

Art and Xerox

Zanna Gilbert Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles
John Tain Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong

This session examines the impact of xerography on the production and distribution of art and visual culture. Beginning in the 1960s, when the Xerox Corporation's electrostatic copying technology made easy and instantaneous photographic reproduction widely available, photocopy and its potential for self-publication and distribution has greatly impacted artistic creation and circulation. For instance, much of the aesthetic of conceptual art would be inconceivable without it: one need only think of the 'Xerox Book', the exhibition as publication organised by Seth Siegelaub in 1968. However, xerography also proved important to very different artists working in performance, photography, mail art, and in Xerox or Copy art itself, which peaked in the 1970s and 80s. While the significance of the technology for conceptual art has been discussed by Alexander Alberro in his *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (2003), and its use by activists researched by Kate Eichhorn (*Adjusted Margin: Xerography, art, and activism in the late twentieth century*, 2016), there exists no comprehensive international study. The session aims to address this lack, and will engage with the questions: How did artists' use of photocopy change over time and space, from the introduction of the first copying machines to their widespread availability in the 1980s? What are the historical specificities of the use of the photocopier in different regions or countries? Did artistic reproduction differ in any significant way between photocopy and other print techniques, such as the mimeograph? In what ways did photocopy intersect with photography and performance?

Speakers and Abstracts

Shuffling the Chronology: Jay DeFeo's experimental photocopies, 1975–89

Judith Delfiner (Institut national d'histoire de l'art (INHA))

My paper focuses on Californian artist Jay DeFeo's photocopy work developed during the last 15 years of her life – from the mid-1970s to the year of her death, in 1989 – that has, so far, never been studied. At the age of mechanical reproduction, the artist, curiously, used the copy machine, not as a means of duplication, but rather as an instantaneous process of image-making based on an interplay of contrasts between shadow and light, which resulted, most of the time, in the creation of genuine originals. This tension between the mechanical and the handmade – already present in Wallace Berman's Verifax collages – was characteristic of DeFeo's photocopy work. Although it does not form a distinctive corpus, being organically linked to the rest of her oeuvre, this body of work, which was never exhibited during the artist's lifetime, sheds unique light on her creative process. Fundamentally anachronistic, the latter used the loop not only as a motif (see the *Loop* series, 1971–75), but also as a *modus operandi* that enabled the works to self-generate 'naturally', in a progression that had no chronology. Indeed, quite often the photocopy appears to have been a vehicle for metamorphosing earlier work into new series, enabling a connection between heterogeneous temporalities. DeFeo, the first spectator of this active gestation that occurred before her very eyes, mounted arrangements of photocopies on plywood panels, which chronicled a course that was uncertain and constantly rerouting. The series of photographs that she took of these ephemeral arrangements document the dialectical relationship that linked her works in progress with their matrix, her studio.

Xerox and Art: Practical Questions

Mila Waldeck (University of Reading)

The conversion of xeroxed pages into books involves specific puzzles of page size, binding and number of copies. This presentation looks into how such puzzles were arranged in two books by multiple authors – the *Xerox Book*, organised by Seth Siegelaub in New York in 1968, and the *International Book*, organised by Edgardo Antonio Vigo in La Plata in 1976–80. Documents from the Seth Siegelaub papers in the MoMA

archive suggest that at a relatively early stage it was decided that the *Xerox Book* would be offset printed – which would suit the production of 1000 identical copies of letter-size leaves and facilitate the perfect binding that, Siegelaub’s notations indicate, was preferred for this project. In contrast, the *International Book* consists of unbound sheets individually made, copied and mailed by artists from various countries to Vigo’s address, having no specification other than the edition size of 200 copies and 18 x 23 cm page size. Some pages were xeroxed, others were not. Some were manually reworked. Signed and unbound, the pages seem like limited edition prints, but does this primarily increase their authorial status as art objects? Can such signatures have alternative meanings in the mail-art context where they circulated? What do the number of copies, standardisation and perfect binding mean in the circulation of the *Xerox Book*? If printing, and therefore the appropriation of xerox, was framed by specific situations of distribution and against art-related notions of value, the distinct notions of authorship from publishing and correspondence perhaps infiltrated art.

The Inherent Cost of the Photocopier and its Effect on Artistic Usage

Evan Jones (The University of Nottingham)

The untitled publication that has become known as the *Xerox Book* was, despite the association, not printed using a photocopier. Seth Siegelaub originally approached the Xerox Corporation for sponsorship to cover the estimated \$20,000 production costs. When this failed, he sought help from gallerist John Wendler and the *Xerox Book* was subsequently printed using a less expensive offset lithographic process. This paper will consider how the costs associated with the purchase and operation of a photocopier has shaped its use by artists. Christian Rigal writes in *Bienal Internacional Electrografía y Copy Art*, ‘very few are rich enough to own a color copier.’ These financial restrictions led Siegelaub and others to seek corporate sponsorship to finance the creation of their work. A few artists like Sonia Landy Sheridan received support from universities, others collaborated and founded workshops and photocopier centres. Other artists like Louise Odes Neaderland appeared to embrace, whether intentionally or not, Siegelaub’s desire for the democratisation of art. These copy artists created artworks that were restricted in scope and scale and so were consequently not reliant on the funding of corporations, institutions, or collectives. Although Rigal claimed that this form of electrophotographic art did ‘a disservice to this art’ it illustrates one of the many approaches artists took to solving the issue of the photocopier’s inherent financial cost, and demonstrates how the consideration of cost shaped subsequent artistic outputs.

Bringing together Form and Politics: Xerox and photography as anti-capitalist and anti-racist practice among Black British artists in 70s and 80s London

Taous R Dahmani (Panthéon-Sorbonne University)

In London, in the 1970s and 1980s, young artists and visual arts students turned to inexpensive and relatively fast-producing, art-making tools. In that respect photography and xerography became popular among artists marginalised by society because of their origins, and marginalised by the art world because of racism. If the Xerox machine was primarily the symbol of employee alienation, once introduced in art schools it rapidly became the ideal apparatus of an urgent anti-capitalist and anti-racist stance. This paper will try and analyse these productions as overlays or mergers of a form and a discourse. It will consider the heterogeneous and hybrid use of photography and xerography as objects governed by critical thought. Both practices were found in two main areas: in the artworks themselves but also in all the related appliances that were used to promote their practices. First and foremost, xerography was used for producing pamphlets and flyers. As such, it became a tool for creating networks and forming collectives; this was notably the case in 1982 when it was widely used for the promotion of the first National Black Art Convention. If the camera or xerox machine was engineered to replicate rather than create, it was, at this time, widely used for the creation of art oscillating between punk-rock aesthetics and iconoclasm; through appropriation and collage these artists found a form of empowerment.

Semi-Mechanical Print Tactics and Urban Interventions in Mexico City (1971–82)

Alice David (Independent)

In 1971, Felipe Ehrenberg, Martha Hellion and a small group of artist friends founded the Beau Geste Press, an independent publishing house based in rural Devon. Working from their kitchen table, they published artists' books, assembling *Schmuck* and other printed ephemera on an old mimeograph machine. Both the Press's extraordinary geographic reach and rather unique printing aesthetic, based on printing anomalies and artistic interventions, have prompted much invaluable research. Conversely, Ehrenberg's various translations of the Press in his native Mexico have not enjoyed the same critical attention. On his return in 1974, Ehrenberg continued the group's experiments in semi-mechanical reproduction with a group of students at the National School of Art in Mexico City. A number of these students went on to form *Grupo Suma*, an art collective best known for stringing up banners and stencilled images drawn from popular culture onto the city's walls and streets in order to highlight social inequalities and State terrorism, and to challenge the Government's monopoly on the media. In this paper, I therefore explore the very tangible relationship between the Beau Geste Press's publishing practices and Grupo Suma's subsequent 'guerrilla art actions'. Proposing the notion of 'print tactics', I suggest that many conceptual strategies employed by independent printing and publishing initiatives of the 1970s were not necessarily restricted to the printed page, but adopted by a number of artists as a strategy in their own urban interventions.

Copies in Exile: Xerography and written culture in León Ferrari's work

Agustín R Díez Fischer (Centro de Estudios Espigas (IIPC-Tarea/UNSAM))

In 1976, the political persecution initiated by the military coup in Argentina forced the artist Leon Ferrari to flee to Brazil. While in exile, Ferrari was in contact with an artistic scene that used xerography as a central element of experimentation. Artists such as Julio Plaza and Regina Silveira, and cultural agents including Walter Zanini, gathered in spaces such as the Centro de Estudios e Artes Visuais – Aster to begin a process of experimentation centred on reproduction technologies and strategies to democratise artistic production. This presentation analyses Leon Ferrari's use of technologies of reproduction, such as xerography or heliography, and his investigation into Xerox technology, which led him to reproduce present and past works and to launch the Editorial Licopodio. I propose to read these works in terms of an exploration into reproduction as a fundamental strategy in the articulation between power and written culture. In other words, I argue that in a dictatorial context, Ferrari investigated the link between writing and reproduction technologies, understanding both as mechanisms of social control in western societies. This presentation will be sustained on the concepts 'relational terms' (García 2016) and 'simultaneous avant-gardes' (Giunta 2013) elaborated from the comparative theory of Latin American art. Through these concepts, I will re-read León Ferrari's work based on a double comparison: first, with the experiences of political radicalisation carried out by Ferrari in the 60s in Argentina and, second, with the artistic explorations performed by artists and writers at the beginning of the decade.