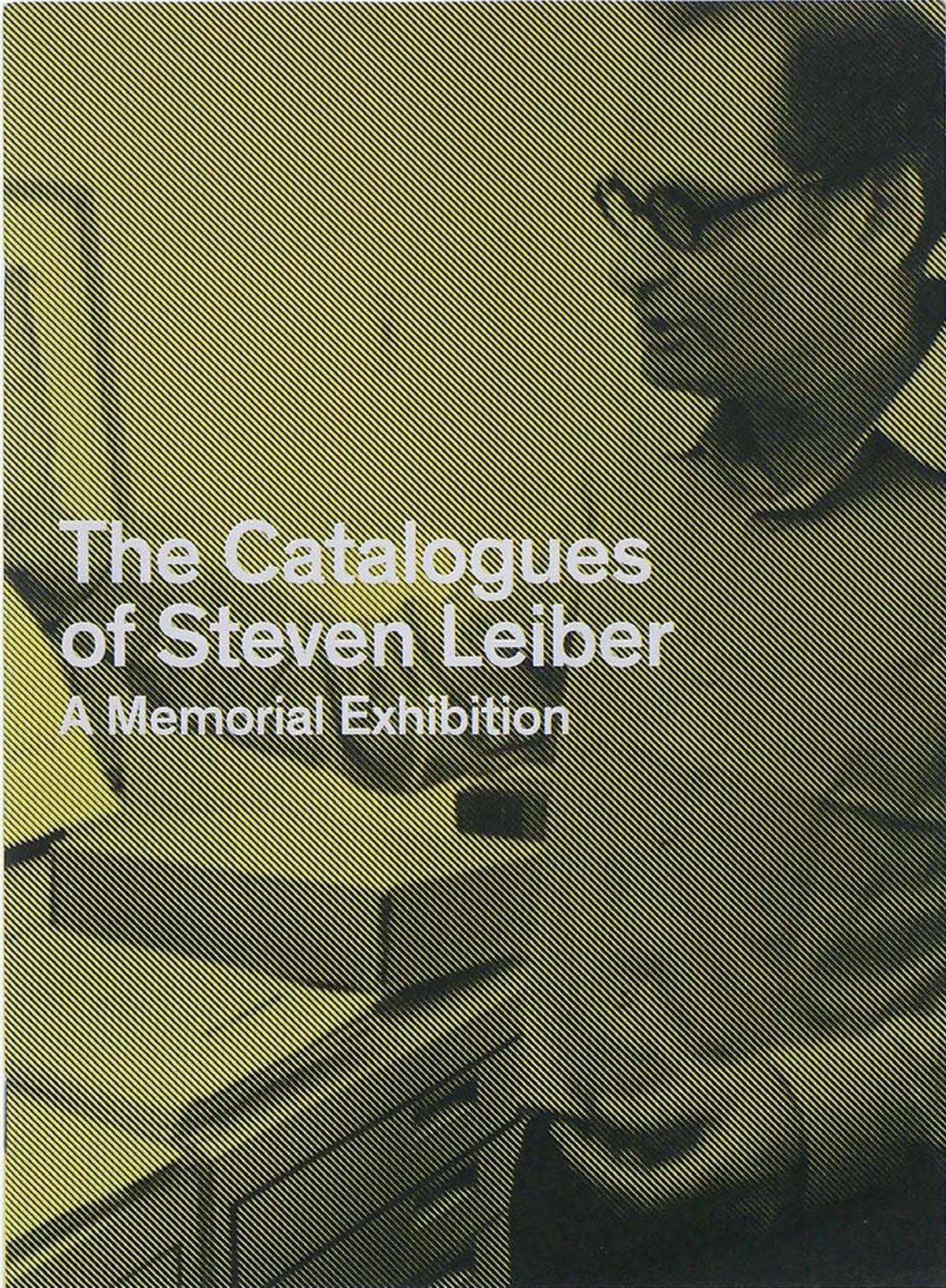
1 Front of Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots Facing the Sea*, 1971, collection of the artist.

2 Back of Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots Facing the Sea*, Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

3 Front of Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots Enter the Museum*, 1973, collection of the artist.

4, 5 Dan Graham, *Likes*, 1969, Advertisement published in *Halifax Mail Star*, 11.10.1969, p. 9, scan from Dan Graham, *For Publication*, New York: Marian Goodman Gallery, 1991 (Original: New York, 1975).

Barbara Preisig is a Zurich-based art historian and critic. After studies at the Universities of Bern and Vienna, she was an assistant at the Galerie Francesca Pia and worked at the Institute for Contemporary Art (IFCAR) at the Zurich University of the Arts, where she holds the position of a research associate since 2014. In 2015, she received her PhD with the thesis titled *Mobil, autonom, vernetzt. Kritik und ökonomische Innovation in Ephemera der Konzeptkunst, 1966–1975*, and co-founded *Brand-New-Life. A Magazine for Art Criticism*. Her writings on contemporary art have been published in *Frieze* and *Kunstbulletin*, amongst others.



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