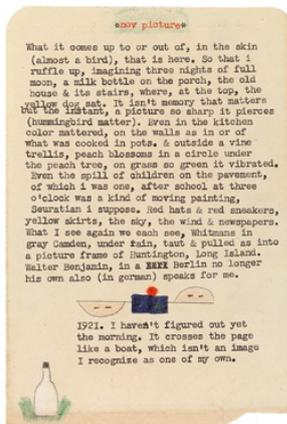


Remembering Robert Seydel

Lauren van Haaften-Schick & Sura Levine

continent. 1.2 (2011) 141-144



selections from Robert Seydel's *The Book of Ruth*.

This January, while preparing a new course, Robert Seydel was struck and killed by an unexpected heart attack. He was a critically under-appreciated artist and one of the most beloved and admired professors at Hampshire College.

At the time of his passing, Seydel was on the brink of a major artistic and career milestone. His *Book of Ruth* was being prepared for publication by Siglio Press. His publisher describes the book thus:

“an alchemical assemblage that composes the life of his alter ego, Ruth Greisman— spinster, Sunday painter, and friend to Joseph Cornell and Marcel Duchamp. Through collages, drawings, and journal entries from Ruth’s imagined life, Seydel invokes her interior world in novelistic rhythms.”

This convergence of his professional triumph with the tragedy of his death makes now a particularly appropriate time to think about Robert Seydel and his work. This feature contains a selection of excerpts from *Book of Ruth* (courtesy of Siglio Press) alongside a pair of texts remembering him and giving critical and biographical insights into his art and his person. These texts, from a former student and colleague respectively, were originally prepared for Seydel's memorial at Hampshire College and have since been revised for publication in *continent*.

For more information on *Book of Ruth*, please visit the book's page at the Siglio Press website: www.sigliopress.com/books/ruth.htm

—Ben Segal

draughty R.*

Lauren van Haften-Schick

2011

“The most apt way to order Smithson's library is with the conjunction 'and'; science and religion; modernism and mass culture; what is present and what is missing.”

—Alexander Alberro, 248

Robert Seydel's classes on collage and collecting immersed his students in a curious world of cabinets, oddities, exhaustive archives and obscure histories, explored always with critical rigor and a sincere eye for wonder. His office was a compendium of the ancient, mythic, potential and unworldly, where seemingly unrelated references were endlessly pulled, piled and fused in an ecstatic dance of hyper-annotation. The small room and all its contents overflowed with notes tucked in every margin and corner. Books coated the walls like a switchboard, anxious and humming, waiting for infinite links to be activated. William Blake's books of Job and Urizen summoned Greek mythology and the animal as metaphor, leading to 19th century cryptozoology and the cave paintings at Lascaux, Gaston Bachelard's description of the bird in his garden and Robert Rauschenberg's *Canyon*. Tracking archetypes and following tangential threads, new revelations and ancient narratives were compiled and ordered to form a new text, a bibliography as assemblage, portrait and poem. Robert's library—one of his many collections—is a portrait, an “artifact, collage of time, a token and remnant” (Seydel, 2007) He is humming with it still.

The imagination of this room—of Robert—breathes through the pages of *Book of Ruth*, as every decision and detail unfolds to a cosmos. Allegory, invention, personal and art histories are entangled and leveled, rendering lived, perceived and absorbed experiences indistinguishable. Anonymous scraps discovered on the street or studio floor, careful clippings and drawn figures are chosen and animated through serendipitous destruction and whimsical, delicate positioning. A precise vocabulary of characters and terms erupts and collapses as personas and passers-by wave and whisper, “Every figure reveals aspects of the total form, which is open and green” (Seydel, 2007). The initials R.S. repeat, a nod to Robert's true family tree and further complicating identification. Robt, Robert's sometimes alter-ego, appears in myriad forms as a trickster “half-wit,” mercurial and skittish, or soft and worn thin. Saul is a solemn tinkerer, parsing the world and sometimes blind. Ruth, the speaker of the book, records and translates all, her voice wavering between poetic verse and a cryptic half-speech as complex as it is sparse. The rhythm of frayed edges sets time - the weight of the world and the lightness of paper.

Robert wrote of his process, “Material is essential; scuffings carry history, which wanders throughout” (Seydel, 2007). Collectors, assemblers, sway between careful movements of selection and placement as they pull from the found world, mediating calculated and unconscious association to form a lexicon of gestures, symbols and allusion, the “artifacts of a life... the refuse and rejecta of days” (Seydel, 2007). These assembled fragments shift and chatter, at home in their homelessness, actors performing in their own lives, populating an invented world of similar orphans. Such accumulated, severed parts carry the injury of their cutting and retain the evidence of their source, binding loss to creation in a symbiosis of trauma and repair.

Mourning and remembrance are deeply embedded in the histories and acts of such practices. Grievance, acceptance, and the fragility of life are conveyed in the 18th century allegorical arrangements of fetal specimens by

* title from *Book of Saul*: “Art an ongoing limit, open to wind. I make it thru me, draughty R.”

Frederik Ruysch. A certain melancholy reverence colors Joseph Cornell's intimately tactile assemblages rendering the universe tangible in miniature, or made in devotion to unrequited loves. Preserved in stasis, these ghosts and idols are kept in a purgatory where fact and fiction, past and present are irrelevant distinctions. Catalogued and contained, the subject of loss is transferred to an artifact. Every thread, scrap and letter may be glued, gathered and placed in a museum, a tomb, a box, a page, ripe and open for possession. Holding on to grief and reveling in disrepair, we opt to be haunted. Forever unbalanced and in flux, the sublime of collage is its resolve to irresolution.

For Robert, "Art, as creation and as sign of primary Imagination, is not objects but a state, a kind of fluid" (Seydel, 2007) Reflecting on his work, life, and death, I am drawn to my library and the myriad titles acquired through his inspiration. There is Daniel Spoerri's *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, Susan Stewart's *On Longing*, various Borges, Barthes, Perec, and especially *Life: A User's Manual*, which concludes that the perfect puzzle will have no solution. I think of the drawers of miscellaneous swallowed objects at the Mutter Museum, Ray Johnson coding the every day in riddles, Wallace Berman twisting tongues, and Susan Hiller laying every detail to bear. Collectors and makers working in endless cycles of observation, ingestion and display. Every gesture informs and is defined by others, every space is shaped by that which surrounds and fills it, the knot has an inner logic, the gigantic is not so different from the miniature, there is a world in every detail, and "All art is collage" (Seydel, 2011) These thoughts have molded my life, my art, and all the minutia that keep the two so profoundly intertwined; There is no difference between life and what we do with our time. "I write my life. I make me up." What a gift to share this secret way of knowing the world, and to leave this knowledge for us to do with what we please. "Art begins in admiration" (Seydel, 2011)

Works Cited

- Alberro, Alexander. "Robert Smithson." In *The Catalog of Robert Smithson's Library*. Ed. Jane Hyun. Berkley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004. Print.
- Seydel, Robert. "Artist's Statement" CUE Art Foundation. 2007. Web.
- . *Book of Ruth*. Siglio Press. 2011. Print.

Lauren van Haaften-Schick is an artist, designer and curator. She currently lives in and works in NYC and co-owns the AHN|VHS gallery in Philadelphia. Lauren is the former co-founding Director of Gallery TK in Northampton, MA.

Sura Levine on Robert Seydel

If early on in his time at Hampshire College I was officially his "mentor," Robert Seydel quickly became one of my great teachers. Over the years we talked about everything, from art, music, collage, and poetry, to campus politics, this latter far too often. It was always a sublime pleasure, if all too rarely done, to enter his apartment to look at his work in progress, to peruse his bookshelves where, inevitably, there were always new treats to examine. And, while he was working on his *Book of Ruth*, I was given the opportunity over the course of many meals at the Korean and other restaurants, to talk with him about image and poem ordering. To see how he thought through each comma, each juxtaposition across the gutters of the Book, was to watch a brilliant curator at work. Each day, I walk past his

wonderful collaged portrait of Ruth, purchased, after much haggling, as a birthday present, a couple of years ago. And each day, I think how lucky I am to have known Robert as he produced this magnum opus.

One of my greatest pleasures in 24 years at the College was to teach “The Collector” with Robert. One of my greatest regrets is that the magic we created together in the classroom will not, and cannot, be duplicated. Its various incarnations, its utter intelligence and magic, were all so deeply Robert’s. His was a mind that put poetry, philosophy, history of science, and history together with art, and art together with music. His intellect and eye were unparalleled. He introduced us to so many artists. He shared his fascination with the cabinets of curiosity of Aldrovandi, of Seba, and Peter the Great’s collection of fetal anomalies, as well as the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles. Robert knew them all and so many more. He was a walking encyclopedia, his home a great archive. Arcane knowledge, perhaps, but oh so important for another of Robert’s heroes, the mid-20th century Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers, whose name he invariably mispronounced as “Broadthayers.” In speaking his name, Robert would always look in my direction in a panic, and then he go on and maul it. I absolutely loved his various mispronunciations of French names and terms!

“The Collector” was always filled with talented young artists, art historians, philosophers and writers who all came to understand the wondrous obsessions of the figure of the collector. Students in this course created dazzling projects each term. He always moved while looking and speaking. He read deeply, and commented on everyone’s work with wonderful generosity. Robert always found something to praise even in the least developed of projects. Robert inspired and mentored all of his students into making work that far exceeded their expectations—and ours. For those of you who were lucky enough to have been touched by or to have had an evaluation written by Robert, savor it, keep it, reread it, and share it. He loved working with you all; it is somehow fitting that he died while prepping yet another new course.

* * * * *

Robert, it’s almost impossible to speak of you in the past tense, even though you left us a month ago. No doubt, if you knew about our gatherings and celebrations of you, you would be embarrassed that we are making a fuss over you; you always placed the focus on others rather than on yourself. This trait is exactly why so many people miss you now. We’re here to love you publicly as we all did privately for the eleven years you were among us. Robert, my very dear friend, you were an extraordinary artist—you were my brother of choice.

My heart broke when yours did. I miss you profoundly.

Sura Levine
February 26, 2011

Sura Levine is a professor of art history at Hampshire College. Her field of specialty is 19th century Belgian and French art, particularly realism and impressionism. Having worked in museums for a number of years both prior to coming to the College, and, as guest curator and co-author of exhibition catalogues, she became particularly interested in the history of museum and trends in collecting. It was because of their shared interests that she and Robert Seydel developed their course, The Collector, which they co-taught for many years.