

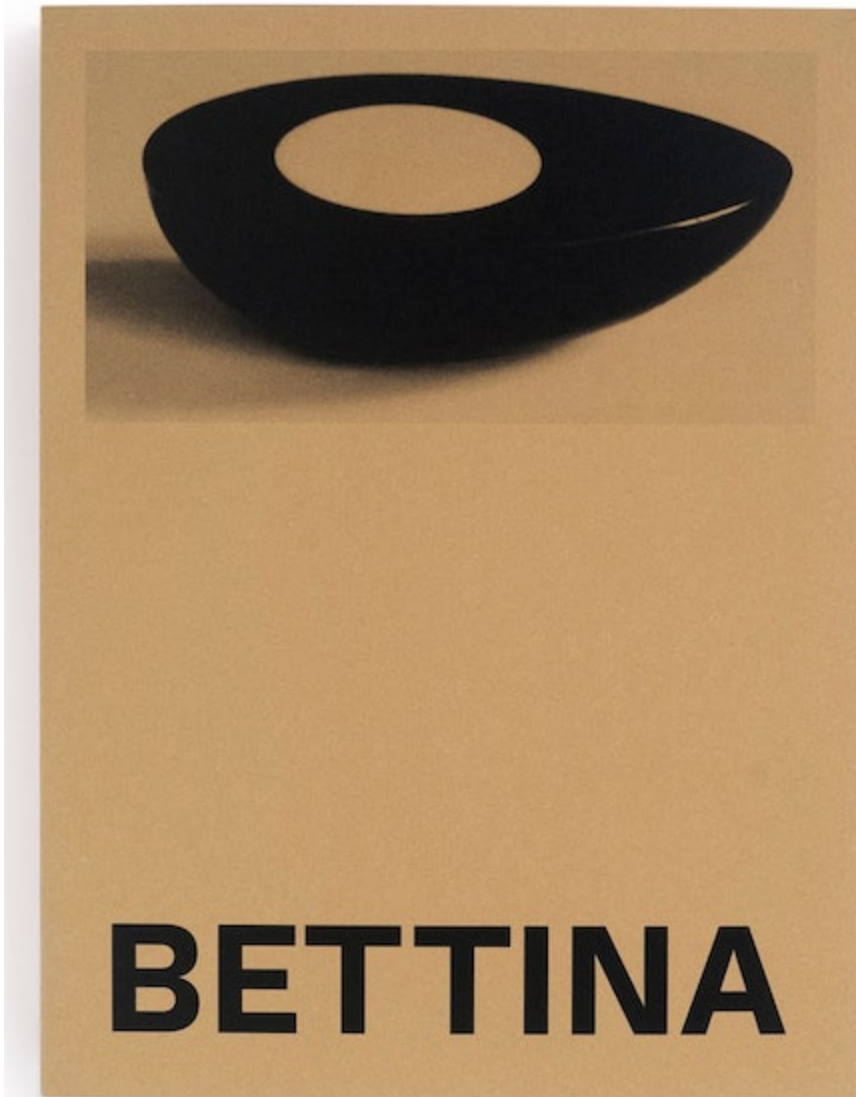
« NOV 2022 Issue

**Art Books**

***Bettina***

**The first monograph devoted to the artist showcases her desire to archive her own work**

*By Noa Wesley*  
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Yto Barrada, Gregor Huber, ed.  
*Bettina*  
(Aperture and Éditions Xavier Barrall, 2022)

In 1966, the interdisciplinary New York-based artist Bettina began to create photographic portfolios of her works, including her sculptures, abstract photographs, and serial geometric drawings. Bettina pasted her carefully composed photo-documents onto black paper and labeled each page in white pencil with neatly blocked letters. After a studio fire destroyed all of her work and killed her cat, these photo-album portfolios became a way for Bettina to preserve her work and assuage her anxiety of losing it once again. The desire to archive her own work, which undergirded the philosophy of much of her photographic practice, became a necessity and a means of surviving as an artist after the tragedy of the fire. A selection of these portfolios are reproduced in *Bettina* and their sleek, simple design style informs the zine-like feel of this expansive book.

*Bettina* is the first monograph devoted to the artist who died in 2021 at the age of 94 while this publication was in progress. Like many women artists of her generation, Bettina's work largely remained unseen during her lifetime. Her first solo-exhibition was in 1980 at the O.K. Harris Gallery in New York and she did not have another until this year, when Les Rencontres de la Photographie—an annual photography festival in Arles, France—mounted *Bettina. A Poem of Perpetual Renewal*. The exhibition in Arles is a companion to the book and was organized by the editors—the artist Yto Barrada and Gregor Huber—after the book won the Luma Rencontres Dummy Book Award in 2020 (which financially enabled its publication). In an artist's career, a forty-year gap is a long one, and the story of what did, or did not, happen in those years for Bettina is certainly the sub-text of this publication. What becomes clear in sifting through almost 250 images of the artist's work is that Bettina believed in the merit of her creations, preserving them for a future audience that awaited her.

Since meeting Bettina in 2015, Barrada has been the shepherd of her rediscovery. In her text in the book, she describes the evolution of their relationship. In their initial meeting, Barrada found Bettina dwarfed by the boxes and books that filled the artist's Chelsea Hotel studio. "One sees Bettina and understands that some disaster has taken place, long ago," Barrada writes. This sense of disaster had been the focus of two documentary films—Sam Bassett's "Bettina" (2007) and Corinne van der Borch's "Girl With Black Balloons" (2010)—and it is to Barrada's credit that she pushed past the artist's initial claim that all her artwork had been destroyed. Over time, Bettina began to unbox her archive and, in 2019, the two began to work on the book. Bringing on Gregor Huber as a designer, the three set out to create a monograph with "a punk energy [that would] reflect Bettina's raw elegance."

*Bettina* opens with a section on her Xerox works, another method of duplication that propelled her creative output. In the first Xerox, a large line drawn circle is at the page's center with the text "SANCTUARY protect the magic" at its top. The edges of the Xerox are visible in its reproduction, which preserves a sense of the work as an object that exists beyond the page. This untitled Xerox, like much of Bettina's work, is conceptually driven and demonstrates her kinship with other artists in the 1960s and '70s who were similarly working with image and text to catalogue information. But this work is also evocative of the spiritual registers Bettina sought to conjure within her artworks.

The overlap between a rigorous conceptualism and an interest in mystical phenomenon is best illustrated by a series Bettina began in 1977. For *The Fifth Point of the Compass / New York From A to Z, Studies in Random Constant, Fixed Focus-Time Lapse*, Bettina photographed random occurrences on the sidewalk below her balcony. "I looked over the

balcony, and I saw these people walking below me,” the artist recalls. “And I thought... I’d like to capture that. You find mystical coincidences when you concentrate on something hard enough.” The artist would continue the series for eight years, creating photographic typologies of pedestrians’ activities, organized from A to Z. A selection of the photographs from this series are reproduced in the section on photography, where the editors successfully use the book format to create a sequence of related images that unfold with the turn of each page. In the group “READER,” photographs of people walking and reading are printed in varying sizes, creating a rhythm that brings forth the magical synchronicity of New York City, always there if you take the time to look.

Like many of Bettina’s other projects, this series expands from one media—photography—into others, including film, Xerox, and conceptual texts. As the artist Robert Blackburn observed in 1986, “[Bettina’s] photography, film, sculpture are as one, for the photographic medium is employed not only for documentation, but as an endless source of inspiration from which other disciplines emerge-and merge.”<sup>1</sup> In spite of the fact that Bettina often flowed from one media to the next, the book sections are separated by media, making each section feel like an unsuitable container for what it holds. Works derived from *The Fifth Point of the Compass*, for example, are displayed in the sections on Xerox, Photography, and Film. A chronological structure may have been a more successful approach for clearly laying out the evolution of Bettina’s hybrid practice.

Sometime in 2020 when it seemed like the book might never be completed, Bettina wrote to Barrada: “I NEED MY FIRST BOOK TO BE LESS COMPLETE LESS EXPENSIVE AND MORE AVAILABLE TO MORE PEOPLE.” With this mandate, the editors produced a book that privileges access to a wide-range of Bettina’s artworks. This democratic selection invites us to explore Bettina’s radical faith in paying attention.

1. Robert Blackburn, “Critical Review,” 1986, Bettina archives. Quoted in *Bettina*.

## Contributor

Noa Wesley

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