

Between 1969 and 1974, the art critic Lucy Lippard curated a series of group exhibitions that have come to be known as her “numbers shows.” Each took place in a different city, and was titled after the approximate population of that city: 557,087 in Seattle (1969), 955,000 in Vancouver (1970), 2,972,453 in Buenos Aires (1970), and c. 7,500 in Valencia, California (1973-4). (This last exhibition travelled to seven other locations in the U.S. and Europe, though the title remained the same.) These shows, which broke from minimalist legacies towards new concept-driven attitudes, contributed to an important tectonic shift then occurring in contemporary art: the dematerialisation and dehierarchisation of the art object. Installing works both inside and outside of professionalised art venues, Lippard hoped to challenge the connoisseurial logic of art production in her time.

Reflecting on these exhibitions in 2011, Lippard ruminated that conceptual art had, “partly due to its non-object portability, and partly because it was more welcomed in other countries/continents than it was in the U.S., opened up international possibilities.”¹ Interestingly, one of the primary locations of art’s refuge from the object was print: in a postmodern book form, as published textual language. (Lippard’s next major project after her numbers shows was *six years: the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972* (1973), an exhibition in the form of a catalogue.) The historian Benedict Anderson developed the idea of “print capitalism” to describe the origins of modern nationalism. Books were printed in the vernacular, and not in sacral languages, like Latin, to forge new markets. Consequently, readers speaking different dialects began to affiliate with each other within the imagined community of the nation state.

Radically departing from these prior ambitions of publishing, conceptual experimentation can be sited within a new stage of mediated capitalism, which reduces language to code as it produces a globally networked world. Context becomes liminal (work can be made, or read, anywhere), and traditional identities are destabilised. While enabling greater ease of circulation, with

gravitational implications for transnational alliances, feminist world-building, and insurgent collectivity, this mode remains nonetheless attached to rarefied vehicles of exchange: markets, which retool to distribute dematerialised commodities while calcifying borders in order to protect financial interests.

there is a tension inherent in the book form as a conceptual art proposition: cautiously, simultaneously, it inhabits two formative paradigms of capitalist value production.

in the elliptical exhibition-making of jean-michel wicker, the condition of immaterialisation prefaces numerous questions about play, imagination, transfer of surfaces and spaces (and so, meaning(s)) and the possibility of joy (via inspiration). what content remains when context, and other forms of referentiality, is foregone? did reading replace looking with the innovation of the printing press? what space is there for living?

i'd like to evolve this thought further, but i think wicker's camouflage motif offers a provocative prompt. camo patterns signify the pastoral, because they are bound to the visuality of the meadow and the forest, but they also perform pure abstraction. (with a change in location, what was deceptive can become flagrant.) amid the relentless equivocation of global capitalism, it might be a good moment to argue for the provincialisation of contemporary art, to pivot off of dipesh chakrabarty's *provincializing europe*, or to celebrate a queer rurality, to invert one of jean-michel's cruisy catchphrases.

it's a life's work to break out of the traditions we're given.

harry Burke

¹ lucy r. lippard, antony hudek, "number shows." *flash art*, issue 281, november – december 2011.