

Interview with **San Keller** by Dimitrina Sevova, 5 February 2016 at Corner College, for the launch of Internet platform www.panch.li and LUPE Zürich

Additional language editing and proofreading: Alan Roth

D: Would you have in mind some artists of the older generation, someone who has been in Zurich or is still in Zurich, connected to the scene in Zurich, involved in performance?

S: There are some. The first I can think of are musicians, like Luigi Archetti,¹ and also Johann Anre (?), but their practices are not in that sense performance. They do art, with music. Maybe that would fit. There are women, female performers from the 1980s scene, like Klaudia Schifferle.² She's a painter, but also did music, with the band Kleenex, later renamed to LiLiPUT.³ I think the typical thing for Zurich is that there is not a performance scene as such. It's artists forming a band, giving concerts. Take Alain Kupper, he's a graphic designer, an artist, a musician. Maybe it's just the kind of people I know here in Zurich. Like David Renggli, who is an artist, but also has had a band for a long time, Waldorf. It's an interesting phenomenon in Zurich, this different idea of performing. It seems to me that these performers don't necessarily try to articulate what performance is for them. I mean, they indulge in the pleasure of forming a band, of playing music. Or think of Lutz & Guggisberg:⁴ Anders Guggisberg is a musician, and Andres Lutz is a comedian. They both have a performative attitude in their work, but it is difficult to call it performance. We can also look at what is happening in the dance scene, but more likely, the dancers do not relate to the art performance scene. I would say that today there is an overlap. It wasn't like that in the 1980s, I imagine. The different genres were more separated.

D: How does performance relate to your own practices? You said that for you it's difficult to define yourself as a performance artist who belongs to a performance scene.

S: I would describe myself as a conceptual performance artist. It's a kind of mixture of conceptual thinking and the medium of the performance to realize something. That's maybe a characteristic of my practices that I set a frame, and in that frame I do a performance. Often it is not just me. The concept is also a kind score according to which people can contribute and participate in my sense. It has also changed a bit over time. I never really did performances of the kind in which you step in front of an audience and do your thing in front of them. I've always worked with another time frame, like announcing something ahead of time, creating expectations about what is going to happen. There's the idea of whether you want to be part of it, whether you want to participate, and then you're part of it or not, or you're just thinking of what could happen, what is going to happen there. Then there is the aspect of documentation. But there is always a before the moment, and an after, and connecting these different time layers and working with them for a performance. I'm having an exchange with artist colleagues, or I often also created formats to get in contact with

¹ Luigi Archetti <<http://www.luigiarchetti.com/>> (accessed 2016-02-23).

² Klaudia Schifferle <<http://www.klaudiaschifferle.ch/>> (accessed 2016-02-23).

³ Kleenex / LiLiPUT; LiLiPUT were a Swiss female punk band active from 1978 to 1983, initially known as Kleenex; Regula Sing (vocals), Marlene Marder (Marlene Marti, guitar), Klaudia Schiff (Klaudia Schifferle, bass, vocals), and Lislot Ha (Lieselotte Hafner, drums) <<http://www.killrockstars.com/artists/kleenexliliput>> (accessed 2016-02-23).

⁴ Lutz & Guggisberg <<http://www.lutz-guggisberg.com/>> (accessed 2016-02-23).

other artist colleagues. I did several works, like the *At Work (Cuckoo)* (2008-2011), where I visited them in their studios and asked them to do a portrait of me, a photo portrait of me at their work, doing their work. Or a work like *Blaumachen* (Skiving / Skipping Work) (2008), where I went to the studios of artist colleagues in Basel, and asked them to lay down their work and take a day off and take a walk with me. Then we would go to the next artist and also ask them to do nothing. So I've often created formats for bringing artists in contact with each other. Also for me to get a chance to get in contact with my colleagues, and in an economical sense also make an art work out of it, to get it financed somehow, to have the option to invest that time, to have a conversation and drink coffee and maybe do nothing, or exchange about what you are working on at the moment. I don't feel like there is a performance scene here in Zurich. I'm part of an art scene. I can even say that when I came here to Zurich, I was first more part of the graphic design scene. Corner College has some influences from graphic design, as the space was founded by Urs Lehni and Lex Trüb. For me this scene has always been much stronger here in Zurich. So I've been in the position of a performance artist in a graphic design scene.

D: What makes conceptual performance different from that other performance scene you are talking about hypothetically?

S: I performed in December at Bone in Bern.⁵ And it was a nice evening. And yet, its framing is that there are seven or eight performers, during one evening. There is a first performance, a second performance, and sure, they will be announced. If you go to a theater like Gessnerallee,⁶ you have some idea in advance, what you can expect. In the performance scene, there will usually be performers doing their pieces, and you're there, and it's this moment. I think this has opened up, but that's still the format. If you go to Gessnerallee these days, it's also a mixture between theater, performance, dance, art. Theaters have also created, especially in the 2000s, kinds of spaces where different things could happen, or different performances happened, contributed something. I have taken part in projects like that, mostly in Germany and Austria, and contributed to festivals between art and theater and dance, exploring the public space and making use of it as a place where you can be present also as a theater institution. Often these invitations were due to the interest of theater institutions and formats to open up and not just stay inside the institution. I think it would be good to have also a close look at this kind of scene, and what is happening there, and to have an understanding of this as performance. Some questions seem to be playing a big role, about where your origin is, where you really come from, what you started with. Whether you started out with dance, or in theater, and then became interested in art, or whether it is the other way around. And in an economic sense, where you are making your money, whether you work with a gallery, or produce pieces that can be sold to institutions like Gessnerallee. I'm also friends and colleagues with Dimitri de Perrot and Zimi, Martin Zimmermann from Zimmermann & de Perrot.⁷ They are also performers. Yet they produce very clear pieces that they sell. For me that is not the point. I never really made a great effort to define what performance is for me.

D: Regarding your own practices, your method embraces performativity, unfolds with performative elements. How did you start? How did you move into this kind of practices?

S: I started my performance practice with drawing. At that time, really at the beginning of my artistic practice, I did drawings. Even before I went to school, I would give myself a time frame for the drawings. I would have the night, one night, and could do whatever I wanted to do. This was a clear

⁵ Bone: Festival für Aktionskunst Bern <<http://www.bone-performance.com/>> (accessed 2016-02-23).

⁶ Theaterhaus Gessnerallee, Zürich <<http://www.gessnerallee.ch/>> (accessed 2016-02-23).

⁷ Zimmermann & de Perrot <<http://www.zimmermanndeperrot.com/>> (accessed 2016-02-23).

framing, a surface, a square, one meter by one meter, and a maximum of ten hours, sometimes even just one hour. It was about bringing a moment on paper. And it was also related to my practice as a drawer. I built a table, a light table, and as I was drawing, there was no other light than that table's. And then I started like documenting my daily practices with drawing. When I came to Zurich, I decided to go to a different Migros supermarket every day to buy milk, and draw the way on the package of the milk. It went on like that with different formats for doing drawings. I also created a kind of black box where I could insert just my hand, and do drawings without seeing what I was drawing. You never get to see what is in the box, because the box is somehow closed. You don't get the paper out of the box. This was kind of the starting point for performance. I then did a project taking notes about when I'm sitting, when I'm standing, and when I'm lying down, during one month, twenty-four hours a day. This led to a kind of timetables, to more abstract drawings, and there somehow it shifted. I did *Werbefahrt* (Sales-Promotion Trip) (1997), which was a bus tour to promote the picture that I had made, and the edition I produced from it. We had hung this picture in different places in the Canton of Glarus, and took 50 visitors on a sales-promotion trip, with stops in each of the places where the picture was hanging. There things started to overlap, the activity of drawing, the process of taking notes on it, bringing the latter into the form of a drawing, and then the form of presenting it to an audience became more and more important. And so, like that, it shifted.

I think at that point I stopped making drawings and started doing performances like the *Winter-Hilfe* (Winter Relief) (1997), where I realized for every year, every winter season from November to April one concept for a performance outside. Then I repeated this performance, and people were invited to share the experience and be part of it. For that project I also started doing the flyers, and also created something like the brand, changing my name from Stefan Keller to San Keller for that performance. I started announcing what I will do, giving another importance to the flyers that I produced, and to the way I communicated the concepts and the performances. This was a period of independent performances, creating formats that I can distribute myself as an artist. The next step was then being asked by institutions to be part of exhibitions, but also other kinds of projects. I started doing performances like *San Keller trägt Sie hoch zur Kunst* (San Keller carries you up to art) (2002), which was part of an exhibition. I then got more and more getting into a position of analyzing the way institutions work, and also dealt more and more with questions of mediation, education, stuff like that. The latest step may then be the film I did last year, *The L-Word – No mas metals* (2015). It was kind of getting into new media, but also going to the roots in the sense of doing small performances in public space. I mean, spending one month in LA with the idea of a task, of finding that collector, and with that idea in mind, starting to perform, to create performances on the street, but with another perspective on what we're doing, in that we also wanted to have a film perspective on the performances. Before that, I had never thought of the film image when doing performances in public space, like *Winter-Hilfe*. I did not give any thought to whether the performance would work also as a film image, or as part of a film. It's not that I didn't do film documentations at the time. But there was no idea of having a film in the end. It was just a performance. I think this is a shift.

D: You mentioned a pedagogical, educational shift in your practices. You use performance and performative methods in your educational practices, in teaching. At the same time, a certain educational commitment has emerged in your art practices. How did you develop your teaching methods, and in what context do you create your practices that make use of 'radical' pedagogy or educational elements in the public environment and art institutions?

S: I love teaching. Anyhow, I also love different kinds of formats. I love formats, different formats as a frame for performative acting, like sitting together around a table, where the kind of people

present will shape the format of the discussion, of the exchange, but also formats of presentation like giving a lecture. What can you do with that format, with an audience sitting in front of you? I've been teaching architecture students for eight years now at the technical university, and I've done workshops in art schools, and always had the approach of creating different concepts and formats within which to work with the students. You have the frame of one week, for example. At the beginning this was something really nice and challenging, to have a group of maybe ten, or twenty, or thirty students during one week. What are you going to do with them? It's much more time than you would have when doing a performance in a space for fifteen minutes. What kind of understanding do you have of that frame, and the performative contributions of all the participants and students in that format? Or what is the lecture, and how much time do you have? Do you have fifteen minutes, or one hour, and what do you do with that? Is it me who is doing a lecture?

I was interested also in the invitation by Karin Sander, the professor at ETH, to have a lecture as an artist every week during the semester. What does that mean, doing a lecture as an artist, ten times during a semester? How can you perform that, and are you able to perform that lecture? There, in an institutional framing, you have a very strict format, the lecture, and also the students know that this professor is doing the lectures like that, in this language, etc.

What can you do to do a performance that is somehow successful for the students? They don't have to join your lectures, because you're supposed to have a script, which means they can skip the lectures and at the end of the semester, read the script to prepare for the exam. So the lecture really needs to have another quality through the person who is giving the lecture. This is something I'm really interested in. This also relates to how you do your work as an artist, and how my artist colleagues work. What is their working performance? This is also my interest, passing by the shoemaker here around the corner: How old is he? How does he do his work, with what kind of attitude? I was really happy and interested in working with these different formats, contributing performances to an institution, to an institutional frame. Because I'm not making a big difference between the framing that is given to me by a curator, or by an institution, educational or other. This is all on the same level for me, somehow. If you asked me to do something, I'd be interested in your position as a curator, and when it's an institution, it has another tradition, the way formats have been established.

D: You recently did a seminar about Manifesta. In your seminars at the school, you like to involve your students, or develop a performative environment for them to study, and to participate, co-produce the seminar. I'm just curious how you connect these participatory and performative approaches with your techniques of institutional critique, how you resist your self-institutionalization, and avoid being part of the grand performance of representational theater. How do you create this environment of participation? What demands do you have towards the students? How do you make the audience a co-producer? How do you trigger this connection between you and them, and between them and the institution or the environment around you?

S: I really like giving seminars because it's always so challenging, because everyone of the group is contributing, and I'm just giving an input, and then I don't really know where this will lead to. The seminar lasts a semester, and I don't know where we're going to be at the end. This whole process for me really belongs to the group of students who come together and contribute. What I can do is have an always-critical look at what they're contributing, and from time to time offer a next step. But just if it's necessary. And also, offer moments of reflection on what we are doing. But this is also a nice thing, because I don't need a concept that delivers an image already. It gives a kind of a value to what is going to happen. It's more about opening of potentialities.

Currently I run optional seminars, for which the students can choose if they want to take part. In an institutional setting, it's quite different if students have to join, or if they can choose to join your seminars, or your formats. I'm doing a seminar on performance and intervention, and one on artistic thinking and practicing. I appreciate this way of working together. I like giving lectures, too, but these formats are really group-based process.

It's really interesting to work with students who are becoming architects, with their understanding, also their performative understanding of space, of public space, their interpretations. A few of them you can convince that what we are doing is art, but they need another argumentation. This is kind of close to me, because I have often worked in public space, and you don't convince people of something just because it's art. Or often, because it's art, it's just a kind of cliché or a wrong way of understanding it. So you have to find another way to gain their interest, their participation, their reflections, reflections on what you're doing, and not the whole self-referential meta-level of why is it art, or performance, and what makes it this kind of performance, or that kind of performance.

D: Is there something that architecture can learn from performance practices? I mean if you are a student, a future architect, how do you think they will relate later to what they learn in the seminars with you?

S: An important thing is the way you're doing research, or the way you can personally become conscious of space, and particularly public space, the space of a city, the way you move in the space, the kind of reception of built spaces. You can offer individual ways of exploring that space. Why not take one's time, stay for twenty-four hours or one week in that space, or whatever? I don't know what is going to happen. I mean, architects have kind of rituals regarding the way they see architecture. They do seminar weeks going to London, and Rome. They have a strict program in which they go to see a given house, and have a close look. They go to see the stairs. This is an interesting part in the construction. It is a very specific way they approach architecture. And I think there are different ways to make them see also social aspects. They also study sociology, and get to know a way of looking at society. I'm somehow forcing them to find their individual ways of exploring space. And then, the other thing is the way they express their experiences, and the way they express it in architecture. That's not my responsibility as such. I offer them the self-confidence to see that there are also other ways of perceptions and thinking. You can try to build a house, but you can also work with existing spaces, and change the perception of these space using a certain format, get people confronted with a certain kind of image or perspective on a space, and change that thing. We're not learning to do performance on stage. This is not how I teach. The artistic thinking and practice is a lot about different techniques of work, having a close look at the students' own working practice and routines, and what kind of routines they are adapting. From the different ways they get to know, what kind of individual working practice can they establish? This is part of ETH, where different architecture professors all know the way you have to do architecture. Each of them proposes their own way of working. My part is making it possible for the students to move in their own individual way between these different positions of professors. There isn't for me a hierarchy there. I mean, I also have an interested view on the way architects work, and the way artists work, and how you can combine different ways of working approaches. I rather teach methods, different methods, than telling them, look, this is something that you could do, or look at this... They already know so much. So it's more about their individual interpretation, about combining the knowledge they already have. They are constantly filled with knowledge. What is interesting and important to me is the way you work, deal with all that information.

D: You mentioned something that makes me think of empiricism. You said that when you passed by the shoemaker's shop, you observed him performing his labor. Often, an art performance does not

produce a work, an object. You said that you collect different observations. Then, how is this kind of collection transformed into performative practices? What I'm trying to say: Is it an absence of work? Or what is delivered in the institutional art context? One can say that it is this turning moment when art can also be perceived as an institution of art, where the notion of work and performance cannot be legitimized without the institution of art itself? What is the difference in the relation between labor and work, when you're producing an art performance, or producing a shoe? The shoemaker makes shoes, but when you perform what you captured through your observation of the movements of his labor, what is the product? This raises the question of documentation, too. What can be documented, or how should it be documented? Is the shoe a record, or a trace, a protocol of the labor of the shoemaker?

S: In 2013 I did a project for an exhibition curated by Harm Lux in Bogota, *Working Voices*.⁸ For that, I stayed in Bogota for one month, collected the different moves of craftsmen in the neighborhood, and developed a fitness program out of it. You ask about documentation, which would be this straight way of showing something. There is also always the way of slipping into a specific job, doing that job, and then presenting the object, a shoe, or whatever it may be. In that project, my idea was not to become a shoemaker, or a baker, or a butcher, but somehow physically adapt these moves, and adapt a kind of repetition of these moves, and create a format again that you can share with others. This is a format that I include from time to time in a performative lecture format, like a kind of warm-up doing these fitness exercises, telling the audience about the craftsmen and what I experienced there. You can also use language, it's not like just dance, where it all belongs just to the body. The combination can always change, the way you're collecting something, and take it further. And it doesn't stop there. I did a lot of projects with my graphic designer colleagues, friends, and the way they work. I also really like to give jobs to people. So this is maybe also a reason why I am not just teaching, but I also lead the chair: I like to analyze the way people work, and also assist them to maybe create another way. I mean, together with them, in a dialog reflecting on their working practices, what makes them happy in the way they work, or what isn't correct, what is good for the students, for the institution, for the chair, for them, to also offer them a chance to be there at the chair, and work very close to their artistic practice while being part of an institution, and having a very specific task working with students: Is this possible, and in which way? This is close, I think, to what I'm interested in working with at the moment.

⁸ *workingVOICES*, group exhibition curated by Harm Lux, Barrio Minuto de Dios, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Bogotá (MAC), 2 May - 30 June 2013 <<http://workingvoicesbog.blogspot.com/>> (accessed 2016-02-23).

San Keller

San Keller was born in 1971 in Bern, Switzerland, and currently lives and works in Zurich, Switzerland. He is well known for his participatory performances and ephemeral actions that frequently approximate social experiments. The overall tone of Keller's oeuvre is critical, conceptual and playful and reflects on the relationship between art and life.

His investigation of art as a service ultimately gives the audience the opportunity to question out-dated paradigms and experience them in a new way, while also placing them under critical scrutiny. His actions start off with contractual arrangements that set up the rules for his works, but since they rely on the participation of others, the course they take and their ultimate outcome is unpredictable.

Recent exhibitions include: *Deleted Scenes*, Galerie Brigitte Weiss, Zurich (2015); *Invent The Future With Elements of the Past*, Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich (2015); *Twisting C (r) ash*, Le Commun, Geneva (2015); *Disteli – Keller – Warhol*, Art Museum Olten, Switzerland (2013).

<http://www.museumsankeller.ch>



AT WORK (CUCKOO), 2009, Armen Eloyan



AT WORK (CUCKOO), 2009, Christine Streuli



AT WORK (CUCKOO), 2009, Ivan Moudov



AT WORK (CUCKOO), 2009, Shirana Shahbazi



AT WORK (CUCKOO), 2009, Bob Gramsma



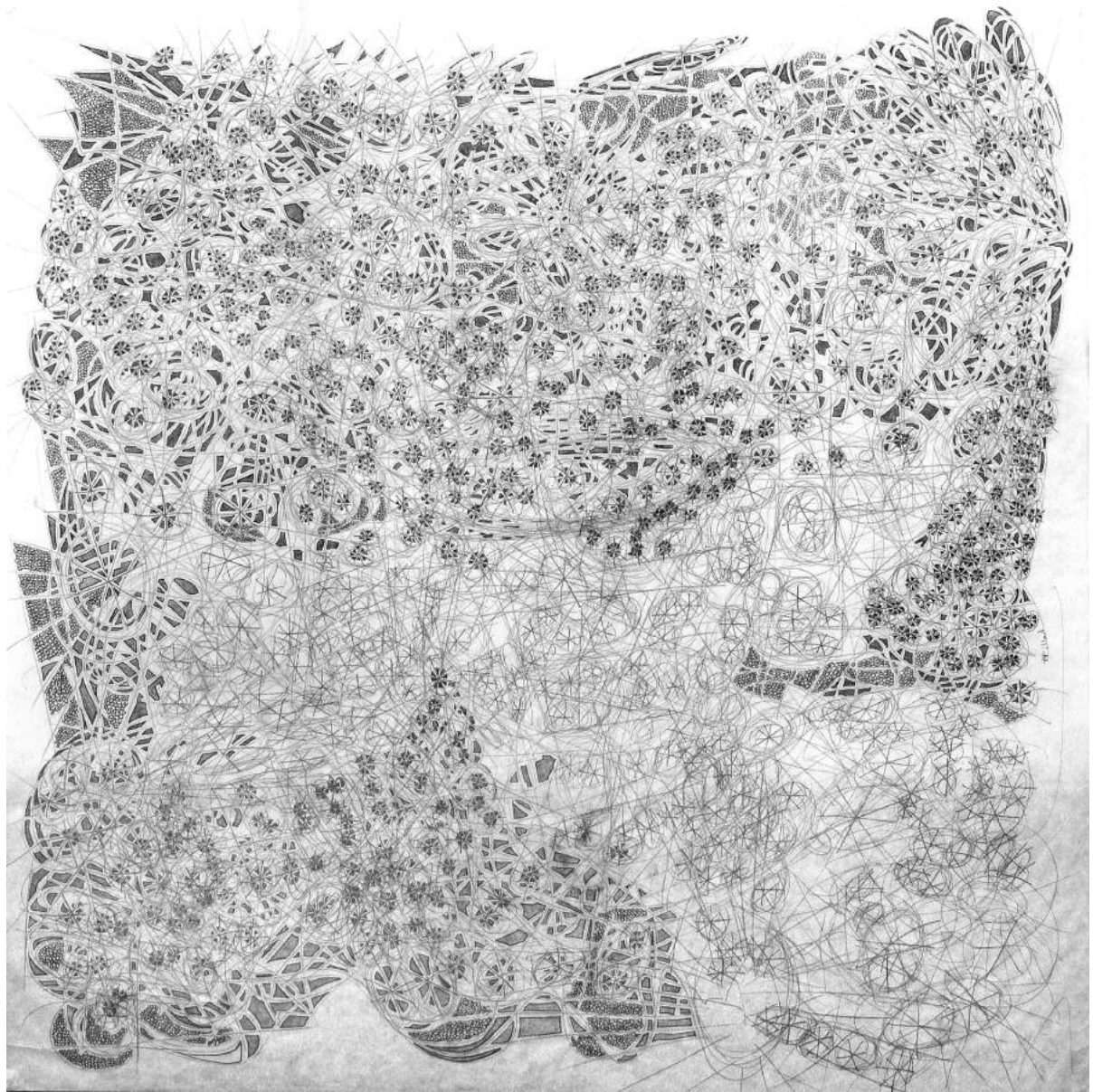
AT WORK (CUCKOO), 2009, Patricia Bucher



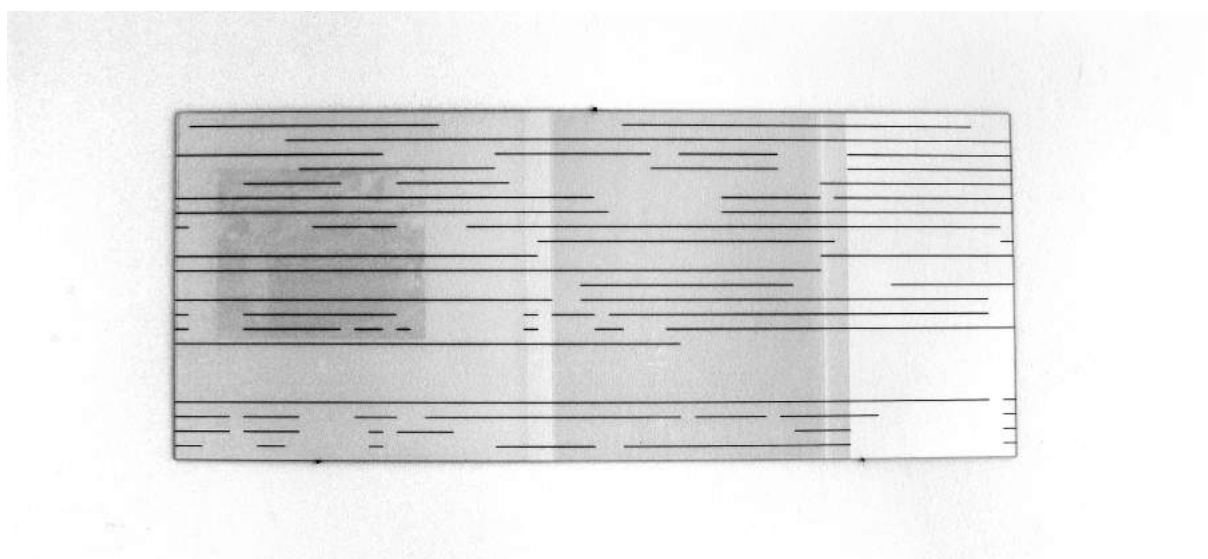
EXERCICIOS



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NACHTZEICHNUNGEN 1994



OHNE TITEL (16.08.1997), 1997



SAN KELLER TRÄGT SIE HOCH ZUR KUNST, 2002, Aktion 9



THE L WORD _ NO MAS METALES, 2015



UMARME HALLE, 2005



winter-hilfe, ZUEGELWANDERUNGEN MIT SAN KELLER, THE LONG WAY HOME 03_04_Promotion

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