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14 September 2021

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The Secret Life of
Objects
Curated by Barbara Ess
and organized by Peggy
Ahwesh

Sep 7th — Oct 9th
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Magenta Plains
94 Allen Street

New York
Lower East Side

An artist, photographer, and musician, the late Barbara Ess was the rare figure whose strength lay in navigating that oft-maddening void between an impalpable idea and its physical articulation. Ess was in the process of curating “The Secret Life of Objects” at Magenta Plains when she passed away in March 2021. Her longtime friend and collaborator, the filmmaker Peggy Ahwesh, stepped in to see the project through. In essence, the show holds that inanimate objects contain meaning beyond their material existence—a notion that ran throughout Ess’ multifaceted practice.

In Laura Battle's *Stairs and Ladders* (2021), a row of miniature, freestanding staircases and rickety ladders are positioned against a blank wall. The effect is cute in the way that dollhouses are cute—and likewise mildly unsettling, as these structures lead to nowhere.

A hazy narrative arises out of Mieke Meguro's *Shopping Bags as Ephemeral Snow, January 2020* (2020) upon contemplating the evocative materials list: "Paper bags from Dan's drug store C.O. Bigelow; burned with Japanese incense."

Other works by ten artists, including Dan Graham, Daniella Dooling, Glenn Branca, Heidi Schlatter, Les LeVeque and Maximilian Goldfarb, range, respectively, from a mini puzzle to a handheld radio suspended in a chunk of resin, to geometric ink-on-paper designs, to a flat-screen television adorned with dried flowers, to handmade bric-a-brac displayed on a glass table. Also incorporated into the presentation is "Radio/Guitar," a 2001 noise album by Ess and Ahwesh.

The last impression of the show, situated to be encountered just prior to leaving the gallery, is a 2017 installation by Ess herself titled *Keep Out*. The piece consists of a pile of generic yard signs arranged on a floor, emblazoned with boldface orange-on-black or black-on-yellow lettering addressing would-be intruders: a half dozen-or-so posters warn "Keep out" while others caution "Beware of the Dog," "Private Property/No Trespassing," and the like. Vastly more subtle, in contrast, are a couple of identical black-and-white photo prints that, at first glance, seem to depict a full moon against the night sky.

But next to the gallery's front door, another copy of the print hangs at eye level, unmistakable as a close-up of someone's eyes. These are Ess' own, captured using her signature pinhole technique. Enmeshed in New York's experimental rock music scene during the 1970s, Ess pivoted to visual art-making in the early '80s after falling in love with pinhole photography. Often markedly distorting observable reality, the images she produced with this technique imbued her chosen subject matter with heightened colors, hypnotic shadow patterns, and enigmatic details as if revealing otherwise invisible dimensions within a scene.

Meeting her gaze is at once startling, amusing, and completely intriguing—as a momentary, fleeting, and striking point of contact with the artist, it's a fitting tribute to her memory. —*Rachel Small*

Barbara Ess, *Keep Out*, 2017. Suitcase, framed photographs, beware signs, mirror, security camera, etc., Dimensions variable.