4,492,040
(L. Lippard)

557,087 .......... Seattle (1969)
955,000 .......... Vancouver (1970)
2,972,453 ... Buenos Aires (1970)
27,500 .......... Valencia (1973/4)

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In the Cards
(L. Lippard)

In 1958, my first job out of college was as a page at the Museum of Modern Art Library when there were still "card catalogues"; later I wrote bibliographies, indexes, and translations for the MoMA Publications Department. By 1969 I was an occasional writer of "experimental" fiction as well as a freelance art "critic." So the notion of a bibliographical structure and loose catalogue cards for 557,087 and its successors made autobiographical sense. It was a form that put both my words and the exhibitions themselves in motion. The cards could be randomly shuffled, rearranged by preference, or discarded in bits and pieces. They allowed for new work when 557,087 in Seattle became 955,000 in Vancouver, where three artists and forty-two cards were added. The card catalogues were sort of a collaborative collage with the artists—not glued down, but flexible, changing, open-ended, unpredictable. I was trying (like many others) to mix up art with life.

The card strategy also worked well for the next two number shows: 2,972,453 in Buenos Aires and c. 7,500 in Valencia, California. These were far more "de-materialized" because they were shipped by ordinary mail, and I did not personally install them. Like the artwork they described, the catalogues were cheap and easy to transport. They treated each artist exactly the same—something I've insisted on in every show I've organized. The "democratizing" instinct was an integral part of the 1960s modus vivendi.

In Buenos Aires I did not include anyone who was in the Seattle and Vancouver museum shows, hoping to expand the network to younger artists I had not known before. However, the perils of such loose organization surfaced there. As I wrote in Six Years, the forty-three 4x6-inch index cards were "misprinted" by the Centro de Arte y Comunicación "in defiance of the organizer's and artists' wishes." A note was apparently added by CAYC director Jorge Gluzberg (whom I had met in Argentina in 1968), claiming co-curator status. Neither I nor any of the artists, so far as I know, ever saw the show, and I have no idea what the installation looked like.

There were also some logistical challenges. The cards came in a small manila envelope and cost around $3. Seth Siegelbaum, who handled the printing and distribution for the first two shows, recalls that they caused problems for booksellers, not only due to the low price and small scale, but because of the "high chances of a missing element. . . . it is just one hassle after another with such things. Someone comes in, takes one card out, and you never know it is gone; then someone buys it." (Life could interfere with art, and commerce.) Not uncommonly, there was also the problem of the artists giving me their cards months before the show went up and changing their minds about what to contribute. In some cases, grandiose schemes didn't pan out because of (very)
In a city of hills, it wasn’t easy to comply with Robert Smithson’s instructions for making his piece: “four square snapshots of Seattle Horizons—should be empty, plain, vacant, surd, common, ordinary blank dull level beaches, occupied uninhabited, deserted fields, scanty lots, houseless typical average roads, sandbars, remote lakes, distant timeless sites—use Kodak Instamatic 804. 8 rows of 50 garlands on wall.” Bob seemed happy enough with the finished piece, but he made it a point to come to Vancouver in January 1970 for the next version of the show and oversee the execution of Glue Pour in person.

Then there was just plain misinformation, like Carl Andre’s request for “timber” which I interpreted as a log rather than milled lumber. I managed to get “timber” donated by Weyerhauser and had it chopped up into the specified lengths to be lined up over gently rolling ground. It looked great. Andre was nice about it, but he called it “Lucy’s piece,” which lent a certain credence to the notion that the curator had become the artist—something I heartily denied since it implied that curators were not naturally creative—and when they were, they were no longer curators, but artists.

For instance, reviewer Peter Plagens complained about 557.087 that there was “a total style to the show, a style so pervasive as to suggest that Lucy Lippard is in fact the artist and that her medium is other artists,” missing the richness of the exhibition, which included works as diverse as Eva Hesse’s Accretion and Robert Ryman’s white painting, as well as land art, textual, and virtually invisible pieces. In any case, style was no longer an issue, though context was. I prefer Erika Suderburg’s take on the Six Years era: “a period-specific autocritique of art criticism as act.”

Both 557.087 and 955.000 extended far out into the respective cities. There may have been previous exhibitions dispersed on this scale, or these may have been the first to escape the museum to this extent, interrupting public life in many ways and many places. A couple of years later I wrote in Six Years that 557.087 was conceived as an exercise in ‘anti-taste,’ as a compendium of varied work so large that the public would have to make up its own mind about ideas to which it had not been previously exposed.

By 1973 there was definitely a need for c.7.500 because, I’m ashamed to say, there were only six women (Hesse, Adrian Piper, Christine Kozlov, Rosemarie Castoro, Hanne Darboven, and Eleanor Antin) in the previous shows, plus Ingrid Baxter and Liliana Porter—half of N.E. Thing Co. and a third of the New York Graphic Workshop, respectively. By then I was a rabid feminist and very sick of hearing people say there were “no women who make important art, monumental sculpture, conceptual art, etc.” c.7.500 was the only number show that traveled to seven venues. I only saw it three times, at the Wadsworth Atheneum, ICA Boston, and Smith College (where one piece was drastically misinstalled; who knows what went on elsewhere). Traveling of course unraveled the logic (such as it was) behind the titles: it would have been fun to rname each exhibition for the population of each venue, but I couldn’t insist that the catalogue cards be reprinted, though in retrospect they might have been renamed with a simple sticker.

This reprinting project (and its marvelous title, thanks to Jeff Khonsary) comes as a pleasant surprise, though I’m not sure why the card packets are so appealing forty-odd years after their original appearance. Perhaps it’s because museum catalogues these days are usually full-color and indistinguishable from books. These modest black-and-white index cards with blurry halftones may signal a proto-DIY approach for today’s Do-It-Yourself generation of artists and activists. (However, as I write at the end of 2011, even New York’s Occupy Wall Street Journal has color and is professionally produced, though other Occupy publications are grungier.) Maybe nostalgia plays a role, or the fame accrued in the ensuing years by so many then-little-known artists. Forty-odd years later, in such a changed aesthetic and political context, something in the cards remains relevant.

—5. Lippard, Six Years, 111.