

PRIVATE PAGES MADE PUBLIC

Megan N. Liberty explores artists’ engagement with notebooks and diaries, thinking through the various meanings that arise when these private ledgers become public.

In his 1969 essay “What Is an Author?” the French philosopher and theorist Michel Foucault asked what delineates an author’s work: “If an individual is not an author, what are we to make of those things he has written or said, left among his papers or communicated to others? Is this not properly a work?”¹ If what might be of value to future audiences is established by the status of “author,” the net cast is wide enough to have troubled Foucault: “Plainly, we lack a theory to encompass the questions generated by a work and the empirical activity of those who naively undertake the publication of the complete works of an author often suffers from the absence of this framework.”² Foucault posited this question as a problem, but the absence of an answer to it, I suggest, gives artists an opportunity and plays into their performance of self, allowing them to subvert established notions of authorship. As public interest in archival materials grows, archives give artists a way to speak for themselves. We have recently seen the publication of a flurry of notebooks and sketchbooks by a variety of artists both living and dead, including Anni Albers, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Lee Lozano, Brice Marden, Stanley Whitney, and Jack Whitten, to name just a few. These books, many of which have grown out of exhibitions, range from visually driven volumes, focusing on the plans and trials for finished art, to more diaristic forays that visually or verbally disclose thoughts about the artists’ lives and work. Regardless of where a book falls across this spectrum, it offers an intimate experience of behind-the-scenes material.

The publication of archival facsimiles as mass-media art books raises issues of privacy and audience, in terms not just of making private sketches and notes public but also of wide access to materials that would otherwise remain behind closed doors, available only to researchers and institutions. When a sketchbook is more preparatory and less private, access to it is still often limited to visiting an exhibition or an archive, a very different experience from reading a facsimile. Even archives that offer online access still remain somewhat exclusive, resources only for those in the know, or even only those with institutional affiliations. In a 2008 interview, Whitney admitted to not formally exhibiting his sketchbooks: “I have a sketchbook that I draw in all the time. But I don’t really show them.”³ In 2017, though, to accompany an exhibition of his drawings at Lisson Gallery, New York, Whitney published a facsimile sketchbook, a slim, 120-page floppy paperback.⁴ According to the gallery, a priority of this publication was affordability: it was priced at \$30 so that students could buy it. Making the unique available and affordable, this sketchbook circumvents issues of access, functioning instead in the spirit and ethos of artists’ books as a democratic multiple for the masses.

In 2015, the Brooklyn Museum exhibited notebooks of Jean-Michel Basquiat’s, making an argument for the visual as well as the poetic complexity of his writing. Selected pages from his marble composition notebooks were framed on gallery walls, prioritized as art objects. The show exemplified Foucault’s query about the line between archive and art. Basquiat wrote in a bound and sequenced book; reading individual pages as single framed objects in a gallery space certainly changes their meaning. Contemporaneous with the exhibition, Princeton University Press published a facsimile collection of Basquiat’s notebooks, bound together in a mock composition book.⁵ The book lets readers

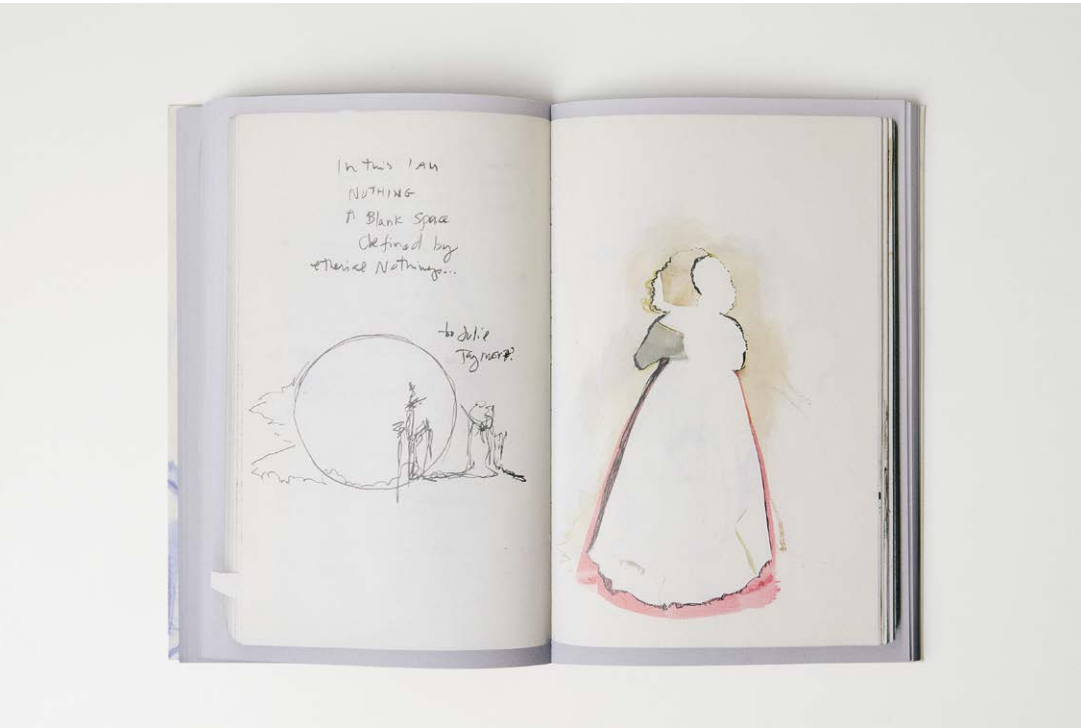
read as well as see, engaging with the writing in a context closer to the one it was created in. Along these lines, in 2015 Karma published two volumes of Brice Marden’s notebooks, which include mock-ups of paintings, collaged photographs of Marden and his friends, reproductions of other artworks, and clipped newspaper ads, together suggesting references he draws on for his abstract paintings.⁶ There are also lines of more personal handwritten text: “Life is but the stream I go a fishing in. I drink at it, but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is.”⁷ Lying at the intersection of artist’s book and study resource, these facsimiles represent the nexus of art object and tactile thing-for-use.

The ubiquity of these books suggests they are not straightforwardly private things made public, but part of a more complicated dynamic between artist and audience. In a review of Benjamin Moser’s recent biography of Susan Sontag, the writer Nausicaa Renner revisits both Sontag’s journaling habits and her own. She quotes from Sontag’s diaries (published by Sontag’s son, David Rieff, after her death)—“One of the main (social) functions of a journal or diary is precisely to be read furtively by other people”—then asks herself, “Should we also think of Sontag’s diaries that way? Do I think that of mine? As I page through undated fragments, I come across an abstract drawing. The caption of the drawing: ‘Will someone look in here someday?’”⁸ Writers like Sontag and Renner may consciously or unconsciously hope for a level of success that will warrant an archive and therefore an audience for their once private thoughts.

The sketchbook is akin to the diary in that it is filled with an artist’s inner thoughts, whether they be visual or verbal. Even notebooks or sketchbooks without personal writings offer otherwise unknowable insights, informing readers on references, failed designs, and experiments with materials. A sketchbook of Kara Walker’s published in 2017 by Roma, Amsterdam, includes a number of lengthy diarylike entries scrawled alongside sketches and watercolor studies.⁹ In an introductory note, Walker calls the materials “uneasy, unrefined, unfinished thoughts and anxieties” that were “never intended to be shared,” and yet she published it. In an early entry she reminds herself, “This is not my diary, leave it,” yet the content pushes against this assertion: the book contains lengthy entries meditating on Walker’s outsider status and relationship to European whiteness, or voicing considerations of race, nationality, and slavery, themes that resonate throughout her work. These musings are accompanied by figurative sketches in pen and watercolor. The line between sketchbook and diary is sometimes thin, perhaps even irrelevant. Renner writes of Sontag’s journals, “She, almost against her will, wrote them to be read.” Diaries cultivate the self we wish to leave behind, both consciously and unconsciously. They are a performance of self for the self, with the desperate hope that others too will want to see the show.

Painter Louis Fratino, to accompany his first show at New York’s Sikkema Jenkins & Co. last year, published a facsimile of his sketchbook in lieu of a traditional catalogue. The book, which documents the period leading up to the show, includes sketchy doodles of people in transit, studies for larger works, and more-fleshed-out, colorful experiments with wax scratchings, the transfer of pigment between facing pages, and the transparency of the paper. Speaking to me in his studio, Fratino called his sketchbook “diaristic” and underscored





Previous spread:
From top to bottom: Brice Marden: *Sketchbook* (Gagosian, 2019); Lee Lozano: *Notebooks 1967–70* (Primary Information, 2010); Stanley Whitney: *Sketchbook* (Lisson Gallery, 2018); Kara Walker: *MCMXCIX (ROMA, 2017)*; Louis Fratino, *Sept '18–Jan. '19* (Sikkema Jenkins & Co., 2019); Jean-Michel Basquiat: *The Notebooks* (Princeton University Press, 2015); Keith Haring *Journals* (Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition, 2010)

This page:
Spreads from Kara Walker: *MCMXCIX (ROMA, 2017)*

Opposite:
Spreads from Brice Marden: *Sketchbook* (Gagosian, 2019)

this kind of book’s ability to provide context and offer the artist a more nuanced voice: “The criticism I get is so rarely about the formal quality of the work. Part of the moment now is so focused on the identity of the artist.” Publication of the sketchbook allowed him to put forward his formal process. Like Sontag in her diaries, though, Fratino is not unaware of his audience. “I have to first consider myself the only audience,” he told me, “you have to feel like you are the only person in the room, but then you also entertain the small voice in the back of your head that is everyone who is ever going to see.”¹⁰

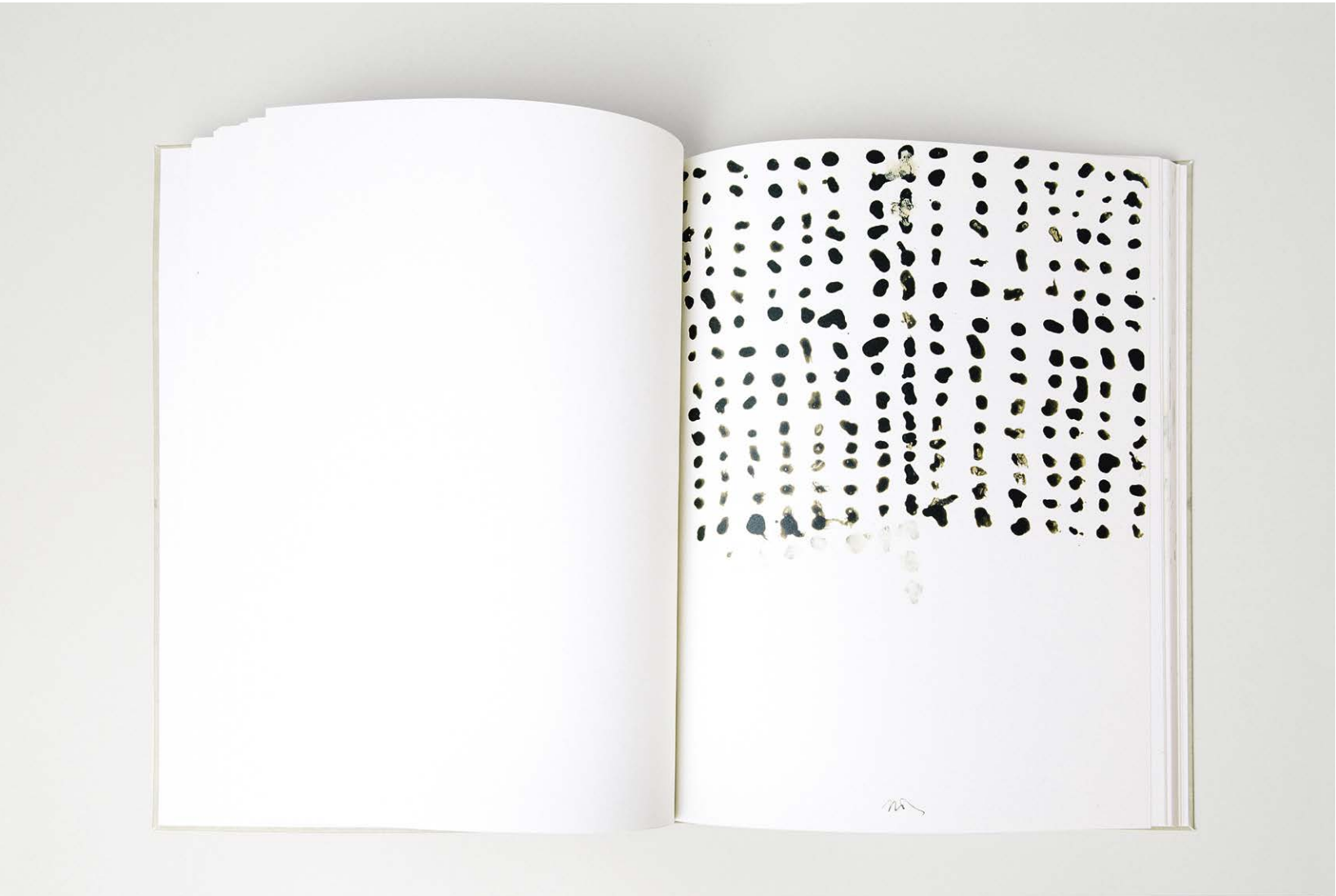
Fratino is an admirer of the journals of Keith Haring, which were published by Penguin in 1997, several years after the artist’s death. Fratino particularly respects his conviction, even early in his career, that “this ephemera matters.”¹¹ Haring was known for work that was publicly accessible: murals, street art, affordable multiples. “I am interested in making art to be experienced and explored by as many individuals as possible with as many different individual ideas about the given piece with no final meaning attached,” he wrote in

a journal entry of October 1978.¹² The books include Haring’s writing (typeset rather than in facsimile), with doodles and sketchbook drawings added as illustrations. A 2010 deluxe edition of the journals opens with a “Note on Sources and Acknowledgments” that claims, “It is clear from Keith Haring’s comments in his journals that he expected they would ultimately be read by others.” The sentiment is echoed by the Haring Foundation’s archivist, Anna Gurton-Wachter.¹³

In 2011, to coincide with an exhibition of Haring’s work, the Gladstone Gallery, New York, published a sketchbook of his from 1978. This spiral-bound book covers two important periods in Haring’s life, when he was a student at the Pittsburgh Arts and Crafts Center and when he first moved to New York to attend the School of Visual Arts. The pages in the first half of the sketchbook are signed and some are even dated, suggesting that they could potentially circulate as single drawings, while the second half of the book is a series of pencil drawings titled “Manhattan Penis Drawings for Ken Hicks.”¹⁴ For the exhibition, the pages were displayed in vitrines as detached single sheets. As Gurton-Wachter told me, Haring often disassembled his books and then gathered the pages together within a book shell, which is likely the case with these pages, now reassembled into a facsimile publication much as Haring would reassemble his loose pages. The visual style of the first half is primarily geometric and includes block-lettered notes throughout, so that it shows both workings-out of visual ideas, evidence of his conceptual thinking, and more personal, diaristic, written entries, such as a page where Haring meditates on a finished drawing, ultimately proclaiming, “but my work is never ‘finished’ and ‘always’ finished.” These lines illuminate the conceptual thinking behind Haring’s popular imagery. As Fratino observes, the sketchbook and the journal foreshadow the immense audience Haring’s work would grow to have, and his willingness to share with them seemingly deeply private considerations.

Lee Lozano was an artist well-known for playing with notions of public and private. Published as a facsimile by Primary Information in 2010, her “Laboratory Notebooks” span 1967–70. Early on in the book, Lozano writes, “I have started to document everything because I cannot give up my love of ideas.”¹⁵ To read through its pages is to engage with both work in progress, diary entries, and finished works. According to James Hoff, a cofounder of Primary Information, while Lozano was still living she and her assistant unbound this notebook (as Haring did his), xeroxed its pages for her records, and then began selling them off individually. She treated these pages, then, as finished works, and this was certainly the case in her series of “language pieces,” which she made directly in her notebooks before removing them for sale. Yet each book is labeled “private” on the cover.

Karma’s in-progress series of facsimiles of Lozano’s small spiral notebooks (seven of a planned eleven have been produced, beginning in 2016) includes mundane details—lists of contacts, agendas—as well as more personal entries, and bears the same “private” label across the front. On the inside cover of each book is a note revealing that Lozano went back to edit them all in 1972, suggesting—as her selling of their pages did—that she saw an audience for them. As Madeline Weisburg writes of the notebooks, “The notion of the private is closely related to overarching ideas that fundamentally formed her practice, in which boundaries





between objectivity and intimacy, both in art and everyday life were often dissolved, or at least confused.”¹⁶ The books document Lozano’s political views, often shared in lists or bulleted proclamations such as “i am not a feminist. i speak to both men and women because i think both men and women are slaves in today’s society.” A list of institutions in which she does not believe includes slavery, marriage, parenthood, and God. The “private” label serves to heighten we readers’ voyeuristic craving to learn something intimate and personal about an artist’s inner life.

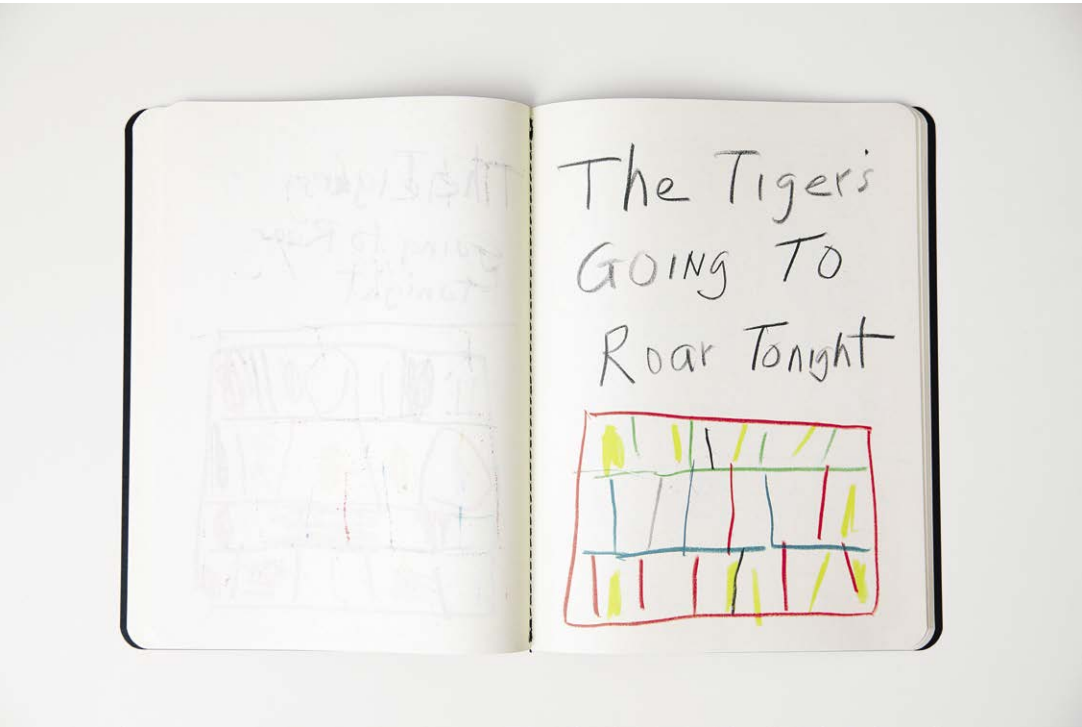
The sheer number and variety of the artists who have produced these books, and the books’ highly various contents, illustrate that conceiving of them as private is something readers may do more than artists. The art audience has a thirst for archival materials, for the behind-the-scenes rather than the finished product, although it depends on scholars and editors to select the most interesting materials. For Foucault, the status of “author” was a means of narrowing down those writers whose materials would count as “work” for the editor and the audience: “we can say that in our culture, the name of an author is a variable that accompanies only certain texts to the exclusion of others: a private letter may have a signatory, but it does not have an author.”¹⁷ Assigning that status of “author,” however—which an artist’s importance as a visual artist may do—shifts the letter from private to public.

The rise in the publication of artists’ notebooks and sketchbooks, and the artists’ willingness to share these private materials, demonstrate an embrace of these expanded boundaries around work, and all the complications that come with it. Rachel Churner has discussed the impact of the archive on Eileen Myles after the poet’s papers were acquired by Yale University’s Beinecke Library: “As Myles explained in a postscript called ‘My Secret,’ they began ‘writing as if someone is reading’ and consequently wanting to withhold their most intimate ideas, words, and experiences from the page.”¹⁸ As artists embrace their own archives, it will be interesting to follow how they perform themselves in the once private space of the archive for a looming public audience that we all know is out there thirsting for their secrets.

Opposite:
Spreads from Louis
Fratino, Sept ’18–Jan. ’19
(Sikkema Jenkins & Co., 2019)

This page:
Spreads from Stanley
Whitney: Sketchbook (Lisson
Gallery, 2018)

Photos: Carey MacArthur



A version of this essay was presented at the College Book Art Association Conference in New Orleans in 2020. The essay would not have been possible without the help of: Scott Briscoe, Sikkema Jenkins & Co.; Jake Brodsky, Hauser & Wirth; Louis Fratino; Anna Gurton-Wachter, The Keith Haring Foundation; Mackie Healy, Lisson Gallery; James Hoff, Primary Information; Andrew Huff, Gladstone Gallery; Rebecca Schiffman, Hauser & Wirth; Lauren Mahony, Gagosian; Roger Willems, Roma Publishers; and Lucas Zwirner, David Zwirner Books. And thanks to Robert Gordon-Fogelson, Levi Prombaum, and Jennie Waldow for early notes and feedback.

1. Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” 1969, in J. Marsh, J. D. Caputo, and M. Westphal, eds., *Modernity and Its Discontents* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), p. 302.
2. Ibid.
3. Stanley Whitney, in “In Conversation: Stanley Whitney with John Yau,” *Brooklyn Rail*, October 2008. Available online at <https://brooklynrail.org/2008/10/art/show-and-tell-contemporary-practice-in-artists-books> (accessed March 25, 2020).
4. Stanley Whitney, *Sketchbook* (New York: Lisson Gallery, 2018).
5. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *The Notebooks* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).
6. Brice Marden, *Notebook Sept. 1964–Sept. 1967* and *Notebook Feb. 1968–* (both New York: Karma, 2015).
7. Marden, *Notebook Sept. 1964–Sept. 1967*, n.p.
8. Nausicaa Renner, “Confessions of a Mask,” *n+1*, December 30, 2019. Available online at <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/confessions-of-a-mask/> (accessed March 25, 2020). Renner is writing on Benjamin Moser’s *Sontag: Her Life and Work* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019).
9. Kara Walker, *MCMXCIX* (Amsterdam: ROMA Publishers, 2017).

10. Louis Fratino, conversation with the author in the artist’s Brooklyn studio, February 24, 2020.
11. Ibid.
12. Keith Haring, *Keith Haring Journals*, deluxe edition (New York: Penguin Classics, 2010), p. 18.
13. Anna Gurton-Wachter, e-mail exchange with the author, December 10–11, 2019, and conversation with the author, February 18, 2020, Keith Haring Archive, New York.
14. Ken Hicks is today unidentified, according to Gurton-Wachter.
15. Lee Lozano, *Notebooks 1967–70* (New York: Primary Information, 2010).
16. Madeline Weisburg, “Lee Lozano Private Books 1–3,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, February 2018. Available online at https://brooklynrail.org/2018/02/art_books/Lee-Lozano-Private-Book-1-3 (accessed March 25, 2020).
17. Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” p. 305.
18. Rachel Churner, “Never Too Late: The Late Style of Eileen Myles and Yvonne Rainer,” *Artforum* 58, no. 6 (February 2020): 167.