

BETTINA

THE FIFTH

POINT

OF THE

COMPASS

Curated by Marina Caron
April 1–May 28, 2023 at The Hessel Museum of Art

BETTINA: THE FIFTH POINT OF THE COMPASS

“My work is serial sometimes, sequential sometimes, evolutionary sometimes, and there is no such thing as one of each. My work is concerned with ‘strategies of auto-regenerating constants’ which demonstrate theories of continuum and working systems rather than isolated images. ... Some projects have two, some four, some ten, some twelve, some twenty four, some much more. I need ten in order to make one totality. One is vapid and isolated and lonely and alone without its destiny.”

—Bettina¹

I first met artist Bettina Grossman (b. 1927, Brooklyn; d. 2021, Brooklyn)—who goes by her first name only—in her apartment at New York’s Chelsea Hotel in the summer of 2019. I was assisting with the exhibition *The Power of Two Suns*, which she shared with the artist Yto Barrada at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council’s space on Governors Island, which opened that fall. That exhibition was one of a number in the past five years that have marked a resurgence of interest in this under-recognized artist’s work.² *Bettina: The Fifth Point of the Compass*—the first institutional solo exhibition of the artist’s work in the United States—arises out of this important moment in the artist’s career. This exhibition is the result of extensive research at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College; close collaboration with Barrada, who has taken responsibility for the artist’s estate; and my friendship with Bettina, which has left a lasting impact on me. The exhibition focuses on one of Bettina’s expansive projects—*The Fifth Point of the Compass* (1977–85)—and presents a number of works she produced under this title, along with a selection of other works that intersect with this project, including the project *Phenomenological New York* (c. 1970s).

This exhibition hopes to elucidate the dual nature of Bettina’s body of work, as both distinctly heterogeneous and deeply interconnected. As the introductory quote suggests, Bettina’s works cannot be seen as isolated objects but rather should be viewed in relation to one another. Her unique systematic approach has resulted in a body of work that structurally rejects the logic of the singular art object, instead calling for modes of display that emphasize relationships and pattern-finding, visible throughout her prolific output.

Born and raised in Brooklyn, Bettina traveled extensively in Europe during the 1960s before settling, in the early 1970s, at Manhattan’s storied Chelsea Hotel, where she lived and worked for nearly fifty years. From 1977 to 1985, the artist documented the flow of pedestrians on 23rd Street. She would shoot over 8,000 35 mm color slides from her balcony, explaining: “I am documenting

daily urban activities in fixed focus from the fifth floor. The pavement grid structure becomes the universal constant within which inner city energies are contained.”³ Bettina then grouped these images into categories such as “deliveries,” “runner,” “luggage,” and “suspenders.” The artist produced many works in various media that drew on this photographic practice, giving them all the common title *The Fifth Point of the Compass*.⁴

The exhibition’s centerpiece is one particular series from this larger project, *The Fifth Point of the Compass / New York from A to Z, studies in random constant, fixed focus–time lapse*, comprising nearly 1,100 slides. Because this body of photographic material was never exhibited during the artist’s lifetime, it isn’t known how Bettina intended the series to be displayed. The work is presented as it was found in the artist’s apartment in 2019 by Barrada: as sheets of color 35 mm slides, with portions of certain pages left empty. Primarily shot on vibrant Kodak Ektachrome film stock, the images capture the wide array of pedestrian activity on the street and sidewalk from a bird’s-eye view.

Bettina’s image categories don’t attempt to be exhaustive or complete. Instead, they suggest fragments of a process that could continue indefinitely. Bettina would organize the slides in loose alphabetical order, according to their categories, transforming the captured urban activity and motion into organized visual patterns. Bettina described this process as one that fixes ephemeral patterns in place: “Once elusive transitory inapprehensible energies are here repositied.”⁵

In *New York from A to Z*, pattern emerges through the relation between text and image. Bettina also worked solely with text, often looking for repetition in letter combinations or linguistic sounds. In *Weight / Wait, English for Foreigners* (date unknown), the artist assembles sets of homonyms. In *B * Foto / Object* (date unknown), she lists words with repeating letter combinations. She also located letter forms in the city itself: in *Think / Reflexissez, WTC, Volumetric Space* (date unknown), the vertical elements of the letters in “THINK” seem to emerge from the vertical stripe pattern on the facade of the World Trade Center, and they echo again in the stripes of the American flag. Text is multivalent in Bettina’s work, becoming a referent, a medium, and a mediator through which to identify likeness and pattern.

Forms repeat not only within discrete works of Bettina’s but also across projects that span decades. The title of a series of small wooden sculptures, *The Handclasp* (1972), reappears as one of the hundreds of categories in *New York from A to Z*. Bettina considered this type of connection between projects to be an essential operation of her work:

“Each work is but an element in a process to be woven into a vast world of interrelational hidden meanings whereby each is relative to the other, incidental to each other, interdependent upon each other, unified and shaped according to each other, materialized according to each other into a greater whole, wherein your involvement evolves into one great unity.”⁶

In another instance, the checkered lines Bettina drew along the grid of the sidewalk in one drawing from *The Fifth Point of the Compass* resemble her earlier explorations of dimensionality in black and white marble in the project *Mass Levitation, Concrete Space, where space becomes matter becomes volume, 1965–75, The Inside-Outside house, (1965–75)*. The grid likewise echoes a series of checkered line drawings on graph paper, titled *Hidden Agendas* (date unknown).

While this exhibition primarily focuses on *The Fifth Point of the Compass*, it’s important to contextualize this series alongside Bettina’s other major project on New York City: *Phenomenological*

New York (c. 1970s). When describing the two projects, Bettina writes that one was “anthropological” (*The Fifth Point of the Compass*) and the other “phenomenological” (*Phenomenological New York*).⁷ Whereas *The Fifth Point of the Compass* is characterized by the omnipresence of the sidewalk grid, *Phenomenological New York* focuses on movement in the city as seen through distorted reflections in the glass and metal of surrounding buildings, cars, and windows. Bettina once described her phenomenological work in this way:

“You see I was back in New York, trying to find this invisible secret. And there is a mystery here. It keeps us here. And it’s there, and I found it there in the architecture. And I started photographing distortions in the architecture—not reflections, straight reflections. ... If you go to certain buildings, at certain hours, and the light is right, then you will find fantastic surrealism created by the sun in the architecture.”

Because of the prevalence of grids and reflective surfaces in the urban landscape, New York City becomes a site of experimentation and realization of what Bettina considered her special vision.

Influenced by her informal studies in mathematics and physics, as well as by mysticism and her Orthodox Jewish upbringing, Bettina’s emphasis on pattern and modes of serendipity took on associations of spiritual interconnectedness. In Corinne van der Borch’s 2010 documentary on the artist, *Girl with Black Balloons*, Bettina speaks about this aspect of *The Fifth Point of the Compass* project:

“I looked over the balcony and I saw these people walking below me. ... I started shooting commonalities—where people were doing the same thing. Commonalities like: a man is walking by lighting a cigarette, striking a match, right beneath me. And, then a few minutes later, someone else came along doing exactly the same thing. And I thought, this is a gift. ... You find mystical things occurring when you concentrate on something—something else will come into being and reinforce what preceded it.”⁸

When I first met Bettina in 2019, the new management at the Chelsea Hotel had stopped taking new long-term residents in order to undertake major renovations. Amid the typical chaos of construction, I rode the service elevator up to the fifth floor. Bettina’s door was covered in stickers and handwritten notes, as it had been for decades. In large, blocky, handwritten text in black ink, one sticker read: “INTUITION = TRANSCENDENTAL LOGIC.” Another in smaller lettering said, “unequal elements constrained and equivocated by a rigid structure of predetermined parameters.” And one phrase appeared on the door twice—“SANCTUARY – PROTECT THE MAGIC.” *Bettina: The Fifth Point of the Compass* builds on the important work already done on the artist in recent years, presenting a selection of Bettina’s astonishingly prolific, rigorous, and unique body of work, situated in her own time and pointing to important resonances for the concerns of today.

- 1 Bettina Grossman, a letter typed by the artist addressed to “Shulamith,” date unknown, Bettina Grossman papers, the Estate of Bettina Grossman.
- 2 Bettina’s work was also recently included in *Greater New York* at MoMA PS1, Queens, (2021); a monograph, titled *Bettina*, published by Aperture (2022); and *A poem of perpetual renewal*, a solo exhibition at Les Rencontres de la photographie d’Arles, France (2022), among others.
- 3 Bettina Grossman, a manuscript typed by the artist describing two of her projects: ‘The Fifth Point of the Compass / Studies in Random Constant / Demographics on 23rd Street / New York from A to Z’ and ‘Finite Structure / One out of a Possible 1,048,576,’” date unknown, Bettina Grossman papers, the Estate of Bettina Grossman.
- 4 One possible reading of this title would suggest that the X and Y axes of the sidewalk’s grid make up the cardinal points of the compass, with the camera on the Z axis becoming the fifth point.
- 5 Bettina Grossman, a manuscript typed by the artist describing two of her projects, date unknown, Bettina Grossman papers, the Estate of Bettina Grossman.
- 6 Bettina Grossman, a manuscript typed by the artist with the header: “Your Moral Right, Your Proprietary Right,” date unknown, Bettina Grossman papers, the Estate of Bettina Grossman.
- 7 In a letter written to Wilhelmina Cole Holladay, and addressed to her office at the National Museum for Women in the Arts, Bettina describes her work (in the third person): “In addition she has been working for the past ten years on two projects about New York, one phenomenological, the other anthropological.” Bettina Grossman, a letter typed by the artist addressed to Wilhelmina Cole, date unknown. Bettina Grossman papers, the Estate of Bettina Grossman.
- 8 *Girl with Black Balloons*, directed by Corinne van der Borch, documentary (US/Netherlands: Wondertime Films, 2010), 26:40.

Bettina: The Fifth Point of the Compass is curated by Marina Caron as part of the requirements for the master of arts degree at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College (CCS Bard). In addition to exhibition support provided by CCS Bard, the exhibition and publication were made possible by the OSUN Center for Human Rights & the Arts at Bard College.

Design by Huber/Sterzinger

Marina Caron and Yto Barrada would like to thank the following people for their support:

Ragini Bhow, Corinne van der Borch, Ann Butler, CCS Faculty and Staff, Rachel Cohen-Lunning, Alex Fleming, Aliza Green, Sean Gullette, Martha Hart, Kaara Henriquez, Gregor Huber, Cara Kuball, Anya Komar, Maggie Kristensen, the OSUN Center for Human Rights & the Arts at Bard College, Ian Sullivan, Joanna Warsza



Portrait of Bettina in front of the Chelsea Hotel, c. 1980s. Gelatin silver print. 7 x 5 inches