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LAWRENCE WEINER

INTERVIEW BY LEAH SINGER
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When I arrived to visit the ground-breaking conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner in his West Village home, his wife, Alice, opened the door and invited me in before asking who I was. We found ourselves standing in the kitchen, which fronts the street, quickly finding things to talk about. On the wall behind us I noticed a section from a German newspaper with one of Lawrence's text pieces: MY HOUSE IS YOUR HOUSE YOUR HOUSE IS MY HOUSE WHEN YOU SHIT ON THE FLOOR IT GETS ON YOUR FEET. This is a good introduction to understanding the work and life of this artist who has used language as material for most of his illustrious career. As in much of his work, the truism functions as an invitation for discourse. He calls the work sculpture, and you can find it on the walls of a museum, writ large over the expanse of a building, or tucked inside a book. Fans of the work even get tattoos. The phrases, words, and configurations he chooses to use communicate what's on his mind. Born in the South Bronx in 1942, Weiner, who is self-taught—he dropped out of Hunter College—started his artist life by making some of the earliest examples of land art, before moving to painting and object making and eventually choosing language and text as the best means of expressing his ideas. All along he made films, wrote songs, designed furniture, made posters; really there is nothing that separates his life from his art. His home, on a quiet block of townhouses, is immediately inviting. The lower level serves as his studio and we gathered there to talk, but not before Lawrence insisted on showing me the boiler room. I couldn't help thinking how wanting to show me the place where all the guts of the house are located was like a manifestation of his work—a way to distil something to its vital parts.

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You have a 12-year-old grandson.

I didn't grow up in familial structures—I took care of my little sister until I left home. This isn't about sentimentality, and it's certainly not about something reflecting me, but it's having an intuition about what is au courant in thought. Twelve year olds think and read and talk about things. I am finding that the conversation makes me feel I'm not missing the world because I'm not running as fast as the world is turning. I still seem to be noticing, and that's what children are for.

Yes, definitely.

The idea of being an American socialist, which I really am, was that you work very hard, but your children do not have to be like you in order to survive. Otherwise there's no reason for the whole damn thing. I am stuck in a society that is basically Judeo, Christian, Muslim, where the child is a reflection of the parent. It's not that at all for me. I'm very proud of my daughter and I love my daughter, it's by luck we have a reasonable relationship, but she is not there because of me. From the lifestyle we were living in, she chose to use this and this to learn that.

You have a houseboat in Amsterdam as well as this townhouse. But this is your primary residence, right?

Wherever I work is primary. I can't get back to the houseboat—I am upset about that—because of the illness. I can't handle things.

What was it like when you were spending more time on the boat?

Same but different. It's been 45 years since we've had the boat. Eighteen years without electricity or running water. We had an eight-month-old baby, with no running water and minimal heat. Eventually we had running water, which was a delight, until they decided to have pumps put in because they turned our dock into a yacht harbour. It used to be this enormous harbour like Shanghai. Alice has a very good talent for doing things. She was able to cut back our expenses on the boat, and this was all done during times of very little money. But we have rebuilt the boat, and it's a good place to draw. I like it. I wanted my daughter to grow up with one foot in the old world and one foot in the new world, as if it was normal, which it is. My only economic choice was to live on the boat.

So you left New York.

I kept a studio in New York and let people stay when I wasn't there.

Was there a community of houseboat dwellers?

It was an enormous community. It was a mixture of people. This storm trooper type was living on a boat next to us, and when our boat sank he helped to hairdry my drawings and take things off the boat. These people were living like human beings, that was the point. The only reason why we ever got a telephone connection was because there were doctors living in the harbour.

They needed communication.

Yes.

You have so many references to water in your work.

I am very much a sea person. To be anecdotal, I am uncomfortable away from the sea. There are cities I adore, like Paris, but I can't stay there longer than 10 days or two weeks at a time. There's not enough oxygen; there's not enough water. The Seine is not the ocean. Often if I'm working on a project, I will find an excuse to go to the sea. It's the same as when I lived in Berlin: I would go to Hamburg so I could literally walk on the beach, have a cup of coffee, get back on the train, and go home.

Why is that?

I grew up in New York. I grew up wandering around on the ferry. I find the sea interesting. The first time I was able to really put into action what I was doing with the civil rights movement was on the docks. I worked there just on and off, but as a blue ticket, not as a legitimate worker—you know, you paid your dues, but you were not part of a union.

Can you talk about your involvement in civil rights?

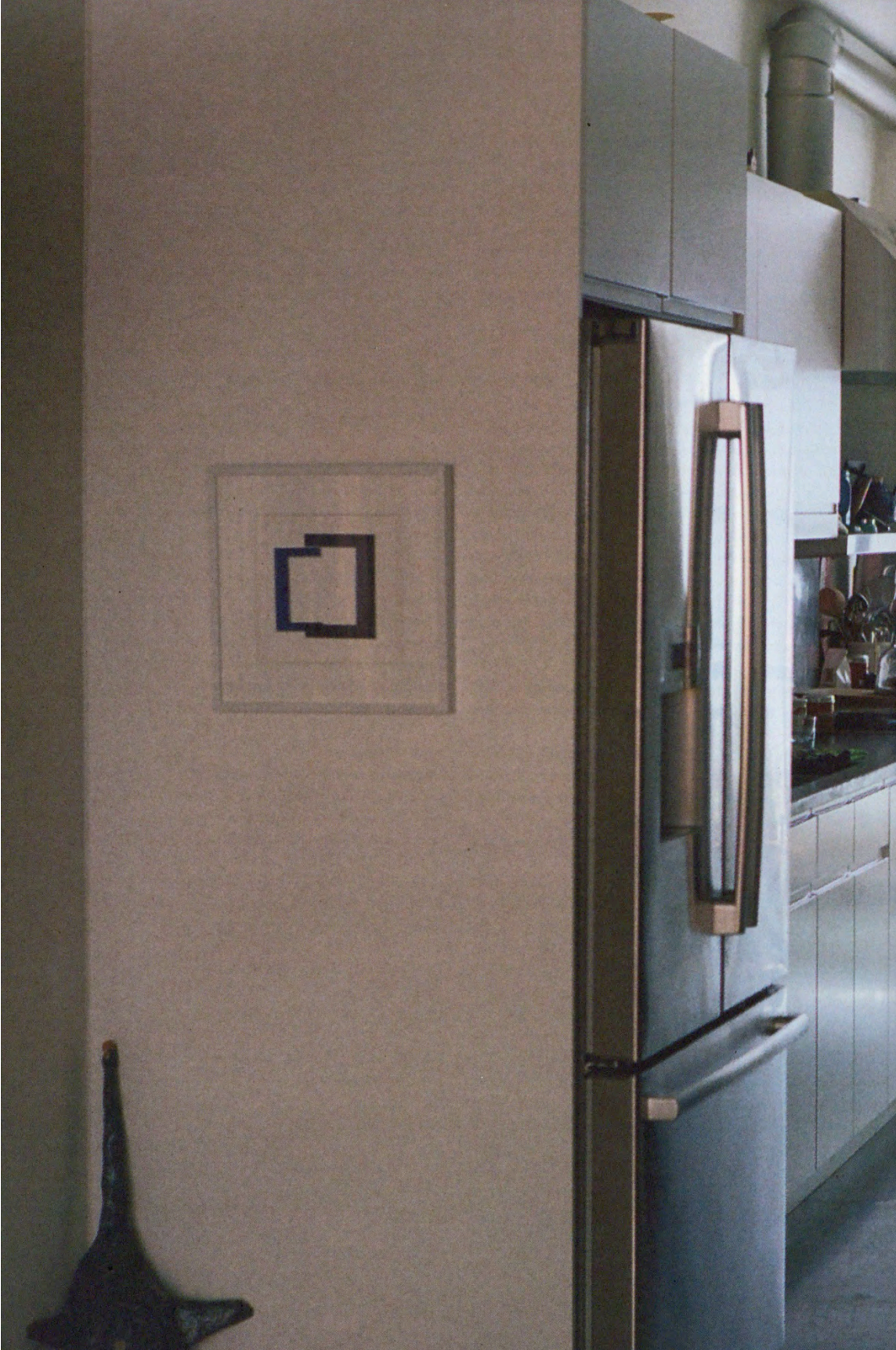
It was about putting little children—at that time it was the '50s—into school, making it possible to get their names on the register so they could go to school.

How old were you?

I graduated from Stuyvesant High School when I was fifteen and a half. It was my second year, so I guess that's about fourteen. I was a large person then. I had worked since I was a child in a store my parents had. So I was physically useful, as they say.

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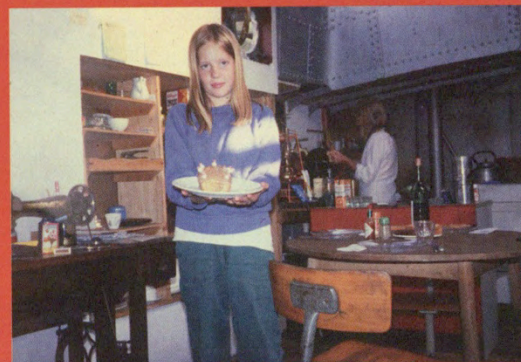
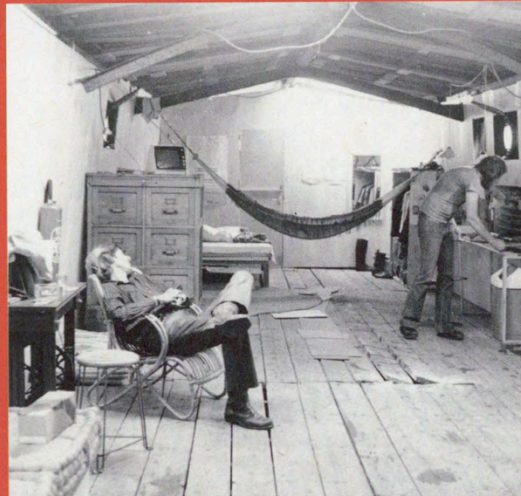
THE RIVIERA

In 1970, Lawrence Weiner and his wife, Alice Zimmerman Weiner, moved to a houseboat moored at Westerdoksdijk in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Their daughter, Kirsten, was raised onboard. These photographs provided by the Lawrence Weiner studio show the boat, named *Joma*, in its original state. Opposite page: I: Dan Graham and Alice Zimmerman Weiner in the galley; II: The *raum* (the hold); III: Kirsten's birthday cake (circa 1970).

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But you had an activist intention?

I don't know what I had. I don't like racism. I was blonde and blue eyed. I am a New Yorker, my parents were born in New York, but I never ran into anything until people started sussing religion. It was not something that greatly affected me, and in fact I didn't want to go to Princeton.

You could've gone to Princeton?

It was special studies that interested me, but a group of people told us out loud in front of an audience, 'We've got enough niggers and kikes'.

Right, you weren't exactly welcomed?

I saw what it was like. We have a culture that

house in the end was designed by LOT-EK. Alice is very good technically. The whole back of the house with the terraces was her idea. She saw it in an airport, and it was put up in a day. Everything else took a year, a year and a half.

Yes, it takes time.

I am very happy with the house. The light is good. That's the point.

And you have everything here. You have your archive, a working space, a living space.

Well, not everything; we have storage spaces all over the place. I seem to have done a lot of things. When you see the rest of the house it's



has completely denigrated itself by not acknowledging the fact that slavery ruins culture completely. And if you don't give the blame to the slavers, how does the slave have any sense of dignity? I will do anything possible to make life uncomfortable for people who believe in slavery.

You'd lived on this property for quite a while before you tore down the house and built a new one.

Yes, the house is still partially there. It was a two-storey house, now it's five.

Were you part of the building process?

We were totally part of the process. The

completely cluttered and falling apart, and we have to do something about that. My getting sick has completely screwed everything up. I never go out. You see, I am totally reclusive. But when we lived on Bleecker Street for 30 years, I'd meet people when they came to New York. They would call out on the street. There was no bell.

'Lawrence, come down!'

But I wouldn't go out, and very often people would call at two in the morning and say they were coming over for a drink.

But didn't you sometimes go out?

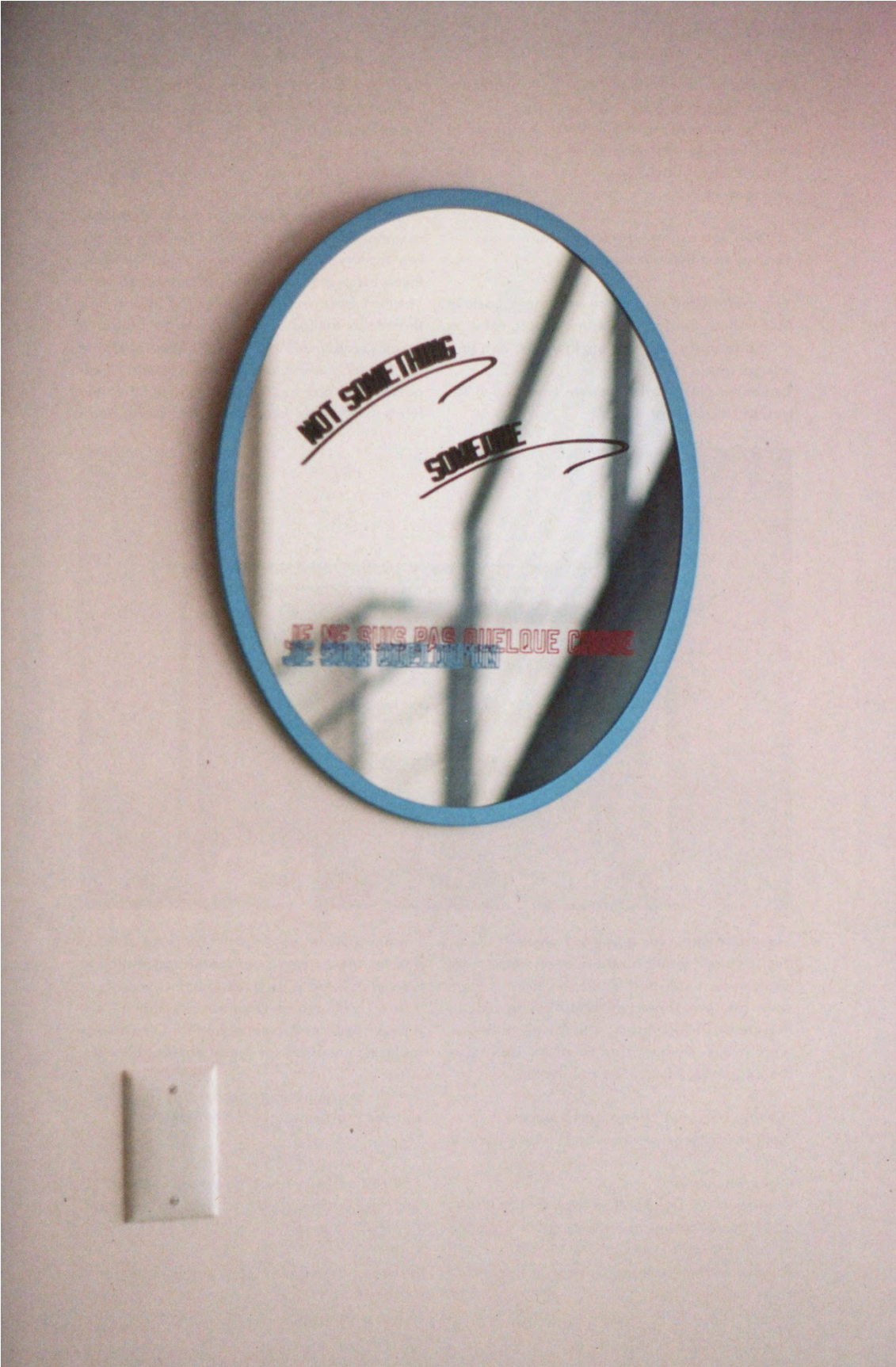
I used to go out to bars.

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Yes, the coolest bars in New York, from the Cedar Tavern to Max's Kansas City.
That's another time. No, it's true. At the same time, I would sometimes not go out for two days. It's really luxurious when you don't have any money.

In 1960 you found yourself in California.
Yes, my first trip out there.

You made *Cratering Piece* in a state park in Mill Valley, California. Many people refer to it as one of the earliest earthworks; can you tell me about it?

Explosive TNT: I laid it down and tied it together and it went boom.

Australia. There's no accreditation, really. It's just there, out of nowhere. You don't have to prove that it's art.

What about the person who is experiencing it or coming across the work?

The last thing you would expect was for people to understand a work of mine. But they are not having any trouble out there. With *Cratering Piece*, for years I thought I had succeeded. And I hadn't, because I was under the impression that each explosion was going to create a unique sculpture. Well, in fact it does. But I was really trying to explain that the concept of explosion was making the sculpture, not the hole left behind. Most people are not stupid, and I



You knew what was going to happen?

Yes, or else I wouldn't have been able to get explosives. I still had a leftover licence from some job I had taken while hitchhiking around the country. You just had to certify that you were not a criminal, and then you could buy the dynamite. I was a kid out there.

Did you document these earth pieces?

No. The problem was there weren't any photos.

Right, interesting.

I believe in doing public things that don't require accreditation in order to fly. It's like the *marelle* at the Pérez Art Museum in Miami and the one at the National Gallery of Victoria in

am not a victim as an artist because of what I make. Most people are more than willing to look at it; there is no question of its validity. It doesn't require a certificate saying that it's art. It requires a certificate saying that somebody took responsibility for it, but not that it's art.

You're saying it wasn't necessarily the hole, it was the journey to get to the hole.

Yes.

And you are very much about the journey.

Yes, I am, but the journey can also be imagined.

Right.

Because otherwise you are getting a regional

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QUIET NIGHT AT WESTERDOKSDIJK

The boat serves as both home and studio. The light makes it a perfect place for Lawrence to draw, something he enjoys doing on the boat. He always maintained a studio in New York City during his time in Europe. IV: The largest room on the boat; V: Preparing for the exhibition at Haus Esters in Krefeld with Julian Heynen; VI: Alice at night onboard *Joma*.

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take on it. I like to leave the options open, and the work is always presented by explaining it could be language, it could be built, and it could be built by somebody else, and it doesn't have to be built.

Just as you outline in your 1968 artwork, STATEMENT OF INTENT:

1. THE ARTIST MAY CONSTRUCT THE PIECE
 2. THE PIECE MAY BE FABRICATED
 3. THE PIECE NEED NOT BE BUILT
- EACH BEING EQUAL AND CONSISTENT WITH THE INTENT OF THE ARTIST THE DECISION AS TO CONDITION RESTS WITH THE RECEIVER UPON THE OCCASION OF RECEIVERSHIP

It seems to me I never thought that it was particularly profound. It was sort of logical.

It's sustained you in your work?

Let's just say it was one of those things where the 'stop' at a stop light seems to have kept a lot of people alive. This was another one of those things. It was just a truism. That's why we do what we have to do in order to show that the work we are doing has a real value; you don't have to place a false value on it.

What about access?

Access is something I thought about a lot in the '50s and '60s. Responsibility was another thing, and how do you make money and how does it all work. I came to the conclusion—whether I am correct or not—that when somebody purchases a work, that's access for the work to be shown and such. But it was always allowed to be in books and in catalogues and things like that. That's access, that's all you need.

You make a distinction between the gallery as a public space and the museum as a place where you have to pay.

It's not even about paying. You have to pay by accepting the fact that that's culture. With the gallery, you can think it's a joke.

OK, and what about outside in a public square?

People can joke if they want, or see it as a pain in the ass or an intrusion or vandalism. I have a big problem with one piece, where part of the population wants to keep it. Others want to move it all over the place, but they want it off the building it's on. And I designed the installation for the building it's on, so I don't know how to deal with it.

Where is that?

Corbigny, in France. They were really resenting the *tatouage* of their wonderful building, which is a music school, and the piece is built on musicality.

And so was there a solution?

It's still dragging out. France is a very interesting place. People of one class have a lot of power, but at the same time when they deal with anything like intellectual property, the power gets so diffused, sometimes it's lunacy, but most of the time it takes a very long time. It's part of the culture.

But this case is unique.

Like I said, there's no victim in any of this. The work has been able to find an audience since I started showing it, whether it was difficult or not to make a living or whatever, or whether the work was blocked out at one cultural institution—there was always a cultural institution that was more than willing to show it in its correct manner.

Do you translate the work?

If you are going to put it in a public place where people speak Turkish, do it in English and Turkish.

Has an alphabet ever challenged you in terms of the graphics?

No, we have even done these things in Arabic. We try to find typefaces that are amenable, and if not, we use ours.

Is there a Lawrence Weiner font?

I made one called Margaret Seaworthy Gothic. We even use it in Icelandic and do the symbols. It's just language, you know? And my use of gestures with pieces, it's just language.

I hear you don't like Helvetica.

Yes, I don't like it. You know why? Because the people that used it allowed it to become an authoritative typeface. I also find it squat. My tastes are far more Nordic socialism, I guess. Dutch, Piet Zwart. I have a dislike for serifs.

You have a fondness for the ampersand? Why?

I like the ampersand: 1 plus 1 is 2. Whereas 1 and 1 is 11. That's the win. It's a big win. There's not even a metaphor in there.

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Does it migrate to other cultural languages?
Of course. And when it doesn't, then you don't do it. That's the terrorism of syntax. I'm aware of it all the time.

Do you get excited when you see interesting lettering on a package or signage in the street?
I don't get that excited. I don't mind collaging. I don't have to appropriate. Now, getting excited about something you see often leads to wanting to appropriate it. That's the mistake of the Pictures Generation, where people said they were appropriating—they're not. They are arranging, and that's different from appropriating. Appropriation is when you take credit for something you didn't do. It's a moral

make art or not, because of my time with politics. I felt maybe I should be organising, but I decided to try to change the culture. I ended up in Provincetown. We met up there. I had no idea how we knew each other. It turned out we graduated from the same high school at the same time, but I was the working-class contingent and he was not. I was on the docks and organising, and I think he was in the Reserves. But we didn't know each other, we just knew each other's names. I looked at his space, and we agreed to do a show. He sold rugs on the side to pay the bills.

Rugs, OK.
He was an expert on rugs and textiles.



no-no. It's like graffiti has a right to exist everywhere, as long as it says something. It could say, 'The sky is blue' or, 'My children are hungry'. But it has to say something. It can't say, 'Me, Jose, 42nd Street'. Existential angst is not a sufficient reason to intrude into public space.

You were a painter.
There's a picture up there from my first show at Seth Siegelau, in 1964. Donald Judd reviewed it in some art magazine—not a great review, but he said it was not bad.

How did you meet Seth Siegelau?
I had come back from California and I was questioning whether I wanted to continue to

Why did you transition away from painting?
Necessity. I was no longer able to convey the complexity of what I was trying to convey with the means at my disposal. So I changed the form of the paintings. They developed into these cut-outs. They were being understood and followed, so I could have kept going, it would have been a lot easier. But I just reached a point where it wasn't working. It all moved from one to the other, and it's still making sense as it develops and grows. That's lucky, come on.

It is lucky. Language is really so universal.
Language is the most adaptable thing possible because it allows somebody to maintain that

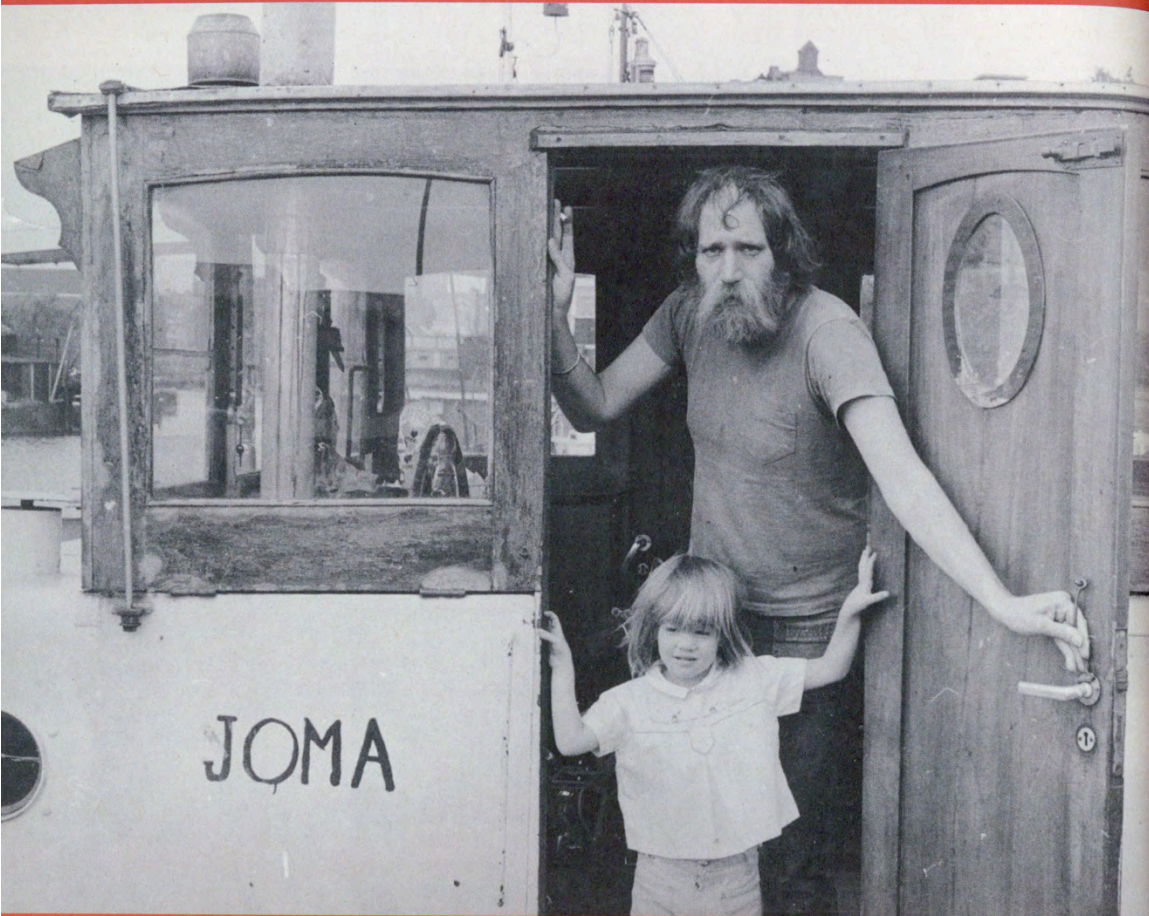
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LIFE ONBOARD JOMA

Although living on the boat was not easy in the beginning—it had no running water and insufficient heat—it was the setting for making important artwork and having close family times. VII, VIII, and IX: An assortment of photographs of the boat's interior.

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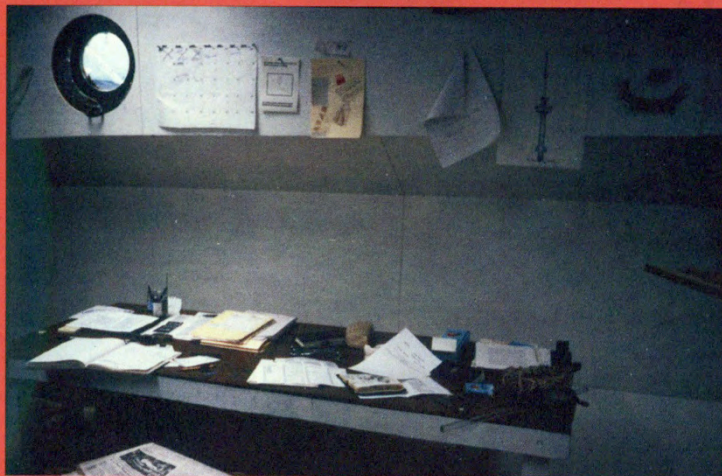
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the way they see something is really the way it is. All those other people seeing it another way is something really out of the question. Language takes it away from the artist's hand and essentially takes away from their ethnicity because you are able to express anything in any kind of ethnic form.

I did also want to ask you about Ned Sublette.
We did really wonderful things; I liked working with Ned a lot. Ned is really a complicated human being. He's genuinely a scholar.

And he is an expert on Cuban music.
Afro-pop, it's just astounding. Along with Peter Gordon and Dickie Landry, those are the three people I used for my movie scores.

And how was it for you to write lyrics?
It was a necessity at the time, emotionally, to write some songs. Then we arranged them, and we got them performed and recorded. I did a performance in Vienna, as well. It was rather interesting; the power blew out and the computers all started to go. People in the audience thought it was part of the show. They didn't know the lights had gone out in the city. It was fun.

Do you like performing?
No, I don't. I don't mind directing.

You have made many films. Have there been retrospectives of the work?
There have been, in Vienna and Jerusalem. At the Kitchen Spring Gala Benefit recently everyone was making such a big thing out of my relationship with the director Kathryn Bigelow. You know, Kathryn and I worked together and I was the rigger on her first movie. We were part of a scene that was continually nourishing everybody else.

Did you meet your wife, Alice, at Max's Kansas City?
Alice and Helen Harrington, who is now Helen Marden, were waitresses at the time, and were tied into the scene. Debbie Harry had just left, I think, when Alice arrived.

Right.
Bars were a nice scene. That bar was a particularly nice scene, though not to work in. A terror to work in. I had been friendly with the owner when he had a little coffee shop on

the Lower East Side and checkerboard clubs. I had a thing about checkerboard clubs when I was a kid. Black and white in the same club, not split apart. In Britain it was really a bitch. In Islington people with baseball bats would come out because you were in a black and white club.

I've never heard that expression before.
It's the least offensive expression to explain it. There are lots of people who have lots of problems about lots of people that don't look like them. That's a nice expression: lots of people who have lots of problems about lots of people that don't look like them.

I think you may have something there.

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