Stella Waitzkin (1920–2003) began her career in the 1940s studying painting and drawing with abstract expressionists Hans Hoffman and Willem de Kooning in New York City. In the 1960s and 1970s, her ways of working expanded to casting and melting glass and polyester resin to create sculptural forms, experimenting with performance art and film. During this time, Waitzkin's work flourished under the roof of Manhattan's cultural landmark, the Hotel Chelsea, a haven for creatives of all walks including Beat writers, jazz and rock musicians, filmmakers, and visual artists. Residing for over three decades at the Chelsea, Stella fashioned her personal vision, composing the walls of her small fourth-floor apartment with a library of colorful, cast-resin books and other sculptural and found objects that she termed a “Lost Library.” Void of words, these ghost books enveloped her space, visually reinforcing her belief that “words are lies”; a proclamation Waitzkin once made to Beat poet Allen Ginsberg as he sat in her living-room art environment.

In 2007, with the help of the Waitzkin Memorial Trust, the Arts Center became home to an elaborate three-wall section of Stella Waitzkin’s Chelsea environment, and in 2016, the Arts Center acquired more than one hundred additional works of Waitzkin’s.

VOLUMES: STELLA WAITZKIN + Rita Barros
June 4, 2017–March 4, 2018
Rita Barros's work lies on the border between a documentary and a self-reflexive approach. Starting from a strictly subjective point of view, she has looked upon realities and subjects such as daily life at the Hotel Chelsea, the September 11 attacks, and the self-portrait. Also a resident at the Chelsea for over three decades, Barros (NY) has documented the vibrant and ever-evolving spirit of the hotel through portraits of neighbors, guests, and friends. Her photographic and written response to Waitzkin's art environment illuminates the bohemian community of the Chelsea that Waitzkin captured with her camera. This is what led me to start photographing my neighbors in their own environments. This is what led me to start photographing my neighbors in their own environments.

The body of work I made of the Chelsea with its high and low moments made me travel in time and think that destruction is still part of my daily living. Working on this exhibition has been quite a nostalgic experience. Revisiting my archives of thirty years has working on the exhibition changed or expanded your notions about what you do? How were you introduced to the work of Stella Waitzkin? How do your background inform your responses to Stella? The idea of creating books as objects/sculptures has been part of my work since 1999.

After the project of photographing my neighbors at the Chelsea Hotel was published (Fifteen Years: Chelsea Hotel, Camara Municipal de Lisboa, 1999), I started making books by hand exploring the different possibilities of working with paper and books—some I designed as accordion and some as flip-books. I love the hands-on approach and the ability to create the rhythms of a photo story within a confined space without a publisher's interference. These are visual books that can become sculptures, or they can be held for a more intimate experience. They can be seen left to right or vice versa, exploring the ambiguous reading of a photograph. I have made more than sixty editions, and I have also collaborated with other artists. I have also shown the work using different display methods in various exhibitions. As an homage to Stella, I have created for the Road Less Traveled exhibition an accordion book with the story of Room 403 from 2012 to 2016. This work of art, an installation. The apartment was a world unto itself, and Stella was the magician who made all this come to life. The old Chelsea had this incredible fascination. Each door led to a genuine world of experiences, smells, dreams, and ideas. This is what led me to start photographing my neighbors in their own environments. Stella agreed to sit for me, but somehow our schedules got in the way and by '93 she was around less often.

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Twenty-odd years later, I met her granddaughter Katya and visited her in Room 403. This time it was much tougher since the Chelsea had been sold, and Katya was trying with all her strength to keep the memory of Stella's old place, which still had a lot of her work in it. Unfortunately, and to Katya's great distress, she had to let it go, and now the memory has been gutted out of the original apartment. Even the inside walls are gone.

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