MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 matthewmarks.com

Paul Sietsema

Press Packet

Hudson, Suzanne, and Paul Sietsema. "Paul Sietsema with Suzanne Hudson." *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 2025.

Rossi, Shane, and Paul Sietsema. "Paul Sietsema." *Arcane* 4, September 2025, pp. 56–63.

Hadland, Gracie. "Painting Money." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 20, 2025.

Muenzer, David. "Paul Sietsema." *The Brooklyn Rail*, December/January 2024–25.

Butler, Connie and Paul Sietsema. "Busy Signals." *ARTnews*, Winter, 2019, pp. 92–95.

Baker, George. "The Black Mirror." *October*, Fall 2016, pp. 30–66.

Duncan, Thomas. "Paul Sietsema." *Flash Art*, January/February 2017, pp. 74–75.

Knight, Christopher. "Paul Sietsema's First L.A. Show of New Conceptual Art was Worth the 14-Year Wait." *Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 2016.

Geers, David. "Paul Sietsema." *Frieze*, January/February, 2015, p. 141.

Walsh, Brienne. "Paul Sietsema at Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago." *Modern Painters*, April 2014.

Mercurio, Frank. "Paul Sietsema – MCA Chicago." *Flash Art*, March/April 2014, p. 93.

Willams, Gilda. "Paul Sietsema – Drawing Room." *Artforum*, February 2013, p. 255.

Zakaitis, Jonas. "A Certain Kind of Realism." *Spike Quarterly*, Spring 2012, pp. 72–83.

Didziapetris, Gintaras with Paul Sietsema. "Interview." *The Federal*, October 2011, pp. 21–28.

Berardini, Andrew. "Dig forever and never it bottom." *Mousse* 16, December 2008, pp. 26–29.

Kunitz, Daniel. "Paul Sietsema." *Modern Painters*, September 2011, p. 90.

Walleston, Aimee. "Photo Finish: Q+A With Paul Sietsema." *Art in America*, May 13, 2011.

Kerr, Merrily. "Paul Sietsema." *Time Out New York*, June 2 – 6, 2011, p. 41.

Troeller, Jordan. "Paul Sietsema." *Artforum*, June 11, 2011.

Prince, Mark. "Art and Illusionism." *Art Monthly*, September 2010, pp. 11–14.

Mull, Carter. "Paul Sietsema." *Marcel*, no. 3, September 2010, pp. 1–2, 6–9.

Fite-Wasselak, Chris. "Paul Sietsema." *Frieze*, October 2010, p. 245.

Johnson, Ken. "Spirals of Self-Reflection, Made by Methods Mysterious." *The New York Times*, January 8, 2010, p. C34.

Coxhead, Gabriel. "Paul Sietsema." *Time Out London*, July 25, 2010, p. 37.

Hainley, Bruce with Paul Sietsema. "Skeleton Key: A Conversation with Paul Sietsema." *Figure 3: Paul Sietsema,* 2009, pp. 41–51.

Goldstein, Andrew. "Dig It." *cityArts,* December 3, 2009.

"The Famous Last Words." *F.R. David,* Winter 2008, pp. 182–87.

Muchnic Suzanne. "Goes the old-fashioned way." *Los Angeles Times,* May 21, 2008.

Subotnick, Ali. "Paul Sietsema." *Artforum,* March 2008, pp. 338–41.

West, Kevin. "Shape Shifter." *W Magazine,* April 2008.

"Anne Collier & Paul Sietsema: Discipline." *The Wrong Times,* Tarzan-Jane Issue, 2006, pp. 3–4.

"Some Notes on Content." *Uncertain States of America: America in the 3rd Millennium,* December 2006, pp. 102–05.

Cueff, Alain, and Paul Sietsema. "Interview with Paul Sietsema." *Hyperfocal - Five from LA,* 2005, pp. 66–68.

Anton, Saul. "Paul Sietsema." *Artforum,* Summer 2003, p. 183.

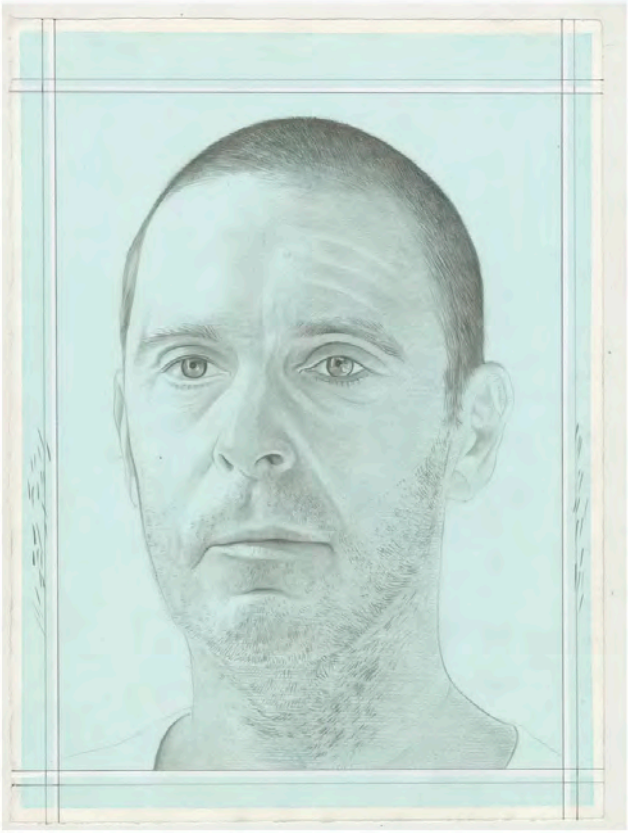
Smith, Roberta. "Paul Sietsema - Empire." *The New York Times,* May 23, 2003, p. E36.

Intra, Giovanni. "Paul Sietsema: Empire." *Flash Art,* January/February 2003, pp. 82–83.

Hainley, Bruce. "Model Theory." *Frieze,* November/December 2002, pp. 90–93.

Pettibon, Raymond. "Paul Sietsema by Raymond Pettibon." *Issue 4,* 2000, pp. 146–51.

THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



Portrait of Paul Sietsema, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

ART | NOVEMBER 2025 | IN CONVERSATION

PAUL SIETSEMA with Suzanne Hudson

Paul Sietsema
Marian Goodman Gallery
October 18–December 20, 2025
Paris

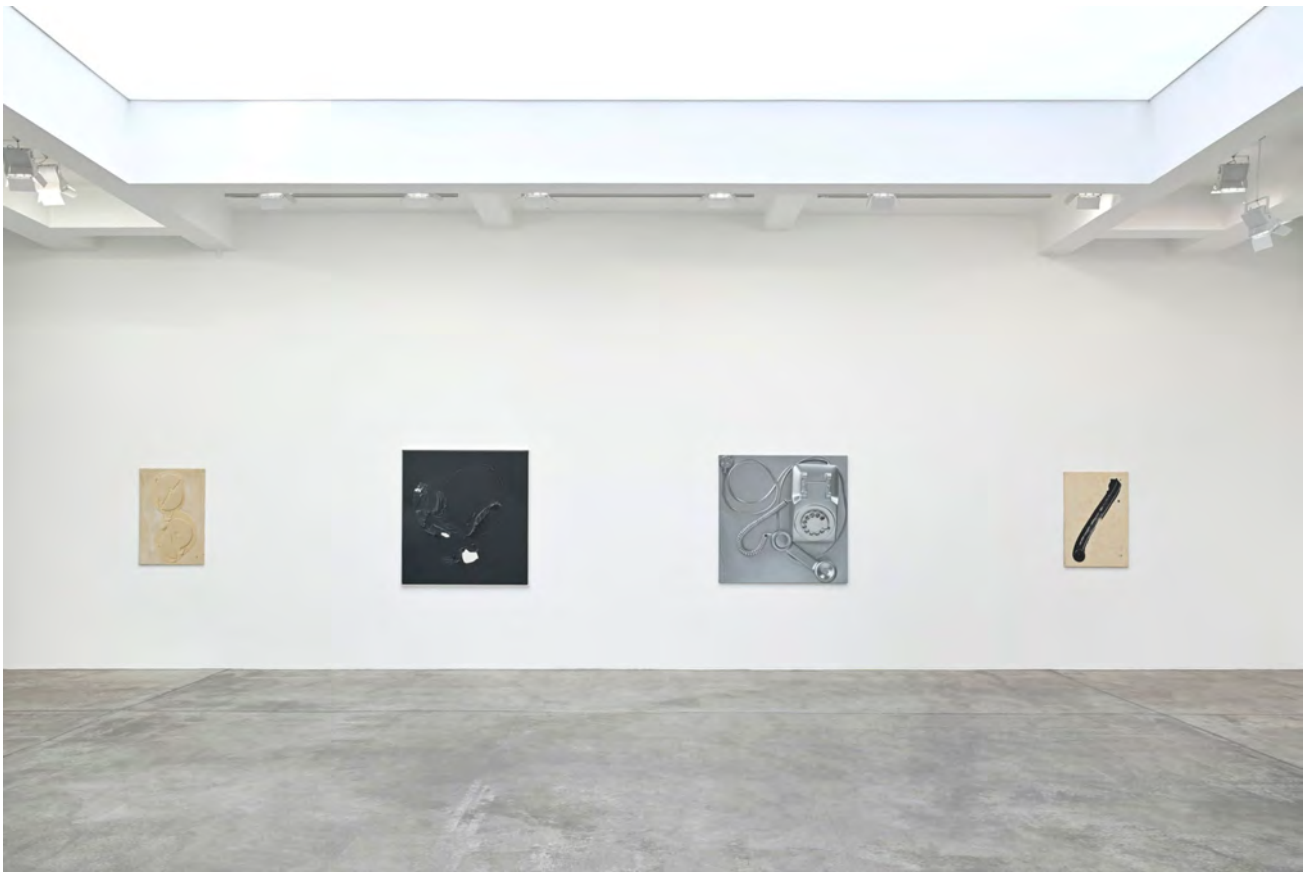
Throughout his career, Paul Sietsema has engaged with the conditions of image-making as historical and contemporary practice. He often uses wildly labor-intensive techniques—I mean, he once made a pair of New Balance running shoes by hand, casting rubber and braiding the laces!—constructing intricate visual worlds. Sietsema is a collector. He finds and chooses things; then comes research, overflowing bookshelves and stockpiles of back-catalogue stuff to make sense of them. He regularly translates objects, which, in the course of such mediation, and beyond digital infrastructural activity, might be reconstructed, photographed, drawn, painted, or filmed. Subjects vary, but all seem to reflect on how meaning erodes but also accrues through reproduction.

I would describe the process as a necessarily embodied reconstructive method. But through this procedural mimicry, Sietsema less seeks the compensation of return than critical engagement with

how tools have been, and might continue to be, epistemological partners in generating patterns of information together with structures of accessing them. He has made 16 mm films—*Empire* (2002) and *Figure 3* (2008)—that explore how histories of modernism and artistic labor are reconstituted through the mechanism of aesthetic reconstruction and obsolescent technologies. His more recent paintings and drawings have depicted paper money and coins, LPs and CDs, exhibition ephemera, tools, and studio debris.

Some flaunt paint stains picturing what Sietsema used to make them; they might sit on "newsprint" that is really a drawing (the infinite regress comprises the content of the paper and the signs of its wear and tear). He has aggregated other images of disassembled framed photos in the series "Painter's Mussel"—an allusion to the muscle of the brain over the arm/brush, and also a reference to the freshwater mussel found throughout Europe that long held painter's paint. (These look like photograms but are actually made with liquid rubber that resists an airbrush spray of ink; when removed, it reveals the blank paper as if it were the photo negative.)

As before, then, with his new paintings made for his second solo show at Marian Goodman Gallery Paris, the point is analytic. He seems to ask, in so many ways, how representation is managed and how value circulates, and what the artist has to do with this passage of material into currency. We talked about this in his Los Angeles studio amidst the works, set to ship out the next day but not crated just yet.



Installation view: *Paul Sietsema*, Galerie Marian Goodman, Paris, 2025. © Paul Sietsema. Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. Photo: Rebecca Fanuele.

Hudson, Suzanne, and Paul Sietsema. "Paul Sietsema with Suzanne Hudson." *The Brooklyn Rail,* November 2025.

Suzanne Hudson (Rail): Okay, so should we start by talking about what's going to be in the show?

Paul Sietsema: Sure. There are seven new pieces that I've made that are going upstairs. The gallery in Paris is a small, nice, clean space with windows running along one wall, so you can see the work from the courtyard outside, too. It makes it a little bit like a vitrine, which I like. It's going to be a hang of the seven works you see on the wall across the room here. Then downstairs I'm showing some earlier work. Some of those have imagery of the work's creation—actions that I felt emanated enough on their own to turn them into something. There is also a painting [*Blue Picasso* (2020)] that is a sort of canceled exhibition poster from the Peggy Guggenheim Collection.

Rail: A Picasso.

Sietsema: Yes. It's very weird, surreal. You can't see much of it because it's covered, but if you know *On the Beach* (1937), it looks sort of like science fiction, with cubistic figures on a beach. It has a very blue sky, light tan yellow sand—very Mediterranean. It's funny being in California and looking at a Cubist beach scene.

Rail: Maybe it's appropriately wistful for fall in Paris, even grayed over.

Paul Sietsema, *Arrangement*, 2025. Enamel on linen, 48 × 48 inches. © Paul Sietsema. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery and Marian Goodman Gallery.

Sietsema: Exactly. And then there are these two carved stone pieces from building cornerstones. When I was living in Europe around a decade ago, I traveled through Paris a lot, and I would photograph these dates whenever I came across them. I started making the paintings with a broken airbrush that I was into because it sort of splattered and did things that were less technical than the other pieces I was working on at the same time. I would render the stone with the dates, but I changed the dates to earlier moments in my life.

Rail: Do you still do those at all?

Sietsema: I haven't in a while, but lately I've been wanting to, and now it is kind of a funny thing, because I have started to look back at work that I've made even twenty years ago, and it's a different feeling than I had when I made them. As I change and move in other directions, the older work sometimes seems to hold even more potential.

Rail: But you never go back into work. I mean, once it's done, you wouldn't re-work a piece? You would make something new in that idiom.

Sietsema: Yes, other iterations. I do have a bunch of the date panels that I started but never finished; it's been over ten years since I touched them. For some reason with those, I'm never in a hurry to finish. I think they rely less on entering the world at an exact moment. A lot of my work does have to do with things that happened before it, and it's maybe ambiguous when it was made, or what my stance is in relation to the preceding histories or authorship in general. I think I've been waiting for this moment since I was much younger, to be able to ripple back through my own history and use it as a kind of echo chamber, or maybe amplifier, to address these things more deeply.

Rail: That's why I like that this is part of the show with the new work. I don't think I fully got it until seeing this mockup. I mean, so many shows pair earlier work and more recent work, with whatever mechanism of connection between them. But there's something about this subterranean chamber, with the earlier work undergirding what is above it. You are spatializing a psychic model.

Sietsema: Yeah, I was into that. In gallery press releases, they usually call it "exhibition space level two," or something like that. But in reality, everybody just calls it "the basement." I was very interested in the idea, because "basement" relates to "bedrock," geologically. It's not just a room under a building; it's also the geological formations under the surface of the earth. As I was coming to those ideas, I came across this Marcel Broodthaers concrete poem, one of his vacuum-formed reliefs in plastic, called *E Sous-Sol* from 1969, which portrays both bedrock and clouds with the same abstracted jagged shapes on either side of a line that stands in for the surface of the earth.

Rail: It is an image of the thing that can't move, that determines or gives literal shape to what comes on top of it.

Sietsema: Yeah, yeah, it's exactly that. It can't change now. I do feel like I've just been forging ahead for decades without looking back. And maybe it has something to do with age, but also everything that has happened this year, that led to me taking stock.

Paul Sietsema, *Object painting*, 2025, Enamel on linen, 44 ½ × 43 ½ inches. © Paul Sietsema. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery and Marian Goodman Gallery.

Rail: What are you calling the show? I didn't even ask.

Sietsema: I was just going to use my name, which is what I usually do. Titles can overpower things.

Rail: But there's not going to be a date range, or a sense of chronology?

Sietsema: No. The only organizing feature will be the above ground versus the below. As for titles, I mean, I guess I really try to get what I want into the work, and then a title feels like a cataloguing element, unless there's something that I want to remember about it specifically. I might tag certain things about a piece in the title, so that when I come across it again, it'll remind me of something I thought I might want to think about in the future.

Rail: So it's like a placeholder for you, always already proleptic. You don't want the framing to be interpretive.

Sietsema: I am extremely interested in language, but I also think that fundamentally, language, like music, has an immense amount of power behind it, and I feel like the work is maybe a little bit quiet, so that power is sort of—

Rail: Well you can't undo it. I always feel like you can't unread something that you've read, or from the other side, you can't really take it back once you put it out there.

Sietsema: Yeah. Whereas with artworks, I think your conception can change a lot over time, which of course is something I'm fundamentally interested in.

Rail: In itself and also because of the relation of what you put beside it. The deck can always be shuffled. For this show, you have muted the colors, in the new and older works.

Sietsema: When the market went crazy, I realize I started associating color with that other kind of saturation. In my last show in LA at Matthew Marks Gallery, in 2024, I made one of my phone paintings that have always had color based on the original phones. I was thinking about what a hot color might look like. I was thinking about lures, like the ones for fly fishing. I mixed this weird and specific reddish-orangeish pink. I don't really know exactly how it got there, but it felt right. And then when I was parking to install the show in West Hollywood, there was a brand-new Jeep parked next to me, still with temporary plates, and it was the exact same color as my phone painting. It made me a little queasy that I'd come to this color, and the car company had come to it as well, maybe on a similar timeline, and then our colors came out at the same time. It just got very confusing for me. So I decided that I wanted to explore material itself, and of course, it's maybe more complicated than that, because it's always very representational material—almost always representations of material—but I was interested in processing something closer to raw materials, and not using color or other elements that might juice the work beyond its fundamental existence.

Rail: I remember seeing the brightly lacquered phones in your studio and in the LA show, but the pink one for me had a kind of tacky, hardened quality of nail polish or auto body paint that I took to be very deliberate. I didn't get the squeamish association you're describing, but thought it to be about product lines and how you can cloak something in different colors, and the colors anyhow can't escape topical reference.

Sietsema: Because that's how the phones initially were marketed. The changing colors were a very important part of them selling more of the phones, as interior design trends changed.

Rail: Right. The obsolescence built-in.

Sietsema: In my last New York show at Matthew Marks, in 2023, I had a yellow phone, a more standard red phone, a sort of turquoise phone, and a dark green phone, based on the colors they originally came in. So I would find the phones, and then I would mix and match the color and pour the paint over them before capturing them digitally. Also sometimes they're enhanced through the photography, the default proprietary color builds off the digital file, and then I might nudge them around a little to get them to sit right. But basically, it's all found color.

Rail: But now seeing it in grisaille, it almost looks like it's naked, waiting for some surface application. Or like this is the under-painting, even though I know materially that's not how the others work.

Sietsema: Yeah, that's interesting. I mean, the other paintings are smaller, and they are meant to have a very hard, shiny surface. They have some Finish Fetish in the way they are painted. But I think that I've always also been interested in phones as bodies, so at a slightly larger scale, they

are more like machines and bodies at the same time. That physiological quality in machines is disappearing of course. We could become obsolete now, you know—earlier the machines became obsolete, but now that could flip in the new system.

Rail: Like in the service of communication or networking, or—

Sietsema: Exactly. So I don't know, I sort of think of this as, like, a figurative painting, although it sounds like such a dirty word to me right now. [*Laughter*]

Rail: Maybe it's a kind of pareidolia, but the typewriter in *Object painting* (2025) reads as not so much bodily, but facial. Or it is provoking that reading of patterning in an inanimate object in such a deliberate way.

Sietsema: I do see a face in it sometimes, which I do like, but that is just a byproduct of its early-machine physicality. As new technology alienates itself from us, older technology starts to seem almost human. What I was really interested in though was the relationship of the apparatus to

Paul Sietsema, *Arrangement*, 2025. Enamel on linen in artist's frame, 42 ½ × 36 ⅝ inches. © Paul Sietsema. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery and Marian Goodman Gallery.

your body, your fingers—the idea of hitting keys, which of course are really just simple levers, and pushing the carriage back to advance the sheet of paper and start a new sentence. I think of it in relation to making the painting. I think it's similar, you know: the manufacture of the object and the manipulation of the object, the interaction with the body and the way the painting is made. They both involve physical labor that produces language. I wanted a subject that had these attributes—a machine that would fill the frame completely and sort of overtake it.

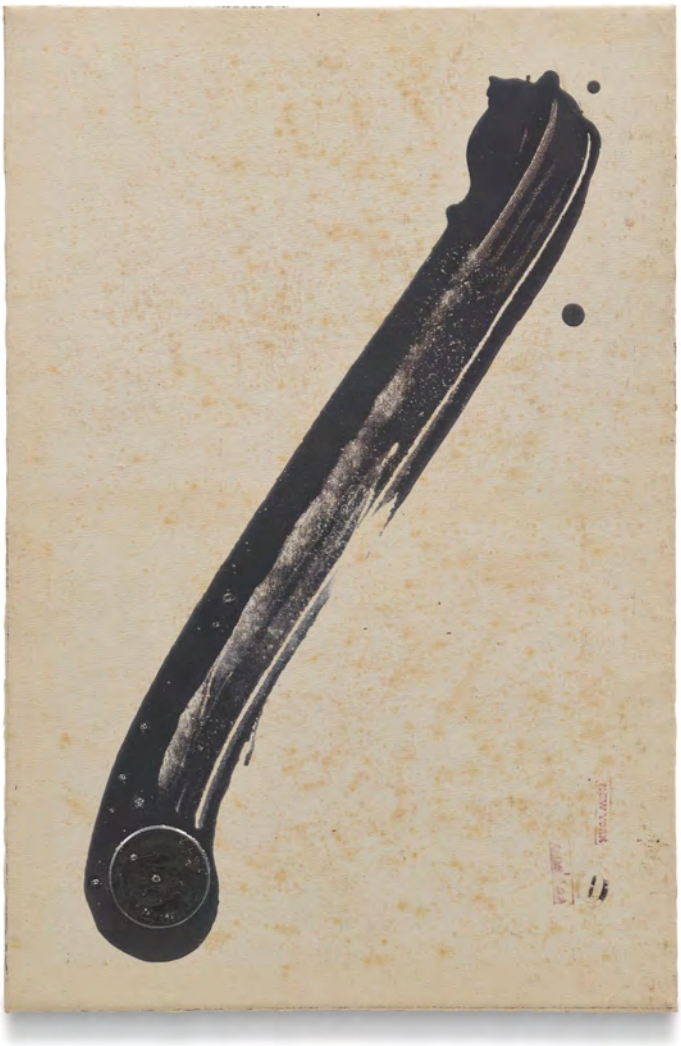
Rail: This is making me think about the way that so many of your works have implied a body or indexed movement. This could be in paint being really evidently slid across the surface or something, but also in what is pictured. They are like quasi-narratives of things arrested in positions that redouble the process of their making to imply a prior action. But now these are like the phone being unplugged, or handset being taken off the cradle. There is also a sonic dimension of these choices, like the clicking of the rotary dial after being returned. Back to your point about the interaction with the body, the feeling of this is so specific: the tension of the turning, the give of the coiled cord. You can sense it. But I guess all I'm trying to say is you can also hear it. Strangely, as images, they are very loud.

Sietsema: It is funny because I was thinking about this very thing just ten minutes ago. [*Laughter*] But before that, I don't know if I did that much. You know, for these paintings I take the phones apart, to pour paint on them and photograph them. I have to gut them first so they won't be so heavy they fall out of the paint. I think I have phones from the 1940s through the eighties, which I've gotten for their different colors. If you hang the ringing bells taken out of the phones from the forties on a nail and tap them with a screwdriver, they will reverberate for minutes, making a beautiful, high-pitched sound, and it just goes on and on and on and on. And the eighties versions go silent in less than thirty seconds. Manufacturing got worse and worse. But in the beginning, it was like a musical instrument. I think of the typewriters in a similar way.

Rail: They're feats of engineering.

Sietsema: Completely. If you open them up, they're incredibly simple objects. Once, the night before the opening of a large international group show, the 16 mm projector I was showing a film on stopped working. It was late and there were no techs around. I found some tools and took the casing off the projector and was able to fix it by tracing the mechanisms to find what was missing, without ever having seen the inside of a projector before. If you're making an artwork—well, this kind of artwork—it's that same situation: a mechanical process, a brain-hand feedback loop in which nothing is taken out of your hands. So for me, there is a resonance, because I think I would almost prefer just to make monochromes. But I just don't believe that painting has that particular power anymore, or maybe it's that I don't want to hand that power back over to painting. I think reading the paintings can include a similar hand-brain feedback loop. In my dreams, this brings about a more phenomenological experience for someone standing in front of them. So I'm trying to find ways to get back to an activated simplicity of some kind, or a directness.

Rail: Yeah, these are maybe more about directness than simplicity. The typewriter, *Object painting*, is such a complicated painting, despite its centering something tilted up to the picture plane, and,



Paul Sietsema, *Action painting (black line)*, 2025. Oil and enamel on canvas, 35 ⅞ × 23 ⅞ inches. © Paul Sietsema. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery and Marian Goodman Gallery.

as you say, aligned so utterly with it. But the longer I look at it, the less sense it makes. It dissolves up close, too, which is the best feeling—when you think you can understand something, and then it starts taking itself apart as you apprehend it. Then I'm thrown back on trying to figure: Where does space happen? Where is something going in or out? And it is so dumbly flat, which is perfect, because it makes me realize it is a literal ground for my projections, for my trying to keep the illusion and see how you produced it at the same time.

Sietsema: That's something I'm very interested in across the board: ambiguity. But spatially, especially with this one, there was a lot of tuning to get it to sit right, you know, and to not either just explain itself or disappear into one particular type of space.

Rail: The space is consistently inconsistent. That's kind of the ultimate game, right? To give the image and simultaneously complicate a path through it. And now that you are returning to these typologies that you developed—in some cases decades ago—you are re-entering those spaces, but also redefining their thresholds and rules.

Hudson, Suzanne, and Paul Sietsema. "Paul Sietsema with Suzanne Hudson." *The Brooklyn Rail,* November 2025.

Sietsema: Yes, I think so. *Arrangement* (2025) is a painting that I've done one iteration of in the past: a broken record in silver. The last one didn't have a frame, which is kind of a small detail, but when I do use frames, it's very much about keying it off as an object of trade, a kind of domesticated cultural object. When I do use them, I often paint imagery over the frames to pull them into the mess. [*Laughter*] So it's not an entirely polite situation.

Rail: You mean you make this as an overall structure, or you paint the frame separately, and then put them together?

Sietsema: It does have to be painted separately to get to all of it, because the image goes down the side and across the gutter. I usually do paint the backs too, which the galleries are not crazy about. They get stuck to the wall and sometimes paint chips off. The question is inevitably whether the back is part of the painting or not.

Rail: Which is it?

Sietsema: It's all the painting. Yeah, it's all the painting. It's partially that I do believe this object needs to have its own sort of existence, and us looking at it is one part of it, but it is also a totality on it's own.

Rail: Without us.

Sietsema: Yes. So the painting on the back has meaning to me, because I don't only care about the surface of the painting your eyes are currently moving over. With the backs specifically, it's also that I spend a lot of time with installation crews, and it just makes that much more enjoyable if you're experiencing a side of the work that other people don't get to experience. For me, that's a very nice moment, this feeling that you're sharing something.

Rail: There's an intimacy.

Sietsema: Which then, for me, calibrates the work differently, because work just sitting on a wall in a gallery is a pretty dead proposition.

Rail: Maybe we can talk about how the works relate to each other. It's an odd segue, but I guess it is another way of thinking about sociability or vitality in a manufactured situation.

Sietsema: Well, these paintings were definitely conceived together, and there has been a lot of editing over the last year and a half. I'm usually more of a planner, and this time, for whatever reason, I decided I would just follow my intuition. I work on tables, so the work is in different parts of the room and different states of being finished—not really visible as a group. When I was getting close to being finished, I put all of them on the wall, and sort of freaked out, because I felt like something was happening that was out of my control.

Rail: They do play off each other so actively. I'm not sure how to put it exactly, but they each have spots where the images interrupt themselves. And I am realizing that you have made a catalogue of gestures with different sets of moves within the same organizing logics.

Sietsema: I do think that. And I think what I like about this group is that each painting is processing some similar ideas about art or commerce in very different ways. Usually, I feel I need a series to do this. But this time, I felt like I was able to get it in there in singles. I see them more as integers, or variables in an equation.

Rail: They can each stand alone, so you don't need more than one of anything.

Sietsema: Yeah. I did make two on the backs of matched used paintings though. I sometimes find old paintings and turn them around to use the reverse. *Action painting (black line)* and *Action painting (white on white)* (both 2025) are knockoff Jackson Pollock paintings from an auction house in Florida. I think they were like 150 dollars each or something, but sold as Jackson Pollock originals, which is kind of amazing. I don't know if the laws are different in Florida or what—

Rail: They seem to be, about most things.

Sietsema: Yeah, maybe all things. These feel like high school art class abstraction. They're nice though. I mean, I chose them because I believe in them as paintings.

Paul Sietsema, *Gray painting*, 2025, Enamel on linen in artist's frame, 51 ⅜ × 47 ¾ inches. © Paul Sietsema. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery and Marian Goodman Gallery.

Rail: They made it harder for you to undo them. But they are still readymades, now assisted.

Sietsema: I think about Abstract Expressionism in terms of chance instead of emotion or expression, or male bravado. The paint is going to do what it wants, so that is really making the image. And there's something I like about using a coin rather than a brush as the paint applicator.

Rail: Chance within certain parameters that aren't governed by temperament or psychology. It's either going to be heads or tails.

Sietsema: Yeah. The idea that a gesture like this could be right or wrong is sort of fascinating to me, because if it feels right, does that make it wrong? What are the rules? A painting like this with a simple gesture makes me uncomfortable, because although it's playing with this, it does also believe in it somewhat—plays a bit by the rules. There's this odd feeling of the gesture as a sales pitch. Is a Willem de Kooning stroke also a symbol of monetization? I've been fascinated by this since I started looking at art. I mean, if you take a step back, it's kind of silly and bizarre that one person's gesture should be loaded with so much importance and value, when, in fact, it should really be every gesture that everybody makes having equal value.

Rail: Right, so the question becomes, "How do you think about these older gestures as the externalization of something?"

Sietsema: I mean, it's weird: one of the strictest, deepest, most personal boundaries for me in terms of making work is that I can't make a gestural mark and believe it is important just because I've done it, or it looks a certain way. And I guess I see the sort of more direct, Abstract Expressionist-type painting out there now as a response to certain types of technology—digital technology and phones and screens—and the idea that gesture carries better on social media because of the dissonance. It's as if it's this incredible thing to make a mark that AI hasn't made. It has reactionary power of course, but I think gives too much deference to the technology itself in the end. Sometimes it feels like AI is training us to make more regressive expressionistic work because it can't.

Rail: It's interesting because I've been coming to this recently from writing about art therapy and the use of the gesture in this moment of historical Ab Ex, which was coincident with its development from occupational therapy. Margaret Naumburg was one of the earliest and most important practitioners in the US. She and her sister, Florence Cane, were progressive educators. They used this scribble drawing game on kids and then Naumburg took it into her clinical practice, encouraging people to effectively make and analyze their own Rorschach test. They are all un-choreographed bodily gestures that supposedly open onto something that language could not, except in their company. But it's never pure communication. Even the gesture isn't enough. It needed to be interpreted. It was a precondition to other forms of meaning-making, whether they're visual, verbal, or some combination. Even in this psychodynamic context, there was not a transparency to meaning. And then how does this translate for work that is intended to leave the studio? That we assume that the gesture can ever just communicate, or that anyone wants it to, feels like such a folly. But what does that mean that it's our desire that it does, or could?

Paul Sietsema, *Figure ground study (white on white)*, 2025. Oil and enamel on canvas, 36 × 24 inches. © Paul Sietsema. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery and Marian Goodman Gallery.

Sietsema: It is just taking our perceptual system that's honed over, you know, generations, that takes in visual information and sounds and all these things, and processes them into something that our brain can make sense of—languages, right? So with the gestural or abstract, you have this either super-limited or, I guess, irrational information you're taking in, and it allows your brain to breathe and relax, and allow other ideas in—which I think can be a very pleasurable experience. But interpretation is a very different situation. And utilization another still. And I guess for me, one of the complicated questions in terms of how this abstraction functions now is that, spiritually or metaphysically, it encompasses as much as you want it too. And in art, the economic often expands in the same spaces the spiritual does. So in the end, it has this extreme potential for value enhancement.

Rail: That gets to Isabelle Graw's ideas on "liveliness"—with the painting as an index of the agency of the maker, which keys to the market so directly.

Sietsema: Yeah, exactly. But, I mean, it is funny, because I'm often just trying to vacuum myself out of the work. Maybe I'm fighting harder to remove myself, and somehow I'm getting more stuck in the tar of the situation.

Rail: I guess that's kind of what I was trying to say: that I was starting to feel this is such a tight grouping because it's all the same. These are all just different versions of the same painting, even though nothing about them is actually…

Sietsema: Yeah…

Rail: Or different propositions within the same concept of what a painting could be.

Sietsema: And each work is its own problem completely, and none of them are easy to solve in the end. Even with *Gray painting* (2025): I've used this image several times before, although it's been at least ten or fifteen years. This type of painting was originally meant to look at Concrete abstraction, Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana, etc. But of course, the paint slagging and making its own form happened in my studio, and I just felt like it rhymed with that earlier era enough. In terms of the painting that's in front of us now, I did want a ripple back to the work that I'd done previously, which is floating around on Instagram and other places—books, magazines, etc. When I started working on this, the highlights felt off, so I found a book that one of the earlier versions was in and scanned the page and laid the image over this one. And then I realized this was a different photograph taken at the same time as the ones I made the earlier paintings from. When I started this painting, I picked the wrong image. This one took place a few seconds before or after the other, and was taken from a slightly different angle. But this potentially inconsequential shift makes this a totally different thing to me, especially in terms of painting the image, because every single part of it is different. I like that it's not just a replication, but this weird parallel moment disguised as replication.

Rail: And the phone is interesting in this, too—the versions and the different histories they encode.

Sietsema: The smaller phone paintings really are about being opaque, and I've been into opening them up this way: making them quite a bit larger and staying thinner with the paint. The painting is more—I'm not going to say performative, but at the very least a physical workout. There is something there for me about the mess of the dust that's settled on the original object before I photographed it, and then in the painting stage, the sort of paint debris that comes from working quickly and using looser techniques. These are natural byproducts of the different stages the work goes through, and I like the lack of intentionality or design in that. And if I take a step back, I do think, as people have less and less experience in working with certain materials themselves, it's nicer to have more access to my engagement with it, so that you can still fall into it as a painting.

Rail: They still are inscrutable images though, which is, I think, what one realizes after the initial confusion over material process. Even trying to figure out where the light source is, or from what vantage the thing is being shown. You are playing with the orientation in these, especially in the fake Pollocks with the horizontal getting set upright on the wall, which registers in the experience of looking at them.

Paul Sietsem, *Action painting (white on black)*, 2025. Enamel on canvas, 48 ¼ × 41 ½ inches. © Paul Sietsema. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery and Marian Goodman Gallery.

Sietsema: That's funny. I never really thought about these that way, consciously at least. But now I can see it, because a lot of them have references to gravity in different ways that might undermine the normal non-space of an image, and also have specific relationships with flatness, in terms of the forms of the objects, but also the low relief I build up with the paint, which I think creates a kind of accentuated in-betweenness. Yeah, that's something I'm going to be thinking about for a while now.

Rail: How about in *Figure ground study (white on white)* (2025)? The parts seem like they are sliding past each other.

Sietsema: When CDs break, they break in very different ways than a vinyl record does. The break describes the material; it delivers a specific edge, which in a painting becomes a specific line. I always think about composition. In the era that I was educated in, composition was an absolutely evil thing. Composition is design; design is bad. And I really liked that the records and CDs, to a lesser extent, drifted around in the paint I poured over them as they were drying, finding their own positions, and sort of self-composing. Plus the jagged pieces point to the full circle of the whole, so there's a sort of subconscious projective reassembly that takes place when looking at them that I think relates to composition, or non-composition, in a satisfying way.

Hudson, Suzanne, and Paul Sietsema. "Paul Sietsema with Suzanne Hudson." *The Brooklyn Rail,* November 2025.

Rail: And what about the paintbrush in *Action Painting (white on black)* (2025)? I'm trying to imagine what would have been different if it had been the first instead of the last thing we talked about. It would have totally changed something. It's not just inverting the order; it's like a key on a map or some kind of decoder-ring scenario. I also love the black monochrome, because so many of the other grounds have more residual incident. This is really like a presentational space.

Sietsema: Totally, a presentational space. I've always liked this image and have wanted to make it as a painting for the last fifteen years or so, and just haven't found the right spot for it. But it is also uncomfortable, because it reminds me of the worst Roy Lichtensteins I've ever seen—the free floating brush strokes on Plexiglas. But that is also what I like about it, that it has an undeniably bristly aspect to it in certain ways.

Rail: These are all rigorous, hard paintings. I don't think they're hard to access, but then to figure out what to do with them is something else. And maybe that's your point? But so then there's a question of, "Well, what is it about?" This is the most didactic. It is straightforward, like, "Here's the device; here is the tool that made the mark that I hung on the wall." How we value it is another issue, but not unrelated, obviously, as we were also just talking about. Beneath that are questions as to how we orient that mark, and when we leave it as a mark. I feel like this kind of unfolds the whole story of what these other things are doing in a way that's probably much more straightforward. Like, I've undergone an experience, and now I have this thing that explains to me more efficiently what produced it, if not exactly what it was.

Sietsema: Yeah, I thought it was too jokey or something. And it kept wavering between being in and out of the show. But then I realized I do kind of want that. And maybe in a way, it's the most critical that way, too, because to me it's also like the logo that you would find on a pre-stretched canvas in an art store.

Rail: You've been interested for so long in the history of art materials and the way that tools migrate into other technologies, like the digital paintbrush icon for in-program design.

Sietsema: You know, everything you're looking at was made with a brush. [*Laughter*]

Rail: It's a stoner in the parking lot kind of thing—a dumb joke that is deadly serious at the same time.

Sietsema: I mean, you just summed up how I feel about the paintings. So that's pretty cool.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 matthewmarks.com

Arcane

Paul Sietsema

an interview
by Shane Rossi

Arrangement, 2024, Enamel on linen, 37 1/8 x 36 3/4 inches, 94 x 93 cm

Rossi, Shane, and Paul Sietsema. "Paul Sietsema." *Arcane* 4, September 2025, pp. 56–63.

Paul and I last saw each other in LA in early June for a studio visit as he prepared for his October exhibition at Marian Goodman in Paris. His windows were characteristically blocked by cardboard and this time there were more paintings on the wall than usual. Many others were unfinished or perhaps finished on tabletops under sheets of glassine – we looked at a few.

Can you talk about how you incorporate new subject matter or a new series into the practice? You have a recurring cast of characters - phones, coins, Picasso posters, and now more recently, broken records - that you develop over long periods. I always look forward to the new "model" of a familiar subject and especially take note when you bring in a new one like you are with this upcoming show in Paris.

So far there is just one of the new type of painting you mention, titled *Object painting*. It considers painting as a machine and emblematizes processing and work, even while it just sits there on the wall, an inert combination of paint, metal, wood, and fabric. The apparatus I've chosen to portray conveys the weight of an era along with the physical weight of the object that embodied it. Its outdated mechanisms rely on finger and hand operations much more so than devices now paralleling the handwork used to make the painting itself. This machine wears its functionality on its surface, but over time and through obsolescence it has misplaced its original intention which is replaced by types of abstraction.

In terms of subjects, if something is still a question for me it keeps going, regardless of how long I've worked with it. There's one painting in the Paris show, a brush in white paint, from an earlier series of brush paintings, that I've been thinking about making for over 10 years.

I'm also resurrecting a type of painting for Paris I haven't made in quite a while. Adding to this dark gray abstraction's existing DNA its new status as an apparition of itself, to accentuate the type's minimal subject matter which is already an apparition of past painting movements.

We've talked about how the city or context you're showing in brings out different attitudes in the work: Paris for example bringing out a grittier tone and less color, Los Angeles a bit more flash, New York maybe somewhere in between? How do these shifts in attitude drive not only the look of the work but also the content you

Paul et moi nous sommes revus à Los Angeles début juin, pour une visite d'atelier alors qu'il préparait son exposition d'octobre à la galerie Marian Goodman à Paris. Ses fenêtres étaient, comme à son habitude, recouvertes de carton, et cette fois il y avait plus de peintures accrochées aux murs que d'ordinaire. Beaucoup d'autres étaient inachevées ou peut-être achevées posées sur des tables, sous des feuilles de papier cristal. Nous en avons regardé quelques-unes.

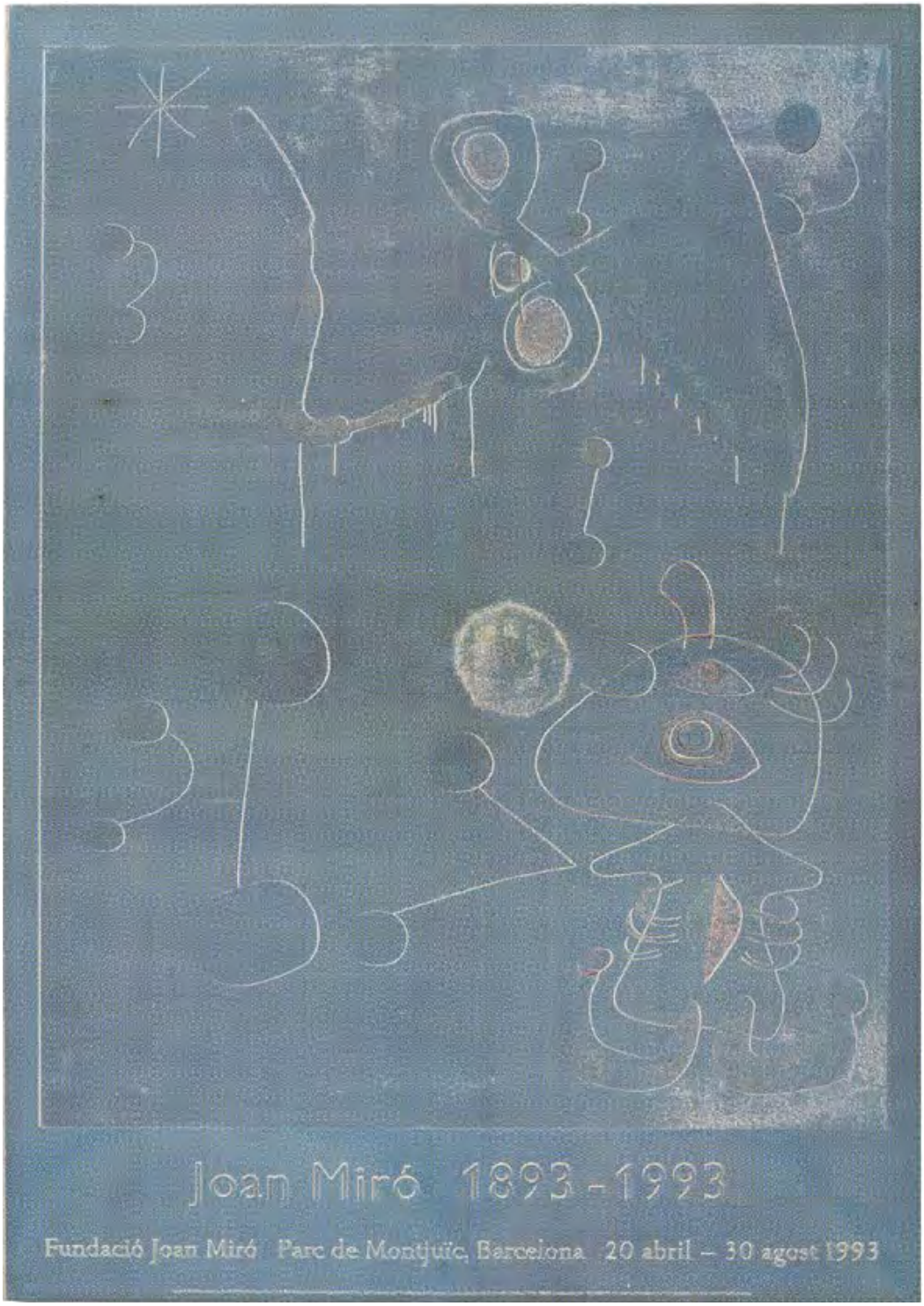
Peux-tu expliquer comment tu introduis de nouveaux sujets ou une nouvelle série dans ta pratique ? Tu as un répertoire récurrent de motifs — téléphones, pièces de monnaie, affiches de Picasso, et plus récemment disques brisés — que tu développes sur de longues périodes. J'attends toujours avec impatience de voir le nouveau « modèle » d'un sujet familier, et je prends particulièrement note lorsque tu en introduis un nouveau, comme c'est le cas pour cette prochaine exposition à Paris.

Pour l'instant, il n'y a qu'un seul tableau du nouveau type dont tu parles, intitulé *Object Painting*. Il envisage la peinture comme une machine et incarne le traitement et le travail, même lorsqu'il repose simplement sur le mur, combinaison inerte de peinture, métal, bois et tissu. L'appareil que j'ai choisi de représenter exprime à la fois le poids d'une époque et le poids physique de l'objet qui l'incarnait. Ses mécanismes obsolètes reposent sur des opérations des doigts et de la main bien plus que les dispositifs actuels, faisant écho au travail manuel nécessaire à la réalisation même de la peinture. Cette machine arbore sa fonctionnalité en surface, mais avec le temps et l'obsolescence, elle a perdu son intention première, remplacée par des formes d'abstraction.

Quant aux sujets, si quelque chose reste pour moi une question ouverte, cela continue, peu importe depuis combien de temps j'y travaille. Il y a une peinture dans l'exposition parisienne, un pinceau plongé dans de la peinture blanche, issue d'une série antérieure de peintures de pinceaux, que je pense à réaliser depuis plus de dix ans.

Je ressuscite également pour Paris un type de peinture que je n'avais pas faite depuis longtemps. J'y ajoute, à l'ADN existant de cette abstraction gris foncé, son nouveau statut d'apparition d'elle-même, pour accentuer le caractère minimal du sujet, qui est déjà une apparition de mouvements picturaux passés.

Nous avons déjà parlé du fait que la ville ou le contexte dans lequel tu présentes ton travail fait ressortir des attitudes différentes : Paris, par exemple, amenant un ton plus brut et moins de couleur ; Los Angeles, un peu plus d'éclat ; New York, peut-être quelque part entre



Blue Miro, 2020, Acrylic on canvas over panel, 85 3/4 x 60 1/2 inches, 218 x 154 cm

Rossi, Shane, and Paul Sietsema. "Paul Sietsema." *Arcane* 4, September 2025, pp. 56–63.

decide to deal with?

I often associate bright colors in art with the market and was interested in testing the relationship of color with economics in one of my phone paintings from the last show I had in Los Angeles. Intuitively mixing until things felt right, I arrived at a bright reddish pink, almost fluorescent, something like Pepto Bismol mixed with molten metal. When the work was done, and I was parking at the gallery in West Hollywood to install the show, I noticed the color of the brand-new car next to me matched the color of my painting exactly.
The resulting queasy realization that an automobile company and I had decided the same color was right for that particular moment is one of the reasons why the show in Paris will represent pure materials. Metals, paint in its simplest form; black, white, natural fibers such as canvas and linen all play roles, as does representation and an exploded idea of painting. I wanted to combine the natural and synthetic to make them one continuous thing.
Los Angeles gives surface beauty a leading role, and much contrast is created if something isn't superficial-which might actually mean using extra superficiality self-consciously. Jo Baer defined painting as an artificial medium in which you need to be genuine, to me this has always meant navigating the artificial on its own terms to align with the true nature of representation.

A couple months back you mentioned a writer [visiting your studio] had called a new painting "nostalgic" (I think.. or something along those lines). What about that read is disappointing or missing the point?

There's nothing nostalgic about the way I live my life, the technologies I use or culture I engage with etc., but many of the subjects I use in my work are from the past. My work is very much about an experience in the current moment and elements of the past are used only for the way they sit in the present, as symbols that embody certain functions and materialities, eras and bodies of thought. I think of them as aesthetic inflection points rather than objects or images. There is also a chronological slippage I am interested in here. For the last 25 years at least, my work has processed how technologies-in the beginning a newly commercialized internet-bring all times to the present. That the year of origin for my work might be hard to figure out by someone who doesn't know it inspires me also because it's a kind of time travel, it brings the future to the present as well.

How are you feeling about the role of the phone in this show? Over the last couple years you've introduced a different kind of enamel paint with the phones in particular — is that becoming more familiar and comfortable to use? There's the metallic variant that feels very new and its own thing and also this more opaque and newer built up ones that feel like you're unlocking an older vibe with the new paint? Does that resonate or not at all?

For this show each individual work is very much its own thing. Each one plays off the other instead of repeating themselves, which is the way the color phones and carriage paintings often work. One of the paintings in the Paris show will be a large silver phone. The silver phones I started showing last year are bigger than earlier phone paintings, and the paint application is more physical, with more body movement. The newer paint isn't as opaque as the previous

les deux. Comment ces changements d'attitude influencent-ils non seulement l'apparence de l'œuvre mais aussi le contenu dont tu choisis de traiter ?

J'associe souvent les couleurs vives en art au marché, et j'ai voulu tester la relation entre la couleur et l'économie dans une de mes peintures de téléphones lors de ma dernière exposition à Los Angeles. En mélangeant intuitivement jusqu'à trouver ce qui me semblait juste, j'ai abouti à un rose rougeâtre vif, presque fluorescent — quelque chose comme du Pepto Bismol mêlé à du métal en fusion. Lorsque l'œuvre a été terminée, en me garant à la galerie de West Hollywood pour installer l'exposition, j'ai remarqué que la couleur de la voiture neuve à côté de moi correspondait exactement à celle de ma peinture.
La prise de conscience troublante qu'un constructeur automobile et moi avions décidé, chacun de notre côté, que cette couleur était juste pour ce moment-là, est l'une des raisons pour lesquelles l'exposition parisienne se concentrera sur des matériaux purs. Métaux, peinture dans sa forme la plus simple (noir, blanc), fibres naturelles comme la toile et le lin — tout cela joue un rôle, tout comme la représentation et une idée éclatée de la peinture. Je voulais combiner le naturel et le synthétique, pour les fondre en une seule et même chose.
Los Angeles donne à la beauté de surface un rôle central, et beaucoup de contraste se crée si quelque chose n'est pas superficiel — ce qui peut en fait signifier utiliser une superficialité accrue, mais de manière consciente. Jo Baer a défini la peinture comme un médium artificiel dans lequel il faut être authentique. Pour moi, cela a toujours signifié naviguer dans l'artificialité selon ses propres termes afin de s'aligner avec la véritable nature de la représentation.

Il y a quelques mois, tu avais mentionné qu'un écrivain venu visiter ton atelier avait qualifié une nouvelle peinture de « nostalgique » (il me semble… ou quelque chose dans ce genre). Qu'est-ce qui, dans cette lecture, t'a semblé décevant ou à côté de la plaque ?

Il n'y a rien de nostalgique dans ma façon de vivre, les technologies que j'utilise, ou la culture à laquelle je m'intéresse. Mais beaucoup des sujets que j'explore viennent du passé. Mon travail porte pleinement sur une expérience du présent, et les éléments du passé ne sont utilisés que pour la manière dont ils existent dans le présent — en tant que symboles incarnant certaines fonctions et matérialités, des époques et des corpus de pensée. Je les considère comme des points d'inflexion esthétique plutôt que comme des objets ou des images. Il y a également un glissement chronologique qui m'intéresse. Depuis au moins 25 ans, mon travail traite de la façon dont les technologies — au début, un internet nouvellement commercialisé — ramènent tous les temps dans le présent. Que l'année d'origine de mon travail puisse être difficile à déterminer pour quelqu'un qui ne le connaît pas m'inspire aussi, car c'est une forme de voyage temporel : cela amène aussi le futur dans le présent.

Comment envisages-tu le rôle du téléphone dans cette exposition ? Ces dernières années, tu as introduit une nouvelle sorte de peinture émaillée, notamment pour les téléphones. Est-ce que cela devient plus familier et confortable à utiliser ? Il y a la variante métallique, qui semble très nouvelle et autonome, et aussi des versions plus opaques et plus travaillées qui donnent l'impression que tu réactives une ambiance plus ancienne avec une peinture nouvelle. Est-ce que cela te parle, ou pas du tout ?

Pour cette exposition, chaque œuvre est vraiment une entité à

Vertical coin game, 2021, Enamel on linen, 32 1/2 x 28 1/4 inches, 83 x 72 cm

one making the silver image more diaphanous, like the surface of a silver balloon-thin and taut with a rubbery dullness. At a time when AI makes it hard to feel optimistic about our future with technology, the silver paintings embody a kind of optimism, lifted from the age of domesticated machines, which had bodies to mirror our own.

How are you orienting yourself toward the craft side of your practice at the moment and how often does that fluctuate? The paintings are unfathomably well made and I'm curious how often, if ever, you wish it were a simpler process? Also, does it bother you when people fixate too much on the execution of the work?

I suppose it does bother me a little if someone pays more attention to one aspect of the work rather than the whole, but I'm still compelled to work the way I do. I like to slow the path through the image. Much art I experience feels light to me, in a battle of objecthood with an ashtray it might lose. I think the methods I use and the time I devote to them might allow the work to put up more of a fight against the weight of regular things.
I've developed many methods for making my work over the years. In the beginning I was interested in fusing the photographic and digital and painterly, but my rule was that the final execution had to be made entirely by hand, no printing etc. The only exception is a series of blocked out exhibition posters I was silk screening. Even those required hundreds of pulls of the screens and quite a bit of correction by hand, painting hundreds if not thousands of CMYK dots with a small brush. As you start to calculate the amount of work you might be able to finish before you aren't able to make work anymore, this can start to seem like not a great idea.

I remember driving around LA a year or two ago and you had the ASAP Rocky song - *Fukk Sleep*- on your dashboard that I couldn't help but clock. How does music play into the studio practice?

***Fukk Sleep* is a track on *Testing*, which is a pop album that takes on the idea of experimentation as its theme, a kind of inversion of 20th century avant garde thinking. Good artists are always floating parts of their true selves in front of us, in their lyrics, as a kind of formalism. The detachment of repetition and noise of the necessary technology for distribution complicates this and creates productive tension. I usually listen to full albums for the concepts, and an artist's full catalog in chronological order to experience the evolution of the work. This is something I used to do in the studio, up until maybe 5 or 10 years ago. Now, I do most of my listening in the car-on trips across town to my panel fabricator, or hours north or south to swim in the ocean. I stopped listening to music in the studio as a constant backdrop because I wanted to try to get everything out of the work itself and not be confused about if the buzz I was feeling was coming from something I was doing or the ASAP Rocky blasting out of my speakers.**

part entière. Chacune joue avec les autres sans se répéter, contrairement aux séries de téléphones colorés ou de carrosses. L'une des peintures exposées à Paris représentera un grand téléphone argenté. Les téléphones argentés que j'ai commencé à montrer l'année dernière sont plus grands que les précédents, et l'application de la peinture y est plus physique, engageant davantage le mouvement du corps. La nouvelle peinture est moins opaque que la précédente, rendant l'image argentée plus diaphane, comme la surface d'un ballon d'argent — fine, tendue, avec une matité caoutchouteuse. À une époque où l'intelligence artificielle rend difficile l'optimisme quant à notre avenir technologique, ces peintures argentées incarnent une forme d'optimisme, puisé à l'ère des machines domestiquées — des machines qui avaient des corps pour refléter les nôtres.

Comment t'orientes-tu actuellement par rapport à l'aspect artisanal de ta pratique, et à quelle fréquence cela fluctue-t-il ? Tes peintures sont incroyablement bien réalisées, et je me demande à quel point, parfois, tu aimerais que le processus soit plus simple. Est-ce que cela t'agace quand les gens se focalisent trop sur l'exécution ?

J'imagine que cela m'agace un peu si quelqu'un se concentre davantage sur un aspect du travail que sur l'ensemble, mais je reste poussé à travailler comme je le fais. J'aime ralentir le parcours à travers l'image. Beaucoup d'œuvres que je vois me paraissent légères ; dans une bataille d'objectité face à un cendrier, elles pourraient perdre. Je pense que les méthodes que j'emploie et le temps que j'y consacre permettent à mon travail de mieux résister au poids des choses ordinaires.
J'ai développé de nombreuses méthodes de fabrication au fil des ans. Au début, je m'intéressais à fusionner le photographique, le numérique et le pictural, mais ma règle était que l'exécution finale devait être entièrement réalisée à la main — pas d'impression, etc. La seule exception fut une série d'affiches d'exposition masquées que je sérigraphiais. Même celles-ci exigeaient des centaines de passages à l'écran et beaucoup de corrections à la main, peignant des centaines, voire des milliers de points CMJN au pinceau fin. Quand on commence à calculer combien d'œuvres on peut raisonnablement achever avant de ne plus être en mesure d'en produire, cela peut sembler ne pas être la meilleure idée.

Je me souviens avoir roulé dans Los Angeles il y a un an ou deux, et avoir remarqué que tu avais le morceau *Fukk Sleep* d'A$AP Rocky sur ton tableau de bord, ce que je n'ai pas pu m'empêcher de relever.

Quel rôle joue la musique dans ta pratique d'atelier ?

Fukk Sleep est un morceau de *Testing*, un album pop qui prend l'expérimentation pour thème, une sorte d'inversion de la pensée avant-gardiste du XXe siècle. Les bons artistes projettent toujours une part de leur véritable identité devant nous, dans leurs paroles comme une forme de formalisme. Le détachement de la répétition et le bruit des technologies nécessaires à la distribution compliquent cela et créent une tension productive. J'écoute généralement les albums dans leur intégralité pour leur concept, et l'ensemble de la discographie d'un artiste dans l'ordre chronologique pour en percevoir l'évolution. C'est quelque chose que je faisais auparavant dans l'atelier, jusqu'il y a environ cinq ou dix ans. Aujourd'hui, j'écoute surtout de la musique en voiture, lors de trajets à travers la ville pour aller voir mon fabricant de panneaux, ou en conduisant des heures vers le nord ou le sud pour aller nager dans l'océan. J'ai arrêté d'écouter de la musique en permanence dans l'atelier car je voulais tirer tout de l'œuvre elle-même, et ne pas être troublé par l'idée que le frisson que je ressentais venait peut-être de ce que je faisais, ou bien d'A$AP Rocky résonnant dans mes enceintes.

Carriage painting, 2024, Enamel on oil on canvas, 52 7/8 x 36 5/8 inches, 134 x 93 cm

Rossi, Shane, and Paul Sietsema. "Paul Sietsema." *Arcane* 4, September 2025, pp. 56–63.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 matthewmarks.com

LA Los Angeles Review of Books RB

Painting Money

Gracie Hadland talks to Paul Sietsema about his recent exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery.

By Gracie Hadland • April 20, 2025

PAUL SIETSEMA'S PAINTINGS often lead with something so obvious—a punch line or visual pun—that it makes you wonder: Am I stupid, or is he? In his series of Carriage *paintings, he covers other artists' paintings that he bought for cheap at auction—with renderings of ripped bills in foreign currency. The paintings are literally, then, money wasted (ha ha), while the monetary value of the original is voided by Sietsema's overpainting. But with another look, the elegant opacity of the enamel surfaces muffles the punch line. The works have a layered effect; the cool, glassy sheen of the surfaces create a trompe l'oeil, luring you in and making you wonder if you're actually both smart. Sietsema's work depends on this oscillation between sophisticated appearance and punchy humor, leaving the viewer somewhere in between.*

Hadland, Gracie. "Painting Money." *Los Angeles Review of Books,* April 20, 2025.

In the artist's most recent show, this past fall at Matthew Marks in Los Angeles, Sietsema presented 14 new paintings, most of which are continuations of series he has been working in for years. In addition to torn money, there are rotary phones and coins built up with paint. Sietsema is an artist preoccupied with the perennial problems of painting. Is it dead? Is it just a pretty, market-friendly object? He seeks answers through repetition, returning again and again to these series marked by minor variations on narrowly defined visual themes. He often shows them together: it's as if each new series must be accompanied by the last to exhaust its function. Among the phones and money paintings at the Matthew Marks exhibition was one from a new series, featuring objects in metallic tone enamel. This piece, Arrangement (2024), is a picture of a broken record: perhaps a subtle nod to the artist's own obsessiveness.

I visited Paul's studio in December where we discussed his work, surrounded by piles of paper and postcards and foreign notes.

¤

GRACIE HADLAND: Some artists are set on being opaque—avoiding speaking about their work too much or not wanting to personally appear in their work or around it. You've given lectures where, instead of talking about the work, you show a film. I'm wondering, what does that gesture of opacity as an artist mean to you? And is it important for you to be sort of cryptic or opaque in your self-presentation as an artist?

PAUL SIETSEMA: I'm not trying to be cryptic or opaque at all. I get stage fright about public speaking, and I don't want to be in front of people giving a lecture. So I'll think of ways not to be in front of people; I'll show a film of mine instead. It's also that I feel like that's the way that my brain organizes itself. I think making things visually and speaking or writing are totally different. I'm deep into visual stuff, which makes it harder for me to organize my thoughts in writing. It's that I don't really trust what I have to say about the work, and I feel like, a lot of the time, it leads people astray. I'm interested in how objects exist in the world. Not all objects emanate or communicate that much, so I like the things that I make to be one among those other things in the world. They shouldn't be louder than something else.

This fall you had a show at Matthew Marks in Los Angeles in which you exhibited works from different series of paintings. One series consists of what you call *Carriage* paintings, which incorporate different types of currency painted on the canvas. These are paintings of money that themselves become financial assets. They seem to me to directly address the idea that paintings exist primarily as financial assets, but your works seem to obscure a potential critique of a market-crazed art world.

Yes, I mean they either do or they don't [become an asset]. It's not up to me. But I think that this does maybe have something to do with the way that I feel like my work functions, maybe a little related to opacity—I do like if there's a grand gesture that is maybe kind of dumb, and I always think of it as a red herring. Something that sort of slaps you in the face, and then if you can regain your vision and everything, [you realize] that's not really the point, that there are other things happening.

Also, I collected currency as a kid. The American dollar almost looks like it was hand-drawn in ink. I was always amazed by the beauty, but I also loved that it had this sort of triple value: its aesthetic beauty, the monetary value, and then the fact that it was like this multiple that many people had access to in various

stages of circulation. It seemed like this beautiful thing that was like an artwork that had a wide existence, being used by people all the time. When I started making these paintings, I was still interested in that matrix that I experienced when I was a kid. Then I was in a position to put these in play, in a situation in which the painting either had value or didn't; it was handmade, it would maybe be in a series—like, there were just parallels to it in the weird economy that I was spinning them into. But I do find the currency very beautiful, and, of course, tearing money is a thrill. I tear the bills to make the paintings. And that's great, because it's like if I could afford to buy a really nice car and then drive it into a wall; I think that would be pretty exciting.

There's another element to these Carriage paintings too, in that they are painting over paintings made by other people, right? Could you talk a little bit about that?

I realized, when I started traveling around and looking at things and going on eBay in the late 1990s, and looking at other weird auction aggregators since then, that there are just hundreds of thousands of paintings—probably more—probably millions of paintings for sale at all times from different people in the world. And so, as a game, I started bidding on some paintings. I started choosing them intuitively, based on my own network of understanding of painting. And so I started putting in low bids, bottom-feeder bids, like 50 euros on a painting, and if I would win it, I would have shippers pick it up and then wait for others to join it, and then have them shipped to me. It was a strange way of collecting art but it didn't really cost anything. The artists were dead, a lot of them, because the paintings were older, and the styles usually paralleled other [contemporaneous] styles. Most of these artists were unoriginal. It was interesting to me to have this sort of second or third or fourth or fifth take on style. Once I had them, they became like a trigger for whatever would happen on top of them. The idea of a blank canvas is something I'm not crazy about, and it was nice to have something to react to.

I was thinking about that too. I mean, in your studio, there's so much stuff that is made by other people that you often use as a starting point. Is that an important element in the work, that it begins with something already existing, handmade by someone else, as a sort of prompt?

I see it as doing two things. Number one, and this is how I feel about these objects, if they're sitting at an auction and, you know, out in the middle of nowhere, and nobody picks it up, it probably goes in the garbage. And I sort of like the idea that I'm picking these things up and keeping them in circulation as cultural objects—maybe not with the intention of the original maker, which is a different thing to think about, but that I'm sort of keeping this other world that somebody else started in circulation is interesting to me.

I know that the art world in general seems to like people who are true originals—people are very egotistical. You sort of have to be. It's about bravado and expression. It's sort of like neo-expressionism never died. With conceptual art, I think there's something to me that's less egotistical. I do like to disappear, and this might have to do with my sensibility, just the way that I am as a person, but I'm not super excited to be visible in the world. Like, I'm always more comfortable if people don't know I'm there somehow. And so I feel like starting with other work, or mixing with other work—or maybe the thing that I apply is just money: I don't own money, and somebody else owns the work. And it's not about my ego or expression or something. It's more like an equation of different things coming together.

That's interesting, this idea of disappearing in painting. Jack Goldstein talked about disappearing in his paintings. And most often, he was starting off with photographs, I guess.

There is something strange if you're doing work like copying a photograph or doing anything that's related to copying: it's a very meditative process, and you get lost. It becomes your life and it becomes an environment that is, if you have a certain kind of brain, something that you like to live in.

Also, there's something funny about starting with someone else's work, a painting that you bought for like 50 bucks that might end up selling for a thousand times as much. It's a bit of a joke or a prank to apply the terms of your work's value as an artist to this object by someone else that was not wanted.

They're called, yeah, *Carriage*, because a carriage in financial terms is one thing that carries the value of another. And so the idea is that these paintings have to do with a kind of applied value.

To me, there's a subtle humor in a lot of these works. There are these gotcha jokes that have a punchy, warm humor that seems to contradict the sleek, sometimes cold exterior of these objects.

I mean, humor is connected to many things, and it's a fundamental psychological, emotional, linguistic complex. It's an activating element to anything. I have always been interested in perceptual systems and I do like the way the humor plays into those.

In each series (mostly talking about the ones in this past show at Matthew Marks Gallery, September–November 2024), there are time stamps. The dates on magazines, money, credit cards, or through representations of another time, as with the rotary phones—you're often collapsing multiple eras on the surface of the canvas with these different objects.

I think it's maybe another one of these "dumb" moves to grab the viewer's attention. It's something that I like, when an artwork is supposed to embody its time period—if you just write the date on something, suddenly, the artwork doesn't have to exist anymore, because it's a place-keeper for a time period. And then aesthetics that exist in one period of time, indicated by a technological object, is another form of it. But I've also always been interested in the different types of indicators of time that exist. I like using the phones in these works because they capture this spread of time between the 1940s and now. I mean, some people still have them in their houses. When I was in high school in the late '80s, that's all we used. Then there's this, what I think of as an exploration of, slippage in time too. The thing about making artwork now is that whatever it is, if you've just finished it, it exists very strongly in the present. But if it's a magazine cover from 10 years ago, it also has that register. When I was making films in the late '90s, it had a lot to do with the sort of virtual technologies that were coming out then that, of course, now are pretty much everywhere. But it was this kind of idea of time travel or experiencing more than one time period in one object: if an artwork collapses a technique from one era, an object from another era, like a magazine, and then maybe a coin from another era, and all of that expands but they collapse one single moment.

These works have a very meticulous process that takes you a long time and has multiple steps that are not always oriented around the actual application of paint, the most important step of the process. It's more like the painting part is one element of a longer process.

Yeah. I think of them as sandwiches of paintings, of which painting is one of the layers.

Do you consider yourself a painter then?

Part of me thinks a painter is anybody that uses paint. And I think Daniel Buren was a painter. And he, in the beginning, used striped fabric, and then painted one white line on the side, and it was a painting. And then he stopped painting anything on them, but they were like panels or just pieces of fabric, or just skins of paint on a wall that were striped. So, I don't know. It really depends on your definition of "painter." I don't really care. I'm not really into categories that much. I see a lot of people who are throwing paint around in abstract ways, and their paint drips and drops in bright colors, and I don't think they're painters, because it's not relevant. So part of me thinks a painter is somebody who's making relevant artwork with paint. And if that's the case, I'm a painter. But other people have historical ideas of what a painter is.

I do use the idea of a painting as the system. There are other systems involved, but a painting as an object with its own history and existence in different forms is a system that I like to start with. I think that makes them actually deep painting, in a way, and not just painting. Because I do consider what a painting is, and I look at a lot of painting, and I always think about what a painting is or should be. But I feel like painting is so weird now, maybe because of the market or the art world, and so I would be less inclined just to say it.

In that vein, do you see these works being critical of that market or world?

I feel like you know if you do something and then you are in dialogue with other people that do that thing. I don't know if "critical" is the word. I know that I'm influenced by what's happening. I'm not going to copy what's happening, but it definitely influences what I want to say. And I have noticed that in periods where super bright painting is happening, I'll make some. I do kind of consider them like decoys. I can use these trends as camouflage a little bit, where I'm kind of going undercover. It allows me to extend the system of what I feel like I can activate if that aesthetic is in play at the same time. But critical … I mean, I have my own feelings about whether I like something or not, or whether I think something should exist in such high numbers and force the attention of the art world based on its economic weight. But in my work, I always want to make something that emanates in the way that I want it to. I don't think that the tool of my work is specific enough to be critical that way, really. I think people pick up on that when they look at the work, but it's not necessarily articulated.

¤

Known for his paintings, drawings, and 16 mm films that explore how imagery, form, and material affect our understanding of culture and history, Paul Sietsema (b. 1968) has had one-person exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Kunsthalle Basel. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2005, a DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) Fellowship in 2008, and a Wexner Center Residency Award in 2010. He lives and works in Los Angeles.

¤

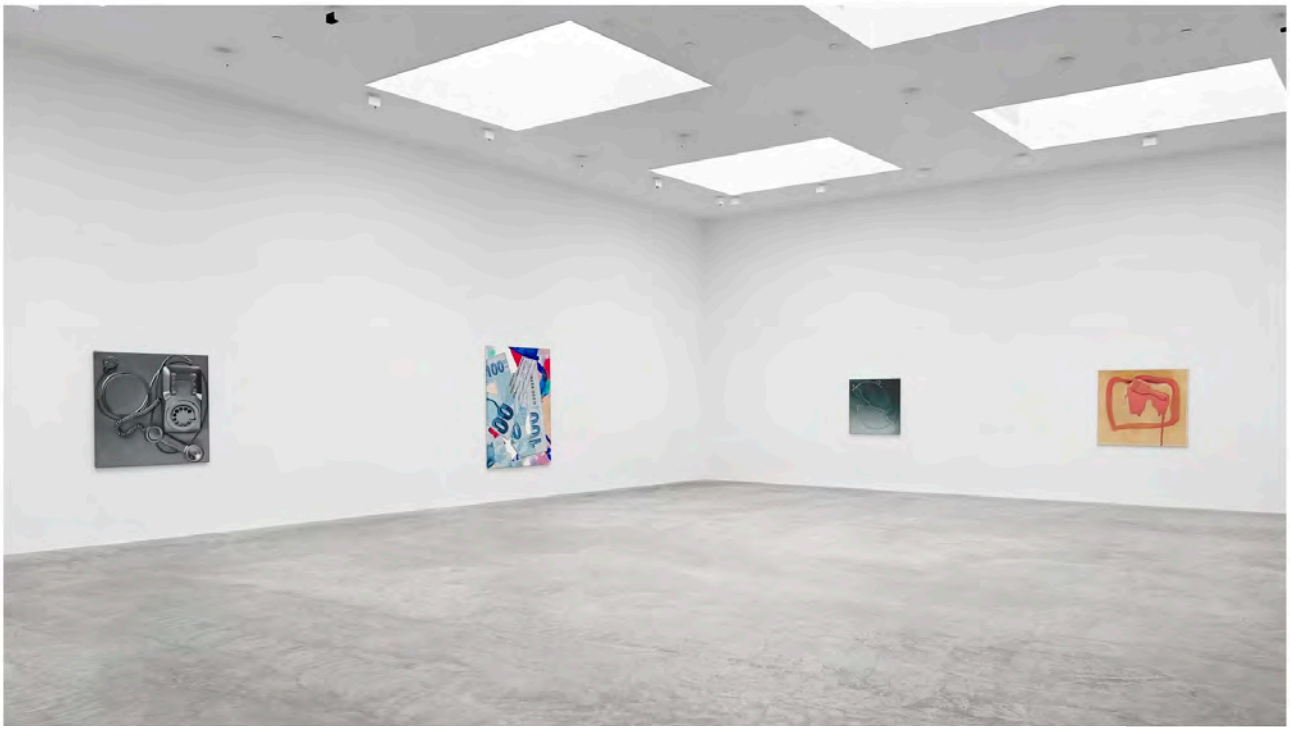
Featured image: Paul Sietsema. Arrangements, 2024. Courtesy of the artist. Image has been cropped.

THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ARTSEEN | DEC/JAN 2024–25

Paul Sietsema

By David Muenzer



Installation view: *Paul Sietsema*, Matthew Marks Gallery, Los Angeles, 2024. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

On a recent visit to Paul Sietsema's self-titled 2024 exhibition at Matthew Marks in Los Angeles, I was struck by how assiduously he avoids many of the devices commonly used to hold meaning in place when parsing work. Paintings with divergent imagery share identical titles, while other images, which seem to be in sequence, span two series. A self titled show is something of a rarity these days.

Ursula K. Le Guin's 1964 short story "The Rule of Names" is a parable of nominative power. In the story, one's secret and true name must never be revealed. I once penned a press release for a friend, beginning with an epigram from Le Guin. The text was rejected—the commissioner was

Paul Sietsema, *Arrangement*, 2024. Enamel on linen, 37 1/8 × 36 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery.

magnificently paranoid about the ways meaning might attach themselves to his abstract paintings. He certainly understood the power of contextual framing.

Yet, at the same time, it's hard not to go around naming things when encountering Sietsema's work. The canvases almost beg for nouns (The phones, the coins, the *New Yorkers*…). You could call these motifs and move on, but I think that is missing the point. Sietsema has been working with these elements for over a decade. And he has used titles in different ways in earlier works, as in the memorable, directively named film *Empire* (2002), which takes its imagery from a veritable russian doll of proper nouns—Clement Greenberg's apartment, as photographed by Hans Namuth, and reproduced in a 1964 Vogue article.

A name is not a material thing, but it can be a kind of mental construction. The arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified is the first axiom of semiotics, but my fixation on the way things are categorized and spoken about here reflects the profound, even perverse, degree to which the action in Sietsema's *Paul Sietsema* takes place at the level of material and form.

To call these objects paintings stretches the category. On a recent visit to his studio, the color system and plethora of stoppered and coded bottles brought to mind the technical work spaces of model

makers and engineers. In the gallery, the sides of the paintings are bursting with activity, and the close planes on which the complex images unfold feel attuned to their own shallowness or depth in a way akin to sculpture.

The sides of the canvases are their own arenas: illusionistically unctuous (false) enamel overspill, rendered in transparent thin layers (*Arrangement*, [2024]—the shattered vinyl painting with that title, not the other one); the sticky-looking and intensely chromatic enamel extensions to the three "Phone" paintings (all 2024), in which the renderings carry through onto artist frames; and, perhaps most heightened to me, the even split in *Blue painting (chalkline)* (2024)–with no undulations–between the thick navy blue and inset white paint and the unblemished pique of the raw linen from which the paint juts out.

The play between the imitation of chance (as in the artfully selected coin flips in works like *Double coin painting* [2024]) and the steadfast reproduction of seemingly accidental digital artifacts (see: the thin contouring green lines in the two *Carriage paintings* [both 2024]) animates much of the work, and the edges are no exception. The fact that such painterly edges might typically be the place where intention gives way to accident only emphasizes how intensely they are here, in Sietsema's work, vectors for thought and labor. I have barely touched on image circulation and economic thinking—two important and consistent touchstones for Sietsema's work—but this imitative play

Paul Sietsema, *Gray Chase*, 2024. Enamel on linen, 44 1/4 × 44 1/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery.

Muenzer, David. "Paul Sietsema." *The Brooklyn Rail,* December/January 2024–25.

with accident and chance, and its particular forms, has everything to do with making a thing distinctive and an object of desire. *Gray Chase* (2024), says it all: what appears to be the residue of an action—swiping a credit card around a still-wet monochrome—is a carefully choreographed image of seductive viscosity, both more and less gestural than any index.

Granted, to spend this much time on the edges of paintings–parts of artworks that do not always warrant official documentation–verges on irresponsible eccentricity. It is certainly a personal projection: I have been making reliefs myself and considering their history. On another level, it's the most staid kind of art historical analysis, nodding to Sietsema's influential teacher Charles Ray, with his own recent and ongoing interest in shallow space. But, whatever foibles to this approach, I think that the broader disposition of the paintings can be assayed through this morphological detour.

Sietsema has commented that painting felt available to him as a practice, in part, because it is outmoded. In today's avowedly history-averse art market (a particular feature of Los Angeles, where we both live), this quality may be slightly less pronounced.

An exceptional attunement to shifting temporalities is an enduring feature of Sietsema's work. It brings to mind T.J. Clark's memorable analysis of Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962) in his 2000 essay "Origins of the Present Crisis," in which Clark emphasizes not the mechanically reproduced, commercially-minded aspects of the iconic work, but instead:

> How handmade and petty-bourgeois [Warhol's] bright world of consumer durables now looks! How haunted still by a dream of freedom! So that his *Campbell's Soup Can* appears, thirty years on, transparently an amalgam—an unresolved, but naively serious dialectical mapping—of De Stijl-type abstraction onto a founding, consoling, redemptive country-store solidity. How like a Stuart Davis or a Ralston Crawford it looks, or an entry from the *Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues!*

Clark's essay was occasioned by considering the so-called end of modernism, and repeats the exact title of Perry Anderson's essay from over thirty years earlier, which was published within six weeks of Greenberg's Vogue special and Le Guin's "Rule of Names."

That "naively serious dialectical mapping" appears in Sietsema's judicious use of pre-existing paintings as substrates for his *Carriage* loops of torn currency. I see an appreciation for the qualities in each of these repurposed artworks, as well as a sense of how their modes of meaning-making still sustain, or fail to. This is different from the obvious, flattening distance of irony.

The remarkable renderings of torn and overlapped currency in the *Carriage paintings* are thick, almost slab-like. The fraud-protection patterns are painted carefully, but not, to my eye, mechanistically—I see some wobble of the hand in each raised line. Is it the power of the scanner that produces their fidelity? Or is it the pattern-recognition capacities of the mind? To me, the piled slabs of rendered currency recall the emphatic embodied abjection of Chaïm Soutine's *Carcass of Beef* (1925).

After the extensive attention to surface in postmodern, hammering depth out of a plane is one way of conceptualizing relief, with all that focus on making thick what had been thin.

Muenzer, David. "Paul Sietsema." *The Brooklyn Rail,* December/January 2024–25.

ARTNEWS

LOS ANGELES

BUSY SIGNALS

Paul Sietsema in conversation with Connie Butler

When New York Times *art critic Ken Johnson went to review Paul Sietsema's exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 2010, what he found there—in a David Lynch-ian moment—was himself. One of Sietsema's black ink drawings was of a page of the* Times *that contained a review bearing Johnson's byline. Sietsema had also reproduced a review by Johnson's colleague Roberta Smith of Sietsema's own exhibition "Empire," at the Whitney Museum in 2003 (his New York debut, which included drawings, a model of Clement Greenberg's New York apartment based on photographs from a 1964 issue of* Vogue, *and a film based around that model, would appeal, she wrote, to those who "like their Conceptual art funky yet obscure"). This kind of archival mise en abyme is Sietsema's stock in trade. He is interested in relics, whether that means newspapers, or rotary telephones or Abstract Expressionism or the entire modernist project. Born in Los Angeles in 1968, he returned to his hometown in 2011 after a stint in Berlin; it was there that he had begun to develop an interest in using euros, and other relics of twentieth-century history, as the basis for a new series of hyper-realistic paintings. Connie Butler, now chief curator at the Hammer Museum, was the organizer of Sietsema's 2010 MoMA exhibition. She recently visited Sietsema's studio in L.A.'s Highland Park neighborhood to talk with him about his most recent works, including those paintings incorporating currency, which were on view this past fall at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York. —The Editors*

Connie Butler: Your recent collages are actually paintings of torn euros, layered on found, anonymous abstractions.

Paul Sietsema: I start by looking at paintings listed on auction aggregators, mostly European sites that compile information about objects from many smaller auction houses throughout Europe. They're relatively inexpensive paintings, 100 [euros] to 200 euros at most, made by painters [who] are either unknown or, perhaps, forgotten. I think of it as starting at the end of a production process, evaluating finished paintings based on composition, color, and perhaps what style they most adhere to. It is an activity that I enjoy and think of as assembling alternative histories of painting, of art, by inserting work that has fallen by the wayside back into the mainstream, or whatever it is that I am a part of, by using these found paintings as carriers for my actions. This is part of the reason I call them "Carriage" paintings, they are works that are asked to do additional work, but maintain their autonomy to varying degrees.

CB: You are actually buying them?

PS: Yes. I bid, sometimes by phone, often using online intermediary platforms, and have the paintings mailed to me. There's a lot of negotiating, trying to get the people who work at the auction house to put the paintings in a box and walk them down to the local post office. The canvases are mostly between 30 and 100 years old, the newest one in the show was painted in the 1990s. I suppose I'm interested in the idea that being a bit more in the spotlight or in a certain part of the art world is partially chance, and that my own current position showing in a gallery in [New York's] Chelsea [art district] allows me to influence this chance and insert some of these artists into a scene they weren't a part of before. I bring these paintings into my studio, there's an action that's performed on them by me and then they're entered into a new kind of circulation. . . .

I'm also thinking about displacement of value. Most of the found paintings have an expressionist style to them. Expressionism and abstraction in painting are sort of like the new Doric column. While they were once sociopolitically complex and activated (and thereby functional) gestures, they are at this point symbols, for value, and for art itself, in a generalized sense. They seem quite classical and for the most part have become the decor they were working so strongly to resist in the beginning. Once I've chosen a painting I then enact a kind of rote image-making on top of it. I've always loved currencies—I collected them when I was a child, coins as well. They seemed doubly magic since they had a value based on their denomination and then a secondary value based on their rarity or historical importance. This redundancy I think is similar to the redundancy of an image-based object being painted, copied, as a painting. There is the value inherent in the image and then the value inherent in the painting, and the activity of painting which, perhaps in its rarity as a hand-based activity, also gains value. The engraving marks of the currency are like road maps of how to lay down the paint strokes, like painting by numbers, the painting paints itself. Of course, currency itself is produced in high numbers, large editions perhaps, and then there are copies made, counterfeit versions, passed off as the real thing to steal the value represented. An abstract painting these days is perhaps the same thing, a counterfeit object that steals the value of the original movement. The term "carriage," in financial terms, refers to the value of an entity that is carried forward in time.

OPPOSITE: Paul Sietsema, *Carriage Painting*, 2018.

Butler, Connie and Paul Sietsema. "Busy Signals." *ARTnews,* Winter, 2019, pp. 92–95.

COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Butler, Connie and Paul Sietsema. "Busy Signals." *ARTnews,* Winter, 2019, pp. 92–95.

As my own expressionist gesture to build the images, I tear the currency into strips, 5 pound notes, 500 euro notes, releasing the value of the object. The torn strips are dropped onto a scanner bed and captured in a digital file that I use for the paintings.

CB: You continue to return to a European history of modernist abstract painting, and you are preoccupied with the idea of composition.

PS: I am playing the part of the retro formalist when I lay the imagery from the digital files of the torn euros over the found abstract compositions. I like to get into the headspace I imagine I'd be in if I were making an abstract painting: a pool of purple here, a swoosh of pink there, a dab or two of turquoise placed just so. Intuitively, I'd be balancing elements of the composition, perhaps trading this off with pure gesture, keeping one eye on light and dark relationships, weight, those types of things. But instead of doing this primal, perhaps existential, perhaps purely formal activity, relying entirely on intuition, I start with a painting that isn't mine but that I have chosen, or rather shopped for. On top of that I choose an object that represents itself which, like a flag, is what currency does; the way it presents itself graphically is completely inseparable from its function as an object. The paintings are chosen with the colors and designs of the currencies in mind, and vice versa. Although the currency is being painted, copied really, by hand, which creates a physical link to the hand of the painter of the found painting, neither the currency nor the painting are bringing much to the table on their own. They each have a kind of vacuous quality to them, and the formalism, the intuitive decisions that lock them together also has a vacuous quality—it is not something that has value on its own. The work itself for me is never quite in the object but hangs perhaps just outside it, a juncture of the energies that find their vectors elsewhere throughout the object. I suppose this aspect might separate me from formalist/materialist painters a bit, but I do think all good painting now has an activated aspect to it, a conceptual element, and that not all good painters are using paint.

CB: Your telephone panels are exquisite and strange painting objects. They remind me of the beautiful green monochrome from your last show in Los Angeles. The phones are nearly photorealistic but through a sense of touch, with cold, yet almost erotically charged, finished surfaces.

PS: Well, first off I should mention I'm not interested in the rotary phones in any kind of retro or nostalgic way. I do remember them although when I touch them now I don't have much of a tactile memory for them. I remember them as lines of communication—it seemed the cord itself reached to the other person—a slightly enhanced sense of physical connection and intimacy perhaps, compared to the iPhone. There was also the "nobody's home" aspect of them, a sort of spatialized absence: with an unanswered phone, you knew a bell was ringing in space somewhere. And the busy signal. Was the phone off the hook? Were they purposely shutting out the world? Or was someone just

on the phone for a long time? The absence or presence of the body on the receiving end, the embrace of the answered or the rejection of the unanswered phone, all felt a bit more emotional, physical, attached to a body and a person. If you think of painting as an even more heightened version of these kinds of connections, the object of communication from which the person cannot be fully separated, whose body lingers, is tethered somehow to the object: I felt for the painting as interlocutor—as open or closed portal, as object of relay for ideas or phenomenological passages, the phone image provided a redundancy that could replace the aura of painting with its mute double—reinforcing what an image is in the first place.

CB: Not to fetishize the making, but describe how they are constructed. It's almost a reverse forensic process.

PS: I first gut the telephones (the loss of weight, I think, shifts them closer to being an image, and their functionality is removed). They have strange organic contents; gooey gels surround some of the wires, etc. This takes some time and makes a mess. I then wipe them clean with isopropyl alcohol so the paint will stick to them. This massaging and tracing of the surfaces of the object is always quite enjoyable—possibly in part because they are designed to interface with a body and of course have bodies themselves. I then mix enamel paint to match the color of the phone and pour it over the phone. The paint must be dripped very slowly and evenly over the phone to allow the object to render itself well when the paint is dry. The paint cures and shrinks over a few weeks in the studio, things from the studio sometimes get stuck in the paint—bits of dust or lint or hair, small air bubbles pop or remain. After the

Butler, Connie and Paul Sietsema. "Busy Signals." *ARTnews,* Winter, 2019, pp. 92–95.

paint coating has cured, the phones are propped up and shot in 3/4 lightning, the standard for modeling objects in space, for drawing but also in the digital realm. I then use the same paint to render the image from the image file, by hand. Layers of the paint are built up on the canvas first, to give me a good surface. This creates air bubbles, makes texture, traps lint and dust and hair, the same things as in the image that will be painted on this surface so that there is a fairly even mix of rendered and real bumps with highlight and shadow. This for me has the effect of destabilizing what is real, and also destabilizing what is painted. It pulls both into a more ambiguous, floating space.

CB: There's something about analog knowledge and process in the paintings.

PS: Maybe 20 or so years ago I read an article about the future of digital information storage that stuck with me. It talked about quantum computing as a model for storage, that certain types of ambiguity could be used to nestle bits of information together in a smaller amount of space. I guess I think about these telephone paintings in a similar way, the various ways I think about them perhaps expands/multiplies the surface area of their experience or engagement for me. And I like that the phone is basically one cell, a bottle without a message in it, with an expanded surface area of engagement.

CB: As is usual for you in recent years, a film is a pendant to each body of work. Can you talk about *Encre Chine* from 2012 that was projected as part of your Matthew Marks show?

ABOVE *Yellow Phone Painting; White Phone Painting; Pink Phone Painting*; all 2018.

PS: When I was living in Berlin I came across a type of printing ink that was very thick and kind of iridescent. I thought it was very beautiful. I bought a tub of it and started coating things that I was going to throw away in my Berlin studio. The coated objects would dry out and start cracking and get dusty and then I would throw them away. When I was back in L.A. I came across one of the tubs of black ink I'd brought back with me. I started coating things I hadn't used in a while. I liked the ink when it was still wet before it dried and got dusty and cracked. So I shot the things that I was coating with my Bolex and made a film. I liked the redundancy of the surfaces of the objects that were coated in the ink, being caught up again in another field of goo, the emulsion of the 16mm film stock. I was thinking about objects losing their function after they've been coated. How this is like an image and also something that couldn't exist outside of the record of it. I was photographing it to stabilize it. The objects I was coating, including my mother's camera which she'd given me decades ago so I could document my work, were being turned into images of a kind, having their function removed, and also being defined by their surface. But the surface was defined by the shine of the ink and its iridescence rather than the objects underneath it. The objects were related to things I was doing in the studio: a hammer and chisel I used to break images of sailboats out of their frames, and some of the frame pieces and mats that were the leftover husks of that activity.

As for the camera I'd had for so long, it seemed like a nice way for it to be stopped and also continue, and for it to become an image even though it's an image-producing device, which I guess the tub of ink with the brushes was also, a working tool and an iconic image that connotes work—a symbol for painting. ■

Butler, Connie and Paul Sietsema. "Busy Signals." *ARTnews,* Winter, 2019, pp. 92–95.

OCTOBER

The Black Mirror*

GEORGE BAKER

We will place ourselves on that side of the lustre where the "medium" is shining.

—Jacques Derrida,
"The Double Session"[1]

The film is rolling, its grain can be sensed, but for some moments there is nothing but darkness, nothing otherwise interrupting the black void projected tautologically into the obscurity of the room. Almost imperceptibly at first, and then with more insistence, a point of light appears. And then two or three more blossom, like stars emerging at dusk, or persisting in the interregnum between night and day. A line surfaces out of the now-gray mist of the projection, and the points and lines continue to grow in illumination. An image is in formation.

It glows stronger, struggling toward visibility, the initial lines and points of light increasing into the most intense of highlights, mists gathering into contrast and shadow, cohering eventually as a black-and-white image. We have been witness to a birth, a scene of origin, and now we are faced with an image that seems decipherable, fully recognizable, even perhaps banal. We are staring at an utterly motionless image of an insect, a grasshopper, perched upon a leaf.

Like a functional inversion of the conventional fade-to-black often employed to signal the end of narrative films, the opening scene of Paul Sietsema's *Empire* (2002) seems to focus our attention on the artist's chosen medium, on 16 mm film. As with so many of the structuralist films of the 1960s, *Empire* begins by insisting upon the basis of cinema, paradoxically, in the motionless photograph, in the individual still image. And yet this talismanic image immediately becomes problematic,

* An earlier version of this essay was published in the catalogue for the Paul Sietsema retrospective at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, and Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago: *Paul Sietsema* (Columbus, OH: Wexner Center for the Arts, 2013). I wish to thank the artist and the exhibition curator, Christopher Bedford, for assistance in its extension here.

1. Jacques Derrida, "The Double Session," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 211. Derrida's essay begins with the following translator's note: "*Lustre*: 'A decorative object, as a chandelier having glass pendants' (American Heritage Dictionary)."

Baker, George. "The Black Mirror." *October*, Fall 2016, pp. 30–66.

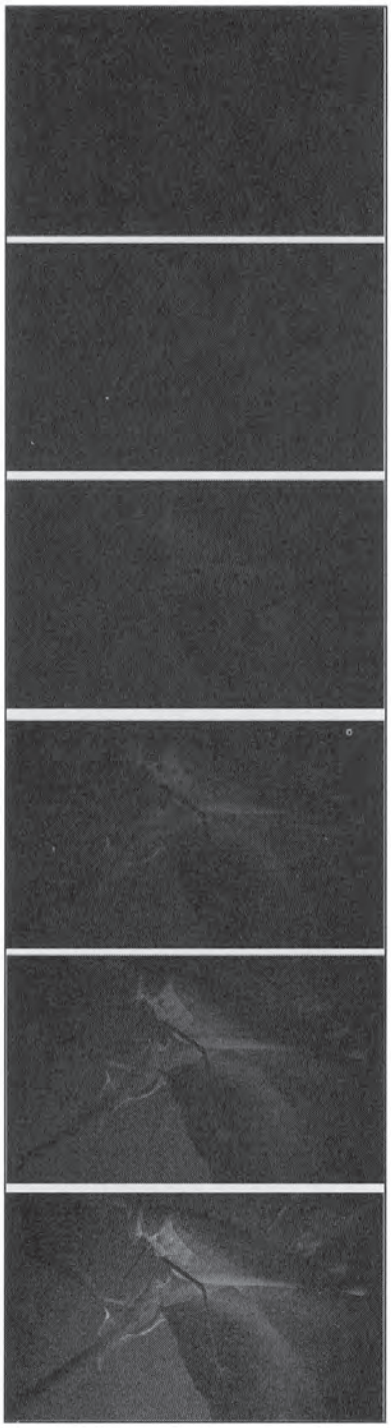
Paul Sietsema. Empire. *2002.*
Unless otherwise noted, all images © Paul Sietsema and courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery.

Baker, George. "The Black Mirror." *October,* Fall 2016, pp. 30–66.

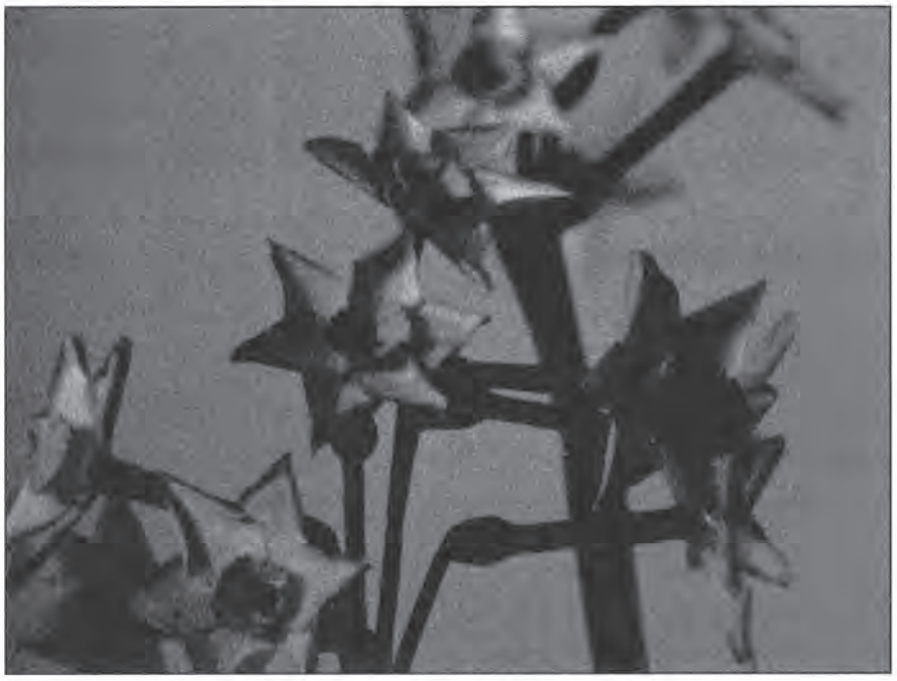
when one realizes that, like so often in the artist's oeuvre, Sietsema has filmed a construction meticulously made by hand to be recorded by the camera, a sculptural double converted by lighting and by filming into the replica of a photographic scene. Like the postmodern artists of the Pictures generation of the 1970s and '80s, Sietsema explores a complex interdisciplinary aesthetic seemingly based upon what was then called the logic of the copy or of the simulacrum, a photographic model for artistic practice that did away completely with the very notion of medium specificity, like a footprint in the sand eradicated by a relentless rising tide.

Stretching from artists like James Casebere to more recent photographers like Thomas Demand, this position of expanded—or what Sietsema has called "extended"—photographic practice seems to be the one the artist himself embraces. Speaking of the paper flowers constructed for his first film, *Untitled (Beautiful Place)* (1998), or the meticulously reconstructed historical sites like the living room of art critic Clement Greenberg's apartment and a rococo Parisian salon explored in later "scenes" of *Empire,* or the archaeological and anthropological artifacts replicated in the more recent film *Figure 3* (2008), the artist has explained: "Important [for all my films] . . . is that they are extracted from the camera. Flowers, historical locations, objects, and artifacts are all highly photographed categories and are woven into the development of photography as [an] anthropological and social construct." And he concludes: "It has been my project for the

Sietsema. Production view of the rococo room construction during the making of Empire. *2001.*



Sietsema. Empire. *2002.*



Sietsema. Untitled (Beautiful Place). *1998.*

last ten years or so to extend the more structurally activated aspects of photography to its contextualizing elements, the social, cultural, aesthetic, historical. The resulting new matter is what makes up the films."[2]

But the "expanded" or "extended" model of the photograph announced in the opening scene of Sietsema's *Empire* exceeds both the structuralist and post-structuralist rationales, we might say, of either late modern or early postmodern aesthetics—and this in deeply specific ways. For the image that slowly forms in the film's first moments emerges not just as an inversion and negation of narrative cinematic convention—the fade-to-black of the climactic structure of ending and dénouement—it directly evokes the coming into being of the photographic image itself. Producing an analogue of the process of photographic "development," like an image slowly emerging out of nothingness in its liquid chemical bath, we witness a miracle that seems less a product of the film projection's "black box" than of the now almost forgotten, obsolete "darkroom." And the scene's sense of the photographic stakes of inversion and negation must be described as more passion-

2. Bruce Hainley, "Skeleton Key: A Conversation with Paul Sietsema," in *Figure 3: Paul Sietsema* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009), pp. 41–42. On photography's "expansion" since postmodernism, see my "Photography's Expanded Field," *October* 114 (Fall 2005), pp. 120–40.

ate still: For the image that develops before the viewer's eyes in *Empire* hardly amounts to a black-and-white image alone. The image appears before the viewer's eyes as a *negative* image, with a precise reversal of tones.

A still image filmed, the scene's only "movement" consists of its development into illumination.[3] But this movement from darkness to light, from invisibility to visibility, replicates the process of becoming of a negative image, where darkness is light, and light, dark. We thus face a scene of complete and total involution or reversal. The photographic, for Sietsema, in some sense amounts to this precise operation of involution, perhaps above all else. We are gazing at the coming into light of what in actuality exists as shadow, the most intense highlights of the image testifying to the deepest pockets of darkness in the simulacral object represented, a dense construction where only shadow and void can now be transmuted into light.

*

Beginning here, at the opening of *Empire*, the concentration on the negative image spreads everywhere through Sietsema's project as an artist, to most of the subsequent scenes of this film, to later films, such as *Figure 3* and *Anticultural Positions* (2009), and to a variety of his different modes of drawing. The singularity and eccentricity of this move on Sietsema's part need to be underlined. For with the shift from analog to digital media in recent decades, few have mourned the fact that this transition has included the loss of the negative from most of the dominant forms of current photographic processes. Whether considered as the matrix of the voyage of the image from camera to print or as the former primary modality of image storage, the negative once embodied the central operations of both photography and film, and yet it has hardly been noted that in recent years the negative has simply been swept away.

The discourse is clear on this point: With the shift to the digital, we have heard endless diatribes about the manner in which the indexical nature of photography seems eradicated, or at least thrown into focus, and perhaps precariousness, in a new way. We know—or feel like we know—that we have lost, surely, the labor of photography that was its chemistry, its noisome liquids and its baths. The optical now reigns supreme (indeed we face a triumphalism of "camerawork" that ties the entire history of photography, analog or digital, to "lens-based aesthetics" alone). But, unmourned amidst the general hue and cry, we have lost, too, that specific layered apparatus and material support that the negative in photography

3. While no one has attended to Sietsema's overarching concern with the photographic negative, one critic has pointed to this scene's evocation of photographic development. See Saul Anton, "Paul Sietsema," *Artforum*, June 2003, p. 183.

embodied. A testament to the *process* of photography, to a practice of multiple, nonidentical steps—capturing, developing, cropping, printing, enlarging—the photographic negative has not found its eulogies. No poets have arisen to sing the praise of its specific but potentially wondrous field of play, its endless capacity to invert and reverse the field of vision.

This was not always the case. At the precise moment of the "photographic turn" entailed by postmodernism, the critic Douglas Crimp offered up an intense meditation on the photographic negative. While not as well known as other attempts to define a postmodern model of art practice based upon the photograph—upon its duplicative nature, its status as a "copy without an original," its institutional nomadism, its challenge to conventional notions of authorship, its technological determination and destiny—the essay in question remains deeply specific about the longer history and conceptual landscape of the negative in photography.[4] Bypassing the historical avant-garde's play with the nega-

4. Within Crimp's own work, see, for example, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," "The Museum's Old, the Library's New Subject," and "Appropriating Appropriation," all collected in Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

Edgar Degas.
Posed Ballerina.
Two versions. C. 1895.

tive—all the reversed images, negative prints, and photograms of the New Vision photography of the 1920s, for example—and mentioning but immediately moving beyond a founder like William Henry Fox Talbot's original thoughts on what he baptized the "negative image," Crimp instead bears down upon a singular case: the marginalized photographic activity of artist Edgar Degas. Noting Degas's play with sandwich printing and a photographic manipulation of the image dependent upon the negative, Crimp defines the latter thus: "[T]he process of photography is itself a double operation. Before the light of the world can be registered on the print, it first must undergo a reversal at the intervening stage of the negative. At this point, however, the breakdown is not strictly one of light and dark. It is, rather, one of opacity and transparency." Sandwich printing capitalizes upon the latter terrain, and so Crimp concludes: "[A]t the stage of the negative, light and dark are not only reversed, they are radically converted. Anything that reflects light in the world registers itself as opacity on the negative, thereby being given the power to obscure, to block out what is dark; while the absence of light—darkness, shadow, obscurity—registers itself as transparency. It

is only in this way that the photo*graph* can be *writing*. For as light passes through the transparent negative, it *inscribes* black onto white."[5]

Crimp thus establishes an opening of photography, through the negative, to writing, a movement away from considering the photographic image as pure index to a complex process of semiotic inscription.[6] Implicating "the negative in the print," as Crimp describes this, Degas's sandwich-printed or double-exposed negatives allow forms not originally co-present to "appear simultaneously," like "phantoms" emerging "into visibility *through* each other." But beyond this internal visual incident and possibility, such is the model Crimp potentially offers for photography more generally, at least a photography that implicates the negative directly and centrally: Here, now, photography and writing, photography and another medium, are co-present with each other, like ghosts perhaps, one appearing "through the other."

Crimp traces Degas's larger play with the photographic negative, the central achievement of his experimentation with the medium. It amounted to a paradoxical effort by the "odd man out" of Impressionism to wrench photography away from realism and naturalism, to make the medium available to the new aesthetic program of Symbolism, and to the circle Degas inhabited around the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé.[7] Degas, indeed, photographed Mallarmé beside a mirror in which Degas himself appeared as cameraman only to disappear in an overexposed flare of light, an image of authorial evanescence Crimp thus names a "Mallarméan photograph."[8]

But this moniker applies even more accurately to those photographs Degas made of ballerinas, his greatest subject, images often printed as mirror- and tonal-reversals of each other. Flipping the negative to print it from both sides, according to Crimp's description, Degas could achieve paired images that display a perfect inversion, a doubling effected as if around a fold, like the spreading of pages in a book. And inverted tonally as well as spatially, the prints become suspended "between negative and positive," the represented image in a state "between

5. Douglas Crimp, "Positive/Negative: A Note on Degas's Photographs," *October* 5 (Summer 1978), p. 91.

6. Contemporary with this essay, Craig Owens performed a similar demonstration in his essay "Photography *en abyme*," now collected in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, ed. Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 16–30. The consideration of photography-as-sign or as writing would be furthest developed in many essays by Rosalind Krauss, most importantly in "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism" (1981), in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 87–118.

7. I refer to the title of Carol Armstrong's book on Degas, *Odd Man Out: Readings of the Work and Reputation of Edgar Degas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

8. Crimp, "Positive/Negative: A Note on Degas's Photographs," p. 95.

appearance and disappearance."[9] But this suspension happens not just between two images—one a negative, and one a positive—it happens internally, within each individual print. Pushing his photographic manipulations of negative and positive printing to a new understanding of involution, Degas embedded both negative and positive areas, inversely, within his doubled pair. A positive imprint of a dancer's torso might distressingly melt into the negative flare of the same torso's supposed shadow on a tutu below; or, even more incoherently, mount toward a face and head turned away from the torso's light, only to dissolve not into the surrounding darkness but into its own "internal" light, the reversed light of negative involution. A positive print of an arm might cast a shadow in negative, as if radiating an impossible light; this arm's sibling in Degas's inverted print would similarly imagine an arm now in negative casting an actual, or positive, shadow.

We confront a set of visual experiences no worldly body, no earthbound space, could support. Faced with such inversions, according to Crimp, writing or language rears its head again, but now in the mode of incoherence: "[L]anguage begins to fail." And so Crimp asks: "How can we any longer speak of light and dark? How can we speak of a white shadow? A dark highlight? A translucent shoulder blade?" The critic concludes: "When light and dark, transparency and opacity, are reversed, when negative becomes positive and positive, negative, the referents of our descriptive language are dissolved. We are left with a language germane only to the photographic, in which the manipulation of light generates its own, exclusive logic."[10]

With this description, we seem far from the landscape of interpenetration—of writing and photography—that Crimp initially attributed to the photographic logic of the negative. Indeed, crucial to the critic's reflections would be the manner in which the "Mallarméan photograph" opened up a space of reflexivity, a space peculiar to the medium of the photograph, severing it in a potentially modernist way from all instrumental notions of empiricism, from the aesthetic ideology of naturalism, from the photograph's seemingly inherent attachment to the document, to the index, to the real. This might be one meaning of photographic involution.

But Crimp's archaeology of the Symbolist photograph was offered as a postmodernist, not a modernist, model. And indeed, photography's medium-specificity

9. Ibid., p. 98. More recent scholarship has questioned or indeed overturned some of the assumptions about Degas's photographs with which, in the 1970s, Crimp was working. It seems that some of the photographs he describes as sandwich printed were instead multiple exposures; and the inverted ballerina prints he discusses were modern reconfigurations of a single negative plate, of which we retain no prints from the hand of Degas. See Malcolm Daniel, *Edgar Degas, Photographer* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), especially pp. 50–51. To the extent that I am interested more in Crimp's conceptual apparatus than this historical scholarship, I am leaving his claims for Degas's work unaltered here.

10. Crimp, "Positive/Negative: A Note on Degas's Photographs," p. 99.

has always been a troubled, and troubling, idea. Rather than grounding a medium, rather than the pure photographic achievement of something like a camera version of art for art's sake, the location of photography's logic in the negative preserves the photograph as a space of reversal and inversion, a deep and powerful force of negation rather than a servant of the real. To return, as Sietsema does, to this history and to such processes now, after they have run their course, seems to insist on the negative as a kind of literal afterimage, and also, potentially, an open image, considering how the negative displays the objects and density of the world transmuted into transparency.

Barbara Kruger. Untitled (Your Body Is a Battleground). *1989. © Barbara Kruger.*

We can say more. For this transparency, this photographic openness, betrays the negative to be the potential support for a conception of an art practice that seeks an image literally between images. This is the crux of the negative image: It inhabits a space between the object and the image, the middle point between camera and print, a "medium" in the true but irremediably hybrid sense of the word. Rather than consider the medium only, in Jacques Derrida's description, "in the sense of element, ether, matrix, means," the term leads directly to a thinking of the "middle, neither-nor, what is between extremes."[11] The negative *is* the photographic *medium.* As a "medium" in this sense—halfway, inter-space, conduit, an image between images—the negative emerges as that properly Symbolist (and not quite modernist) vehicle of a space between "appearance and disappearance," a passageway but also the potential support for a photographic experience like that of the Baudelairean notion of "correspondences." It becomes, in other words, the condition for a communication between images, a play of form and format, perhaps the substrate for an endless

11. Derrida, "The Double Session," p. 211.

James Welling. Hands I. *1974.*
© James Welling.

expansion of the logic of photography, rather than a strict modernist delimitation of the same.

Suspended between negative and positive, Degas's "between-images" body forth the negative as medium, middle-space, relay between photograph and object, camera and image. But in this "medium," we find something medium specificity was never supposed to allow: the opening, through inversion, of photography to film, of photography to drawing (the graphic), of photography to writing (script), of photography even to sculpture (as cast, double, or through shared plays of absence, whether understood in sculptural terms as carving or in photographic ones as tonal reversal and the translation of opaque mass into translucent void).[12] It is this afterimage of the afterimage, this opening of the open image, that Sietsema has claimed in his play with the negative today. Or so I will want to argue.

*

It must be admitted that a distinctly Mallarméan set of poetic and historical tropes runs throughout Sietsema's various projects. In the mounting group of films, we might remember Mallarmé's insistence upon the "effect" of the flower and not its reality as we gaze upon Sietsema's first film of entirely simulated botanical specimens, constructed from paper for the camera, *Untitled (Beautiful Place)*: "I say: a flower! And outside the oblivion to which my voice relegates any shape, insofar as it is something other than the calyx, there arises musically, as the very idea and delicate, the one absent from every bouquet."[13]

We recall, too, Mallarmé's attention to the page or the material substrate of writing that is the book, and to the physical sensuousness of the operation that the

12. I mean such thoughts and such a structure to resonate with the model of medium "sharing" that I elaborate in my book on Dada; see "Intermission: Dada Cinema," in *The Artwork Caught by the Tail: Francis Picabia and Dada in Paris* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), pp. 289–337.

13. Stéphane Mallarmé, "Crisis in Poetry (excerpts)," *Selected Poetry and Prose,* ed. Mary Ann Caws (New York: New Directions, 1982), p. 76.

poet called "the fold," as in drawing after drawing Sietsema explores a parallel set of tactics.[14] Sietsema has produced a loose or displaced self-portrait image that he simply entitled *The Fold* (2007), bending corners of this work on paper both forward and back, toward and away from the viewer, working both sides of the paper simultaneously and playing thereby with presence and absence, addition and subtraction, doubling-over and image loss, layering and removal, reproduction and cancellation. Such, indeed, might be the very landscape of the fold, which for Mallarmé was tied etymologically not only to the physical but to the double, to both *duplication* and *replication*, as the French word for fold is *pli*.[15] And so while Sietsema's folded drawings might seem to emerge as the historical echo of the Process or post-Minimal work of an artist like Dorothea Rockburne, their conceptual landscape must be described more broadly as Mallarméan, for doubling—and through this photography—ultimately structures their unfolding.

Sietsema. Folded Corner. *2012.*

In *Folded Corner* (2012), for example, Sietsema obsessively replicates by hand, in ink, what appears to be a photographic scene of sailboats upon the water. Roping drawing and photography tightly together, making one the medium of the other, the field of pure black-and-white contrast that the water serves to relay can be noticed fading toward middle gray as the image approaches its edges, one of which has distinctly been folded over on itself and then flattened back out.[16] Materializing the paper substrate that undergirds the drawn replication

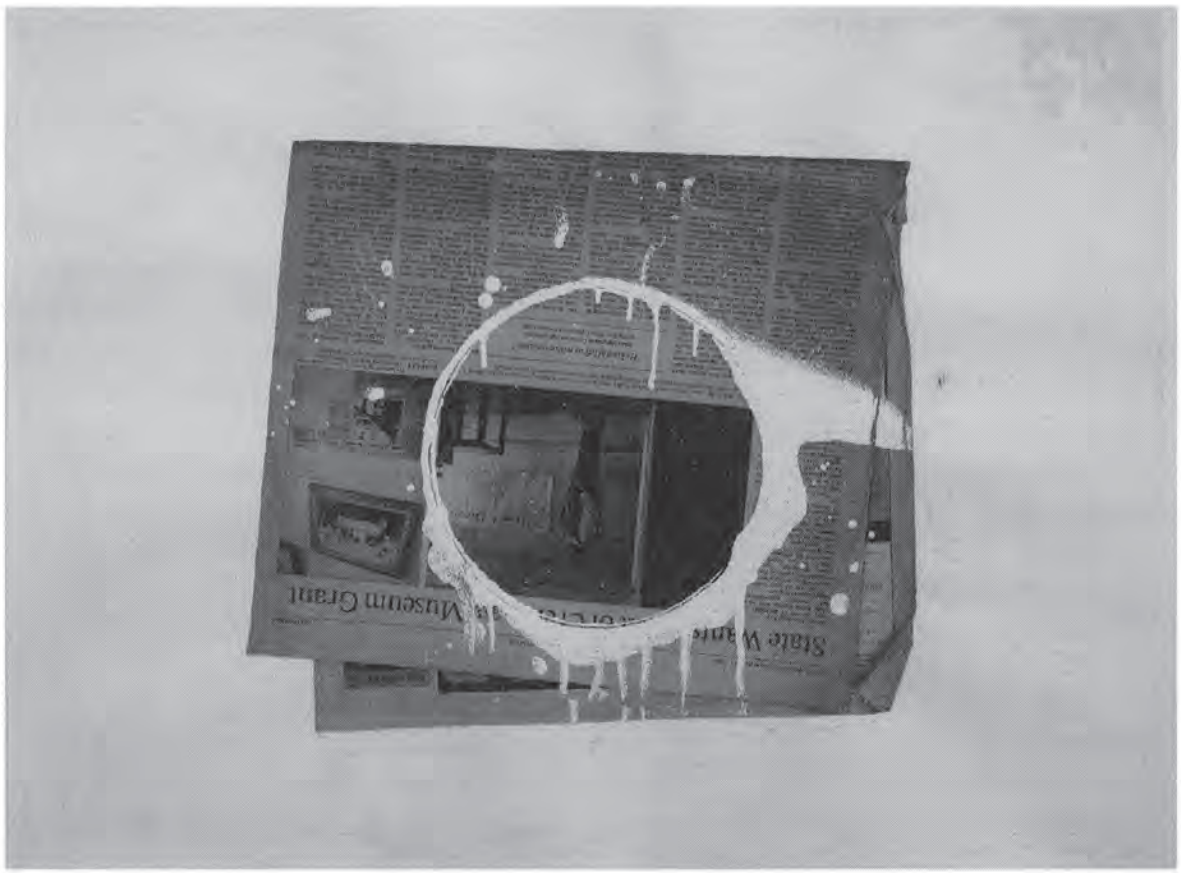
14. See Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 30: "The fold is probably Mallarmé's most important notion, and not only the notion but, rather, the operation, the operative act that makes him a great Baroque poet."

15. Owens, "Photography *en abyme*," pp. 17 and 22–24.

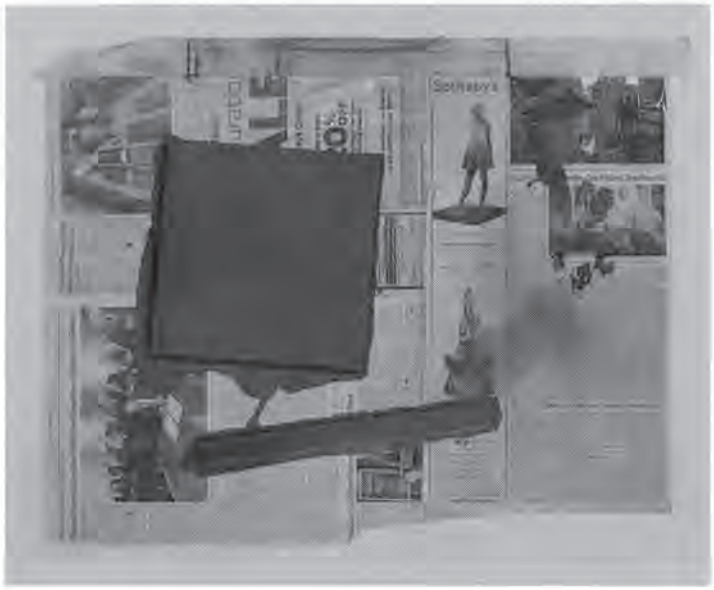
16. On liquid in photography, see Jeff Wall, "Photography and Liquid Intelligence," in *Une autre objectivité/Another Objectivity*, ed. Jean-François Chevrier and James Lingwood (Paris: Centre national des arts plastiques, 1989), pp. 231–32. Sietsema has discussed a related but different work entitled *Boat Drawing*

of the photograph, the folded corner of the drawing produces out of the format of the paper a triangular form that echoes the sails of the boats within the image, a doubling or reduplication of fold and sail that only becomes exponentially more layered as we witness Sietsema's attention to the internally doubled triangles of each boat's dual sails, and the further redoubling of the boats in similar or echoed positions across the expanse of the sheet of paper. It is as if the image had been folded over on itself internally as well as procedurally, literally marked by the voluptuousness and dimensionality of the paper fold, with the field and its fission, its internal logical division and thus duplication, producing the representation that we see—or vice versa, matter and idea following parallel paths.

(2010) in the following terms: "I was interested in layering or couching the various aspects of different mediums. I use watery acrylic inks, and I like the parallel of the brush in ink and the boat in water. I like the match-up of the flat white topographical field of the sails, the portrayed photograph, and the paper the drawing is on. So it's a boat captured in the ocean, captured in a photograph, the photograph captured in photographic paper, and the photographic paper captured in the paper of the drawing. The overall combine of aesthetics ends up consisting of the residual physical aspects of each. . . . With the boat I like the way the antiquated layers intersect with the antiquated image of sea travel. On the boat, one of the figures is waving, maybe it's a farewell to photography." See Aimee Walleston, "Photo Finish: Q and A with Paul Sietsema," *Art in America*, May 13, 2011, http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/conversations/2011-05-13/paul-sietsema-matthew-marks/.



Sietsema. Untitled figure ground study (white ring). *2008.*



Sietsema. Untitled figure ground study (Degas/Obama). *2011.*

We remember Mallarmé's diatribe against the newspaper, the space of the commodification and thus deadening of language and the word within modernity, as we witness Sietsema's many "figure/ground" studies, as he sometimes calls them, trompe l'oeil paintings of meticulously replicated objects, marks, or residue laid upon simulated newspaper grounds. One Mallarméan trope here invades another, as Sietsema's represented newspapers are almost always presented as folded, doubled over on themselves in the posture of used-up and yellowing communicative vehicles now presenting random sedimentary layers and buried paper piles; or a matter of so many open but folded pages, with creases and curls, with ragged bends. The newspapers are also usually (though not always) represented upside down, an attitude of spatial inversion to match Sietsema's other photographic plays with reversal, one that specifically engages Mallarmé's concern with the instrumental or anti-instrumental character of the word. While some of the painted newspapers point to current events like a financial crisis, or presidential policies, or art-world concerns like the auction listings or even a *New York Times* review (by Roberta Smith) of Sietsema's work itself, these are not words destined to be read or easily consumed. Echoing other upside-down images that the artist has produced, like *The Fold*, or other drawings-in-negative where we witness the meeting of photographic and spatial inversion, this effect of continued involution proliferates further in the guise of the simulated residues and objects that Sietsema captures upon the newspaper surfaces, further blocking them from view: paint splatters, drips and coffee stains, rings from cans of paint.

The story that the artist has woven around the newspaper works concerns the detritus of his larger working process, the accoutrements and random scatter of the working artist's studio space, where stacks and piles of newspapers regularly pile up, marking time and serving as surfaces upon which other artworks can be painted or made. In this, the newspaper works are the direct precursor of the landscape laid out in Sietsema's film *Anticultural Positions*, where the artist filmed the marks and spatters left upon on his various studio worktables. But in this anti-instrumental recycling of the instrumental object that Mallarmé considered the

Sietsema. Event Drawing. *2009.*

newspaper to be, Sietsema twists his vortex of involution one step further again. For now the great Mallarméan—and thus modernist—dialectic of the aleatory and the instrumental, of chance or accidental procedures as antidote to the logic of commodification and control, comes to be figured in an ersatz (or mediated) mode, with splatters, gestural marks, and abstract forms all given in the guise of quasi-photographic residue and copied in the mode of image simulation. Copies proliferate over copies, and the splatter and the stain meet the same fate as the reproduced photograph and printed word. The aleatory comes to be repeated, copied, and the technological reproduction arrives remade by hand.

If we were to miss the point of such inversion, and its Mallarméan inspiration—but also active negation—Sietsema developed the newspaper works quickly into a series of ongoing trompe l'oeil paintings of coins, currency or monetary devices depicted in the guise of the coin toss, like so many memories of Mallarme's great invocation of the aleatory, the poem "A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance" (1897). At first played out (in the tonal and material key of Marcel Broodthaers) upon inverted newspaper grounds in works like *Event Drawing* (2009),

the coin-toss works thrive upon inversion.[17] For beyond replicating precisely, almost photographically, the accidental progeny of coin tosses, themselves embedded in simulated rivulets of spilled ink, chance painterly splatter, and even wayward fingerprints, the coin-toss works foreground the coins as a structure with both front and back, a matter of "heads" or "tails," a game of endless flipping. And this oppositional structure will be underlined in yet another, different but analogous form, as in the wake of *Event Drawing*, Sietsema painted the majority of these images upon the backs of old canvases culled from discarded or thrift-store paintings, inverting, reversing the representational scene once more.

Such endless permutations on the labor of inversion return us to the structure of reversal that is the photographic negative, and with this, to one of the most "Mallarméan" scenes in the totality of Sietsema's work on film. At the culmination of *Empire*, the film presents us with a stunning, almost impossible reconstruction of the intricate rococo décor of the interior that is the Salon de la Princesse in the Hôtel de Soubise in Paris—a building now used for the National Archives and the Museum of the History of France. Why we are in this space at the conclusion of Sietsema's film we do not know; but we are returned by this footage to the conceptual operations of the photographic negative, as the entire series of black-and-white shots of the construction have been printed in negative reversal, circling back around to the work's opening gambit. At first endlessly spinning, like the second hand of a clock, rotating within the space, Sietsema's camera takes the place of an absent object we will only come to see later in the scene, the immense crystal chandelier or *lustre* that reigns over the center of this room. And it was Jacques Derrida who underlined how crucial the metaphor of the lustre—"the innumerable lustres that hang over the stage of his texts"—was for Mallarmé's poetic labor.[18]

"*Just as the lustre glistens*," the philosopher quotes the poet, "*that is to say, itself, the prompt exhibition, under all its facets, of whatever, and our adamantine sight, a dramatic work shows the succession of exteriorities of the act without any moment's retaining any reality and that in the final analysis what happens is nothing.*"[19] Derrida reads Mallarme's trope of the crystal lustre suspended over a theatrical stage as a metaphorical image that embodies the poetic suspension of meaning, the crystal's infinite scintillation and endless reflection of its own internal facets now an analogue for the homophonic play of sound and language, the open chain of words sliding into one another, and yet endlessly differing from each other at the same time: *verre* (glass) turning into *vers* (toward), for example, or *cygne* (swan) becom-

17. To the extent that Broodthaers is one of the great inheritors in postwar art of Mallarmé's legacy, Sietsema's close engagement with Broodthaers's work needs more analysis. From his images of collections of coat-check tags that recall Broodthaers's "industrial poems" to his trompe l'oeil images of encrusted objects that evoke the Belgian artist's earliest works, Sietsema seems deeply involved in an alternate reading of Broodthaers's project, and has discussed this in "Paul Sietsema: Interview with Carter Mull," *Marcel* 3 (September 2010), pp. 2, 6–7.

18. Derrida, "The Double Session," p. 179.

19. Mallarmé, as cited in Derrida, "The Double Session," p. 180.

Sietsema. Empire. *2002.*

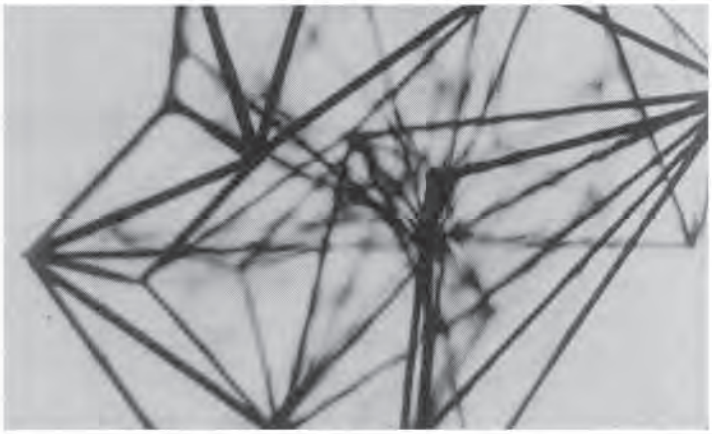
ing *signe* (sign). And so the poet concludes: "*The perpetual suspense of a tear that can never be entirely formed nor fall (still the lustre) scintillates in a thousand glances.*"[20]

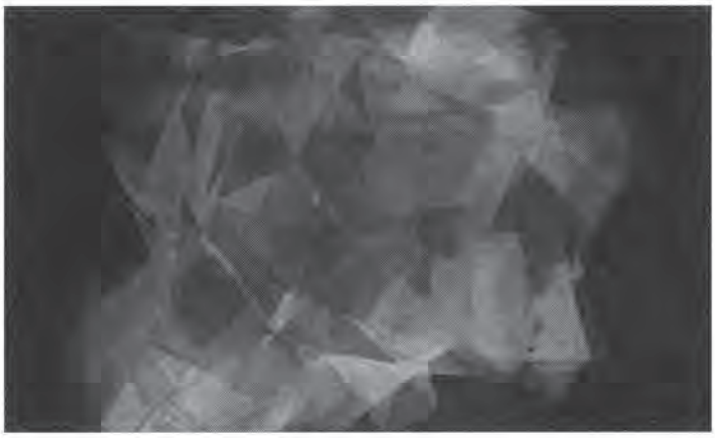
In her magisterial work on Picasso, Rosalind Krauss has clarified the motivations of this Mallarméan trope of the lustre, as it opens onto the "homophonic series" of self-differing words characteristic of Mallarmé's poetics. "This image of the *lustre*," Krauss writes, speaks to the play and materiality of language "because the internal replication of its facets reflecting into one another makes it a mirror into which no reality outside it is reflected." And for Derrida, reading Mallarmé, the lustre "will function emblematically as [the philosopher] develops not only the idea of a kind of mimicry that mimes nothing—being what Mallarmé calls 'a perpetual allusion without breaking the mirror'—but a structural condition of the fold and the 're-mark,' which he will call 'dissemination.'"[21]

In Sietsema's *Empire*, however, it is the camera that takes the place of the dangling lustre. It is the camera—and with it, photography and film—that comes to *be*, before it comes to *picture*, the suspended lustre, spinning and scintillating with its myr-

20. Ibid.

21. Rosalind Krauss, "The Circulation of the Sign," in *The Picasso Papers* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), p. 35. Sietsema does seem strangely attentive to Picasso's work, considering Sietsema's universe of typical Cubist tropes such as the newspaper, the worktable, trompe l'oeil devices, currency, etc. For an essay that might clarify some of these shared stakes, see Christine Poggi, "'Table' and 'Tableau' in Picasso's Collages and Constructions," *Art Journal* 47, no. 4 (Winter 1988), pp. 311–22.





Sietsema. Empire. *2002.*

iad reflections. Everything in *Empire* has propelled us to this final confrontation with the crystal lustre. Earlier, the film focused upon a quasi-modernist wire sculpture, spinning, throwing its shadows and linear elements in and out of focus, like an impossible visual sparkle. Just before the final scene of the rococo salon, another avatar of the crystal lustre appeared, in an abstract vision of spinning film gels, a gemlike structure of pure faceting, folds, and scintillation. And now as another avatar or analogue, Sietsema's camera comes to occupy the site of the lustre, provoking thoughts of this poetic trope of doubling and the homophone—however oxymoronic it may seem—extended to photography and film. If the lustre serves as the Mallarméan image of the poetic homophone, the suspension of meaning, the double and the fold as the condition of dissemination, Sietsema's inverted scene of rococo interior and chandelier imagines a precise extension: The homophone must be imagined as a linguistic structure that is *like* photography. This statement can be reversed: Photography participates in the structure of the homophone. Only thus are its visual copies to be described. In photography, the scene seems to attest, we confront an endless doubling that is also a process of endless difference—not sheer or indexical replication—a copying that doubles, but is *never the same.* Instead, the photograph will be seized as a model of dissemination, the image in the state of scintillation.

It thus seems appropriate that *Empire*'s final scene presents us with a chain of what can only be taken as photographic metaphors or, perhaps better, photographic homophones, photographic rhymes. For the photographic homophone is attracted to what Kaja Silverman would call its siblings, its analogues, and gives voice to this experience of echo and transformation that the photograph might

Sietsema. Empire. *2002.*

itself be described to embody. As Sietsema's camera rotates and then travels through the model of this historical space, we concentrate first on the lace-like scrollwork and faux-plaster or gilt ornament that spreads throughout, its sheer work of black-and-white contrast a long-standing metaphor for what critics have called the "photogenic."[22] We witness the shell and foliate motifs that in their French embodiment—the word *rocaille*—gave the rococo its name, and yet as casing and imprint serve as another vehicle of the photographic. We stare at an endless series of mirrors reflecting back the spaces of the room, fragmenting the interior, multiplying it, and turning it in every direction, so many doubles also photographic in their iteration and differentiation. We marvel at the efflorescence of sculptural putti, plaster casts or quasi-photographic imprints that place replication in the infinite service of represented motion, as does Sietsema with his camera and its film. And then the scene climaxes with its various views of the replicated crystal lustre—first seen in mirror reflections and then in various fragmentary close-ups—the chandelier at the center of the space and its seeming source of light.

But one last structure of the photograph-as-homophone must be underlined. Circling, rotating, moving through this reconstructed space precipitated out of the frozen monumentality of historical time, we confront the avatars of the

22. See Crimp, "Positive/Negative: A Note on Degas's Photographs," p. 99–100.

Sietsema. Empire. *2002.*

photograph-as-homophone in the guise of negative inversion, that is, through the very structure of the photographic homophone itself. This is, of course, another implication of the negative image in photography and film. For the negative embodies an image that produces the photographic double of a scene not only as the matrix for its infinite replication but also in the mode of reversal, negation, a copy that is inherently self-different.[23] Such is the labor of the negative as *medium*, between-image, its involution an operation of the homophone or rhyme, the photographic double as a process of the neither-nor, suspended precisely between similarity and difference.[24]

23. Though our projects differ, I want this term to evoke Rosalind Krauss's notion of a "self-differing medium," explored in *"A Voyage on the North Sea": Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999).

24. Sietsema names what I am here calling the "medium" as between-image in a different way when he speaks of his film *Figure 3* and its search for the "intermediate":

> [F]ilm, I began to think, adds another layer to an object and to our encounter with it. There is the object and then the representation of the object, and I would try to create a third category, where what you encounter is not simply either material or image but somehow both.
>
> Titled *Figure 3*, my new project, then, is a very simple film featuring still images of some seven or eight objects, appearing one after another. . . . At the very beginning, there is a series of straps. . . . All these are modeled on objects from precolonial New Guinea, where they were made of leather. For my piece, however, I made them out of newspaper and tape, which I subsequently covered with a white paint that was also a

And so, filmed in negative, Sietsema's rococo salon is miraculously suffused with light. It is a light the dead space or model would not have had. It is the light of inversion. We might call it a radiance that belongs to the photographic model that Sietsema explores. The chandelier is dark, brooding, a black mirror, in a space quietly glowing.

*

We are not yet finished with *Empire*. For most of this film's viewers, the work's most remarkable scene has been its most iconic one, Sietsema's reconstruction, based upon an old magazine photograph the artist found, of the living room of the art critic Clement Greenberg's New York City apartment, replete with its various furnishings, its bibelots and books, and artworks including recognizable pieces by Kenneth Noland and Barnett Newman.[25] More or less located in the middle of the film, the scene participates in the play with the negative image established by the work's beginning and its end, as all of Sietsema's images of his reconstruction of Greenberg's apartment appear in negative reversal.

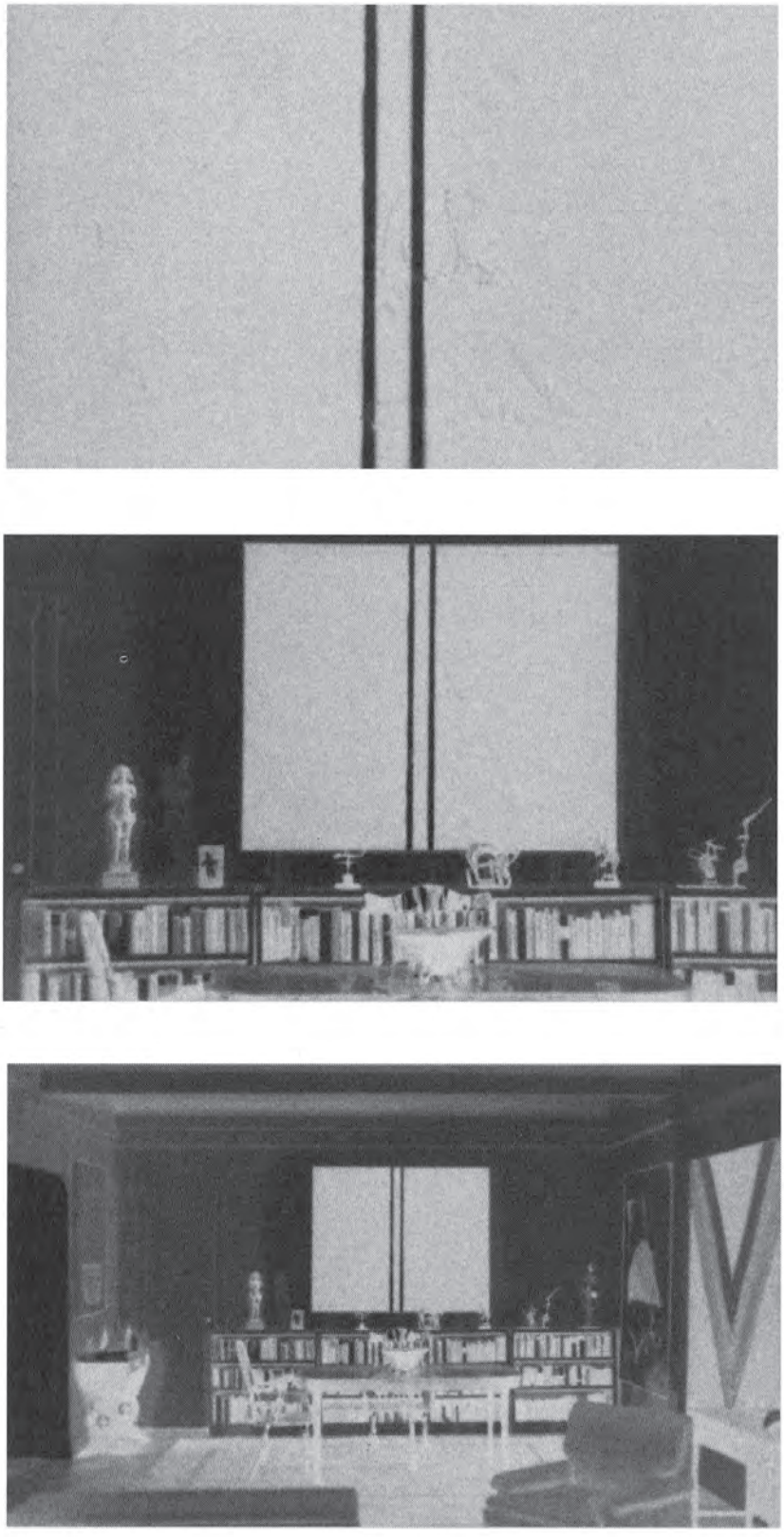
But once again, reversal or involution becomes a generalized operation, as the photographic model of Sietsema's production seems to spread its effects in all directions, photographic, filmic, cinematic, or otherwise. For at first, we confront what can only be described as an "establishing shot" of the apartment space, but this too will be presented in reverse. Beginning with a close-up of the Barnett Newman painting on the apartment's far wall, a close-up so total that the abstract painter's signature "zips" divide the cinematic screen itself—aligning the copied painting with the filmic space—Sietsema then allows his camera to step back. In what we might call this *dis*establishing shot, we at first have no idea where we "are," in a space abstract or concrete, in a medium of painting or of film. In a series of cuts, the camera methodically withdraws until we can survey the entirety of the doubled room; this process of the inverted establishing shot then gets repeated several times. But inversion, like the photographic negative

---

flame retardant. After that, I burned away the paper underneath, leaving mostly just a shell of white paint. The burned areas would either disappear or blacken; I filmed them against a black background so they would seem to be disappearing into their surroundings. In a sense, the process mimics the physical chemistry of photography. What you're left with, I hope, is something like film as a spatial model based on the materials: an intermediate material between the actual thing and the film.

See Ali Subotnik, "1000 Words: Paul Sietsema Talks about *Figure 3*," *Artforum*, March 2008, p. 340. Also relevant to the conceptual framing of this project and its title would be Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 52–68.

25. The photograph in question is actually by Hans Namuth. See "Private Lives—with Art: A Famous Art Critic's Collection," *Vogue*, January 15, 1964, pp. 92–95. The same photograph had long before inspired another Los Angeles artist's work, the painting *Untitled (F-28)* (c. 1962–63) by John Altoon (with Ed Ruscha), now in the collection of Paul and Karen McCarthy.



Sietsema. Empire. *2002.*

that serves as its inspiration, seemingly knows no bounds, no logical point at which its reversals must end. For Sietsema's next move is then to flip the camera upside down, showing the reversed establishing shots repeated, but now spatially inverted as well.

Subjected to such inversions—like the image in a view-camera, or, indeed, a camera obscura—the room is, seemingly, a camera-space, another rhyme—a foundational one—between architecture and photography or film that all the varied rooms in Sietsema's work support. This is a thought that the artist has voiced repeatedly in his various interviews, most frequently when discussing the room from which his various productions arise: his studio. "I installed evenly spaced fluorescent lights on the low ceilings and blocked the windows out," Sietsema has explained of this space, "[and] put together special tripods that would hold my cameras horizontally, parallel to the floor of the studio. My studio felt a little bit like a scanner, or the inside of a camera, and I like the idea of scanning/recording the objects here, in this big apparatus."[26] If Sietsema's copies and filmed rooms suggest their "extraction" from the camera, however, the Greenberg-apartment scene in *Empire* takes one further step. For this scene remains set off from the other negative images in the film, printed as it is upon an orange-red "color clear" negative film. Glowing in negative reversal, Sietsema's images of Greenberg's apartment now evoke the birthplace of the negative itself, its shadowy origin—the red-lit darkroom where the photograph was once developed and printed in a paradoxically bloodred or crimson obscurity. The Greenberg-apartment scene evokes a space of photographic introspection, the impossibly inflamed darkness of the cave-like site from which the light-writing of the photograph emerges.

And if the reddened negative of the Greenberg-apartment scene in *Empire* evokes not just inversion but the darkroom, its tint provokes one further analogue, one further homophone: the afterimage left upon the retina, the image that one "sees" upon the closing of one's eyes.[27] Sietsema actually plays with literal afterimages during this sequence of the film, allowing close-up shots of the Newman painting to persist in the inverted blankness to which he sometimes cuts after their display. But now the photographic homophone, the negative and its reversal, sets up a chain with distinct implications: Aligning the camera and Greenberg's modernist space, *Empire* further rhymes such space with the negative, with the darkroom (or the camera obscura), with the perceptual afterimage (one of the bases of cinema). And all of this will be further aligned, it seems,

26. Gintaras Didžiapetris, "Gintaras Didžiapetris Talks with Paul Sietsema," *The Federal* 2 (October 2011), p. 28.

27. Sietsema's play with the perceptual afterimage has been noted in Chrissie Iles's in-depth reading of the film; see "Empire: A Catalogue Raisonné of an Explorer of Space," in *Empire: Paul Sietsema* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2003), p. 6.

Sietsema. Empire. *2002.*

with that imprint that the afterimage precedes, the historical space offered up by memory. Aglow with the trappings of the darkroom, burning like the image in a state of persistence, the memory image that *Empire* presents exists in that state of involution we have come to know as Sietsema's domain. It involves the structure of the homophone—the paroxysm of the photographic "medium"—transforming now even history, even memory, as it previously did photography, as index, copy, or double. The past lives on, differently, in its fiery light.

*

"Spaces contain the remnants of ideas and actions," Sietsema has asserted. "Memories infest a place." Presenting an idea that seems close to haunting, to the ghost logic of the photograph, the artist was, in fact, describing his film *Anticultural Positions,* a project that would see him turn his camera upon the workstations of his studio, aligning the surface that photography or film presents with the surfaces of this room, the tables upon which he had constructed the elaborate models, objects, and images spawned in his prior works.[28]

28. There is a deep reflection on the notion of "surface" running through this film and Sietsema's larger project, one that seems to show the artist attempting precisely to think through the opposition around surface established by modernist versus postmodernist art (the vertical image of the visual, the "flatbed" picture plane long ago described by Leo Steinberg). Sietsema's operation of the between, the medium, works its effects here as well.

Sietsema. Empire. *2002.*

"*Anticultural Positions* was my way of taking the work tables (and all the marks, all the material accretions) I had been making work on for over ten years (all my major projects!) and hand them over to an alternative history, to finally get rid of those memories."[29]

This "alternative history" seems to arrive again in the mode of a specific modernist memory, the appropriated text that Sietsema intersperses between his images, words borrowed from the artist Jean Dubuffet. Originally screened in the place of a lecture, an artist's talk Sietsema was invited to deliver, *Anticultural Positions* repeats many of Dubuffet's words—not from his well-known manifesto of that same title, but from a lesser-known text of 1952 entitled "Landscaped Tables, Landscapes of the Mind, Stones of Philosophy." As Sietsema films his various worktables, we periodically read a slightly altered string of Dubuffet's words on intertitles that cut Sietsema's images into a spiraling series of divergent "scenes." Now, we might say, photography and film come close to language for the first time in Sietsema's filmic work, perhaps legitimating the "alternative history" and the linguistic structure of rhyme, homophone,

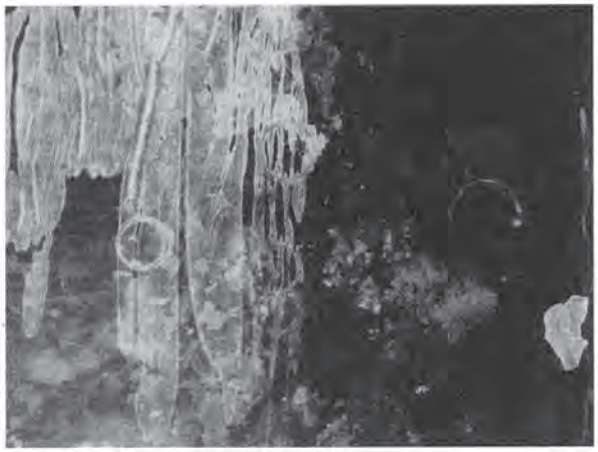
29. Didžiapetris, "Gintaras Didžiapetris Talks with Paul Sietsema," p. 28.

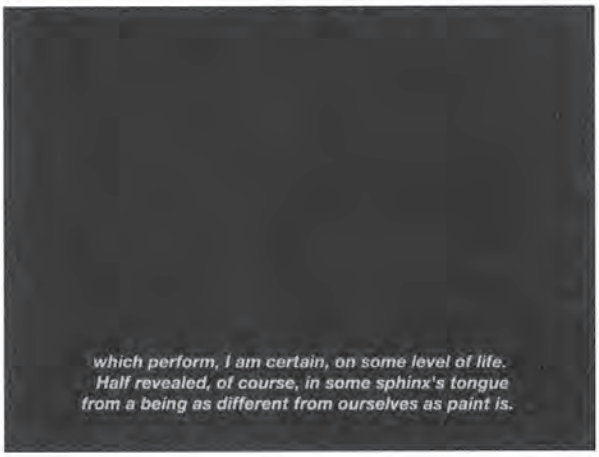
and difference that I have been calling the work's conceptual model. But ultimately, even here, the homophonic structure of Sietsema's aesthetic emerges more from what we might call the parameters of photographic seeing itself.

For the filmic images present an endless series of still images, motionless scenes, like photographs in a slide projection progressing through a series of dissolves. These still images invariably involve close-ups and fragments, the labor of photographic seeing as an operation of the zoom and of the crop, slicing not just filmic scenes but photographic images from the formless expanse that Sietsema's tables seem to offer up. Seized from above, looking down or at various obliques, Sietsema's camera vision cannot be called a human vision, resembling most the photographic aerial view. And flattening out the various surfaces photographed into the tonal gradations of black and white, Sietsema's images once more progress in sheer negative reversal, the "exclusive language," as Crimp once called it, of the photograph.

Too quickly—for a full reading of Sietsema's film must wait—we can observe that such photographic operations coalesce to produce the infinite structure of homophony that characterizes *Anticultural Positions*. For this is a film that establishes a position on photography as a model of reverberation, transformation, involution, and reversal, a structure of self-difference spreading to all the cognates—such as history and memory—that photography will support. The film begins, as one might expect, with images of the worktables that—covered in smudges,

Sietsema. Anticultural Positions. *2009*.





or drips, or smears, the material stains and accumulated detritus of the artist's intensive working process—place us in the realm of the index, the material trace, the accident and the residue that photography has long been considered to embody, and perhaps to prioritize. But given that these indexical residues appear before the camera's eye in close-up as so many gestural marks and formless visual incidents, they immediately move the viewer beyond a photographic or filmic space—indeed beyond a purely indexical space—toward a vision of abstraction that cannot help but call up the viewer's memories of midcentury modernism, Abstract Expressionist gestural brushwork, the full panoply of the abstract strategies of modernist painting.

And *Anticultural Positions* will not rest here, with the well-worn dialectic of the index and abstraction, even of photography and painting. Instead, Sietsema's worktables become a surface of endless reverberation, a visionary space, one could say, a space of visions, projections in all the senses of this term. The homophonic photograph, the self-different copy or double, everywhere rears its head. Inverted and scrutinized, the tables at first give the appearance of riverbeds, canyons, landscapes seized from above. We seem to "see" so many visions of nature, of sky and landscape both, clouds and mountains, stars and plains. But we also see "names," artists, authors, "signed" in the material splatter of the surfaces below our gaze: Rothko, Kline, de Kooning, gestures and signatures all. And then we stand before scratches, gouges, as if the sur-

face of the table had become skin, its blooms so many scars, so many ragged wounds. And yet we gaze upon what seem to be translucent layers, the negative reversal of the film inducing a vision of sediments, an almost archaeological vision of "seeing through" various material deposits, opacity transmuted into transparency. We seem to stare, in extreme close-up, at wood grain in a raking light, given over to Leonardo-like dreams of spiderwebs and diagrams, grids and quadrants, or so many plant forms, with veins, leaves, and their capillary systems.

Sietsema. Anticultural Positions. *2009.*

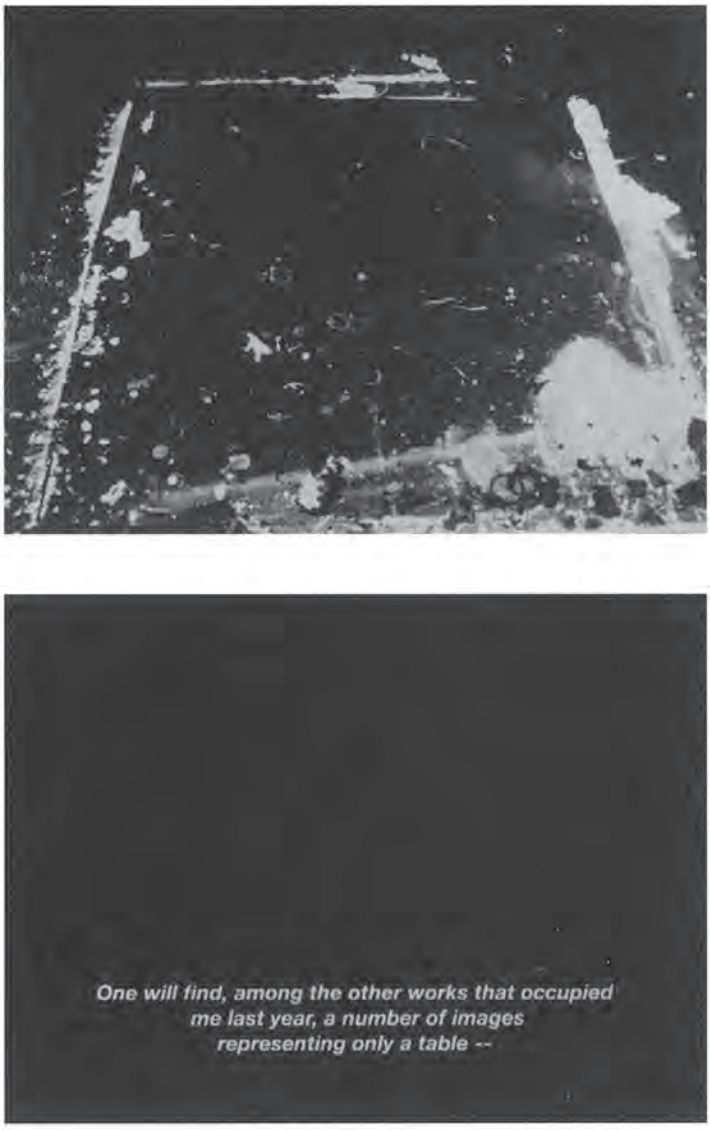
The photographic copy, the filmic index, has become a projective surface here, a homophonic image—and Dubuffet's words reverberate with this experience of the photographic homophone or echo, rebounding off the forms at times we believe we see. "I enjoyed the idea," the filmic text suddenly states, "that a single medium should have this double (ambiguous) power: To accentuate the actual and familiar character of certain elements . . . and yet to precipitate other elements into a world of phantasmagoric irreality, endowing them with an unknown life, borrowed from other worlds than ours—or the same kind of life, but captured on some of its other levels." We watch the tables give up surfaces that seem to peel and flake like skin, like rusted metal, like ruined city walls, echoes of the modernist photographs of Brassaï or Aaron Siskind. Terrains appear, icy and glacial it seems, with drifts of snow, haloed forms, polar zones, unknown seas. We face cloud forms, indefinite skies, and then an increasing river of detritus, like piles of broken glass, dilapidated buildings, and shards, even explosions. "I am pleased when life is questionable in every part of the work," the artist's text continues. "I am pleased to see life in trouble, going insane—hesitating between certain forms that we recognize as belonging to our familiar surroundings, and others that we do not, and whose voices astonish." And then the voice clarifies its hopes for what it calls the "ambiguous" power of the image: "Giving rise to ambiguous forms, coming at the same time from both poles. Ambiguous facts have always a great fascination for me, for they seem to me to be located at just those intersections where the real nature of things may be revealed." Intersections, ambiguity: This between-space has become all.

We are hardly done listing the series of visions to which the homophonic structure of *Anticultural Positions* gives rise. At their most intense, the images pulsate with an almost organic power of change or transformation; while still and frozen, the images nonetheless make us feel as if we are gazing upon biomorphic

Sietsema. Anticultural Positions. *2009.*

spatters, life forms, so many microscopic visions, the close-up and the frame opening onto a world of living cells. But then, simultaneously, the homophone differs: We see the remnants and residue evoke fossils, dead things, embedded in a ground that then gives way to visions of fields as much as seas, a liquid space inhabited by rain, by nothing solid at all. We seem to gaze far and then scrutinize from up close, so near that the gouges and scratches erupt, finally, into a readerly space, a space from which letters and words surface out of the formless fields beneath our gaze. More voices call out from the intertitles: "They [these films] are no longer . . . descriptive of external sites, but rather of facts which inhabit the artist's mind." The text continues: "They aim to show the immaterial world which dwells in the mind: the disorder of images, of beginnings of images, of fading images. Where they cross and mingle, in a turmoil, tatters borrowed from memories of the outside world. And facts purely cerebral and internal—visceral perhaps. The transfer of these mental sites on the same plane as that of real concrete landscapes . . . seems to me an interesting operation." A few moments later, the conclusion comes: "One will find, among the other works that occupied me last year, a

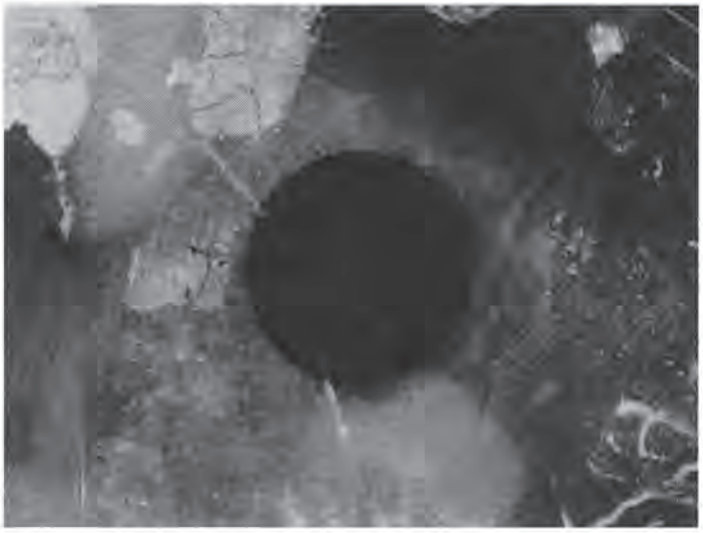
number of images representing only a table. . . . They respond to the idea that, just like a bit of land, any place in this world . . . is peopled with a swarm of facts, and not only those which belong to the life of the table itself, but also, mixing with them, others which inhabit thought, and which are impressed on the table by looking at it."



Sietsema. Anticultural Positions. *2009.*

Dubuffet's words provoke a final conclusion about Sietsema's images: It is the viewer who enlivens the projected photograph, who gives life to the homophonic image. It is the observer who "develops" the negative image here at play, "printing" the open image Sietsema's conception of the photographic involves. It is viewing, seeing, spectatorship that provides the impossible rhyme that this image and its echoes summon.[30] Such is the call of the negative image. As opposed to the intertitles and their clear and simple texts, the "letters" that seem scratched or gouged into Sietsema's tabular surfaces cry out: *D. P. X. K.* We are involved in a process of reading a language that will not resolve into words, a writing or graffito that almost immediately shifts to a vision of a cratered landscape, an otherworldly space, a moonscape perhaps. We are traveling far, ranging wide, through haze, and cloud, and fog, and spray, and foam, through so many indefinite zones, with no secure guideposts.

30. For the model of spectatorship that subtends these remarks, see Kaja Silverman, *World Spectators* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000). For an attempt to sketch out more fully a possible theory of photographic spectatorship, see my series of short-form essays, *The Relational Field of Photography*, on the blog of the Fotomuseum Winterthur, "Still Searching," http://blog.fotomuseum.ch/2013/05/i-the-relational-field-of-photography/. The turn to photographic spectatorship is also key to Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone, 2008).

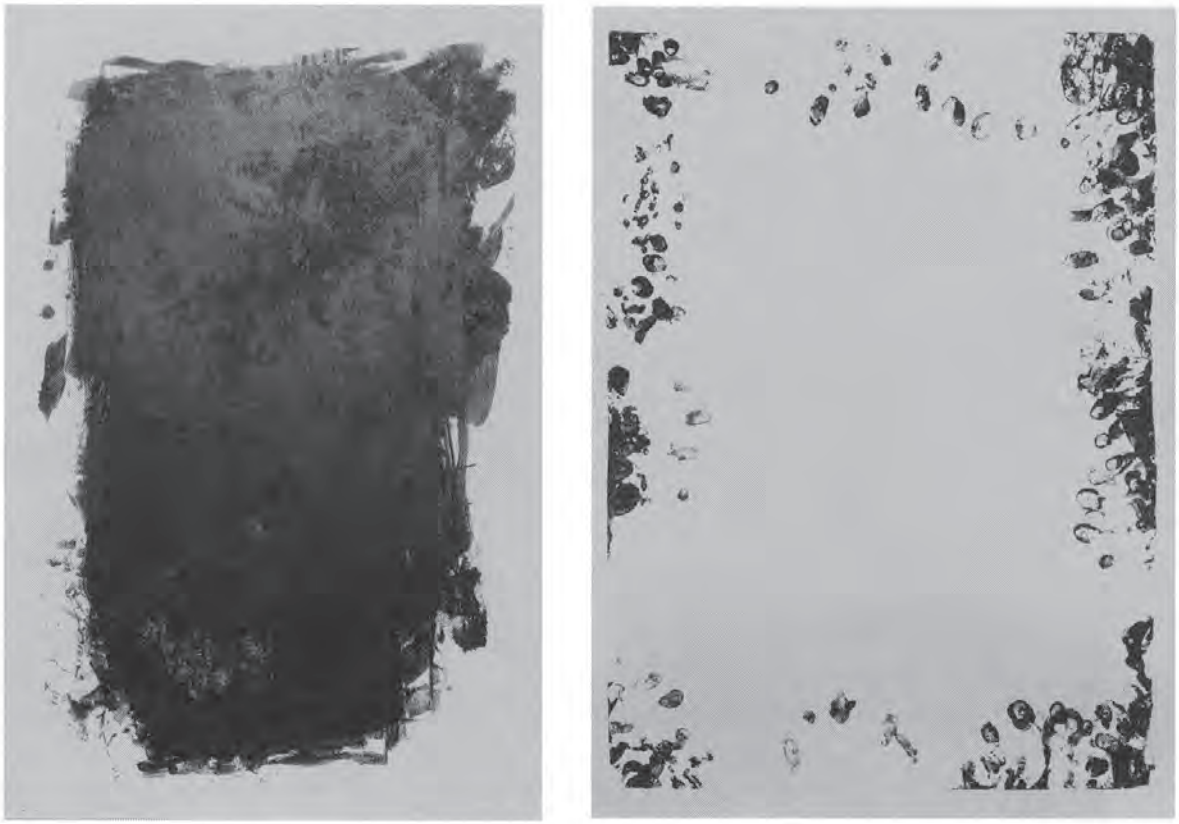


Sietsema. Anticultural Positions. *2009.*

And then the film comes to its end, the relentlessly shifting images their culmination, in what appears to be a black hole, a dark circle surrounded by blazing white. We are pushed close to this absence, and then, like another inverted establishing shot, we begin to pull away. Receding, the form becomes a planet, a moon, perhaps a blackened star. The pierced form of the negative image before us brings *Anticultural Positions* to a close with an image of the sun as the source of light and of light-writing—but in reverse. Like a black hole, a tunnel, we end with an absence into which, through which, we are summoned to travel—the "medium" as a force of attraction, an image and inter-space to be traversed.

*

We thus arrive, in the end, at another meaning of the word *medium.* Beyond matrix or material—beyond even the notion of a medium as hybrid, as middle-space, as neither-nor—a medium is also simply this: a seer, a psychic, a visionary. A medium is a vehicle of visions. Unsurprisingly, given the tunnel or hole with which *Anticultural Positions* ends, the artist has quite often described his works—filmic or graphic—as "portals," passageways to a beyond. In 2011, Sietsema attempted, quixotically, to produce two "images" of one of his primary materials, two images of ink. "I guess since I use ink so much," the artist asserted, "I wanted to make images of ink. Maybe one way to think of them is as homages." Both entitled *Untitled (ink drawing),* the works seem to exist as negative inversions of each other, though not exact ones. A dark slab of layered, brushed ink framed by jagged white, and an open expanse of white paper framed by haphazard fingerprints or small dabs and puddles of black, the two works allowed, in Sietsema's words, "the materiality of the ink to take center stage, along with its delivery device." But then, faced with the expanse of gleaming black ink of the "drawing"—which seems almost like an abstract painting, and gleams like a mirror or indexical photograph,



Both: Sietsema. Untitled Ink Drawing. *2011.*

and glows semi-translucent like a filmstrip—the artist concludes: "When I was making these I also liked to think of them as portals. The larger and darker one as an actual portal, a kind of dark cave, the smaller and lighter one as an image of a portal. I originally put the darker one next to the doorway [of a gallery]. . . . I like to think of walking straight ahead . . . and into the drawing, into whatever is across its threshold."[31]

It is an idea—the work of art or the image as a portal—that Sietsema entertained as well around his work upon *Empire.* Describing the mirrors of the rococo salon as an "investigation of the mirror and doubled or layered space as portal to the fourth dimension," Sietsema linked such image play to well-worn modernist beliefs about abstraction, as a space of the beyond, a dimension above or outside of physical experience. And so he concludes, "This strain of geometric abstraction found its latest manifestation in the types of paintings seen on the walls of Greenberg's apartment, which could also be seen as portals of a kind."[32]

It is an idea, in fact, that one can trace back to the artist's earliest work. In an artist book that Sietsema entitled *Construction of Vision* (2001)—a sort of companion work to his first film, *Untitled (Beautiful Place)*—we confront a passage simply entitled "The Black Mirror." It is the allegorical object of my entire reading of

31. Walleston, "Photo Finish," n.p.

32. Giovanni Intra, "Paul Sietsema: Empire," *Flash Art,* Jan.–Feb. 2003, p. 82.

Sietsema's work, an allegory of the structure of inversion that is the negative image, the homophonic image, the visionary image. Not only an aid to artists, to drawing—like the camera obscura or the camera lucida—the black mirror belongs as well to the domain of magic, of visions, of prophecy, of the occult. In fairy tales, it is the object of knowledge, of wisdom, a portal not only to the events of the past but to the "telling" of the future.

Sietsema's passage unfolds as if the words were his own. I will end with them here. Like so much else in the artist's work, of course, the words are borrowed, memories, appropriations, though their source is nowhere signaled. The author in this case would be another mid-twentieth-century figure, the writer Truman Capote; the passage one from his short story "Music for Chameleons." Shape-shifters, changelings: The allegory moves in many directions. The words are these:

> *I see you are looking at my black mirror.*
>
> *I am. My eyes distractedly consult it—are drawn to it against my will, as they sometimes are by the senseless flickerings of an unregulated television set. It has that kind of frivolous power. Therefore I shall overly describe it—in the manner of those "avant-garde" French novelists who, having chosen to discard narrative, character, and structure, restrict themselves to page-length paragraphs detailing the contours of a single object, the mechanics of an isolated movement: a wall, a white wall with a fly meandering across it. So: the object in the Madame's drawing room is a black mirror. It is seven inches tall and six inches wide. It is framed within a worn black leather case that is shaped like a book. Indeed, the case is lying open on the table just as though it were a deluxe edition meant to be picked up and browsed through; but there is nothing there to be read or seen—except the mystery of one's own image projected by the black mirror's surface before it recedes into its endless depths, its corridors of darkness.*
>
> *It belonged, she is explaining, to Gauguin. You know, of course, that he lived and painted here before he settled among the Polynesians. That was his black mirror. They were a quite common artifact among artists of the last century. Van Gogh used one. As did Renoir.*
>
> *I don't quite understand. What did they use them for?*
>
> *To refresh their vision. Renew their reaction to color, the tonal variations. After a spell of work, their eyes fatigued, they rested themselves by gazing into these dark mirrors. Just as gourmets at a banquet, between elaborate courses, reawaken their palates with a* sorbet de citron. *She lifts the small volume containing the mirror off the table and passes it to me. I often use it when my eyes have been stricken by too much sun. It's soothing.*
>
> *Soothing, and also disquieting. The blackness, the longer one gazes into it, ceases to be black, but becomes a queer silver-blue, the threshold to secret visions; like Alice, I feel on the edge of a voyage through a looking glass, one I'm hesitant to take.*[33]

33. Paul Sietsema, *Construction of Vision* (Arnhem: Sonsbeek 9; Los Angeles: Regen Projects, 2001), n.p. See also Truman Capote, *Music for Chameleons* (New York: Vintage, 1994), pp. 7–8.

*

One final postscript. It is a postscript on a postscript, a series of works Sietsema made as an addendum to the film *Empire*. We have not exhausted this artist's work upon the negative image, nor even considered the full range of his other negative drawings, in all their various modes. "Processes move in different directions at once," as Sietsema himself has stated; the open image dictates no singular path.[34] We could have pointed to his drawings that seem quasi-photographs, sheer visual analogues, but now of negative images, like the demonic trompe l'oeil of *White Eyes Drawing* (2007), or the obscurantism of *The Famous Last Words* (2006). We could have pointed to conceptual linkages, like Sietsema's concretization of the negative image's dependence on absence, as well as on a logic of the stencil, the negative's transparency acting as an aperture for light, for projection, in the process of the print. The result would be a singular thing, an object without progeny, the artist's *Stack Drawing* (2006), a pile of cut-out images and their superimposition, an architecture of holes. Or we could point to graphic inversions that exist as procedural analogues to the negative image, the use of imprints and resist mediums in Sietsema's various images of "spills," such as *Small Spill* (2011): drawing as a process of not-drawing, of the blank and of negative space.

But perhaps Sietsema's most compelling negative images would be these small addenda to *Empire*, works packed up in tiny boxes, cases, like the leather-bound for-

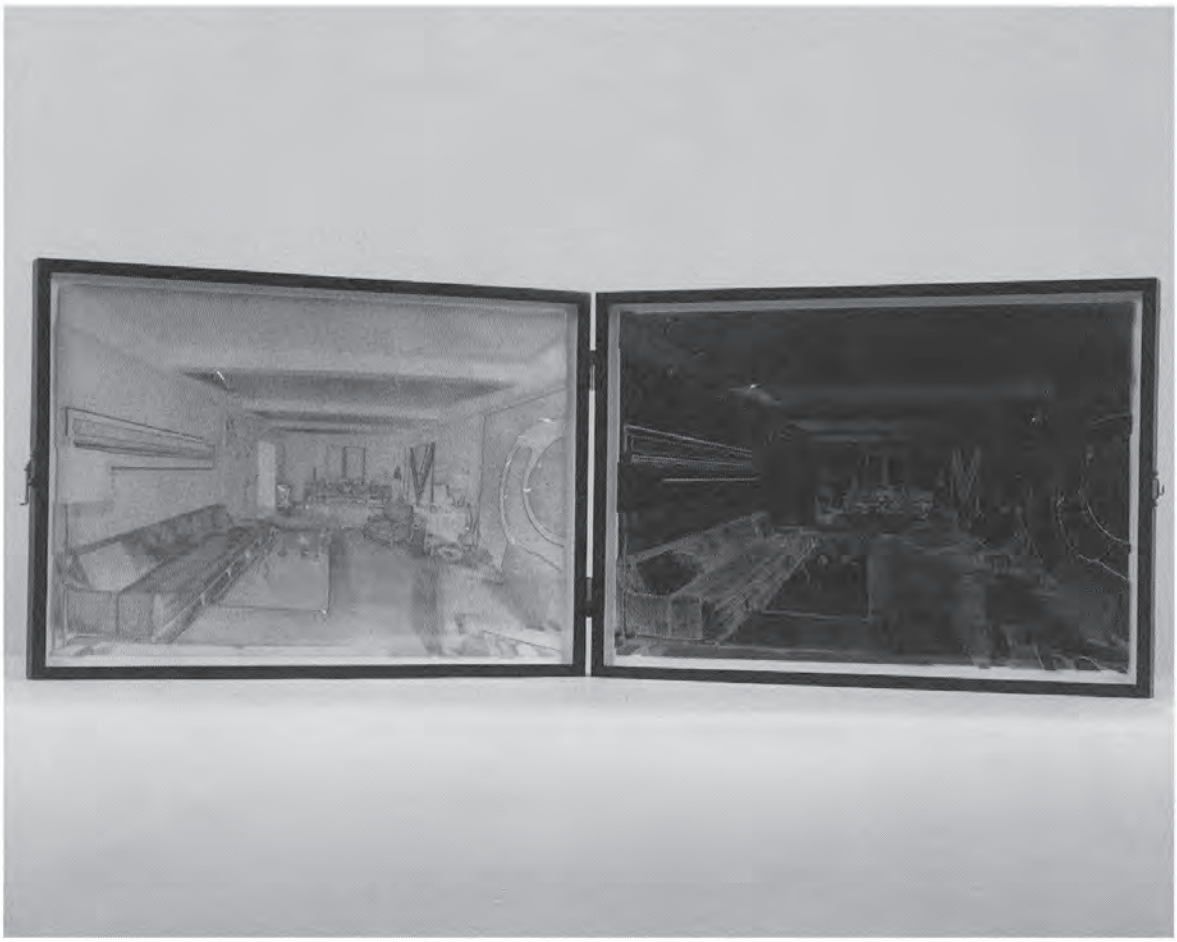
34. Subotnick, "1000 Words: Paul Sietsema Talks about *Figure 3*," p. 340.

Sietsema. Stack Drawing. *2006.*

Sietsema. Small Spill. *2011.*

mat of the black mirror just described, or the antique objecthood of the earliest photographs and daguerreotypes, or simply like books opened onto their doubled and folded pages. Sietsema now created literal photographs from his filmic work, a string of objects each holding two images of the same scene taken from *Empire*, a labor of the double producing more doubles, with these imprints then boxed in shells, frames, further encasements. There would be a box made for the film's opening scene of the grasshopper; another for the rococo salon. But somehow prioritized was the scene of Greenberg's apartment. In *Black and White Box* (2003), Sietsema presents an image of the full expanse of the room. The images erupt in negative, but the two "negatives" differ, one lighter and one inky black, as if we were staring at a photographic negative and another image that perhaps had been solarized, a positive reverting back to its origin in the negative once more.

This, however, is not the case. Sietsema made these works by printing both a positive and a negative image of his filmic scene. Then, using a blade, the artist laboriously cut up both scenes, relegating all the tonalities from middle gray to black to one image, and all from middle gray to white to the other. Sutured together with clear tape, as in the process of editing a film, the image fragments coalesce to produce two images with both positive and negative areas in each, but inversely, in a dance now of literal image involution—the folding of one image into the other—and reversal.



Sietsema. Black and White Box. *2003*.

We confront, it seems, a precise embodiment of the photographic *medium*—the middle-space, the hybrid image, the homophonic image, as I have been exploring it. We are left with two images that meet in a middle, around which they rotate, around which they "unfold." Two images that are doubles, copies, homophones for one another, locked in an obscure two-step, a doubled song. The possibilities unwind, dizzying: They are "carved" photographs, sculpture of a sort. Collages too, perhaps. Film "sequences" too, images that are "edited," like montage, and held together by tape. Photographs, extracted from film, and remade by hand. Echoes, between the positive and the negative, in black and in white. Copies with a difference.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

Flash Art

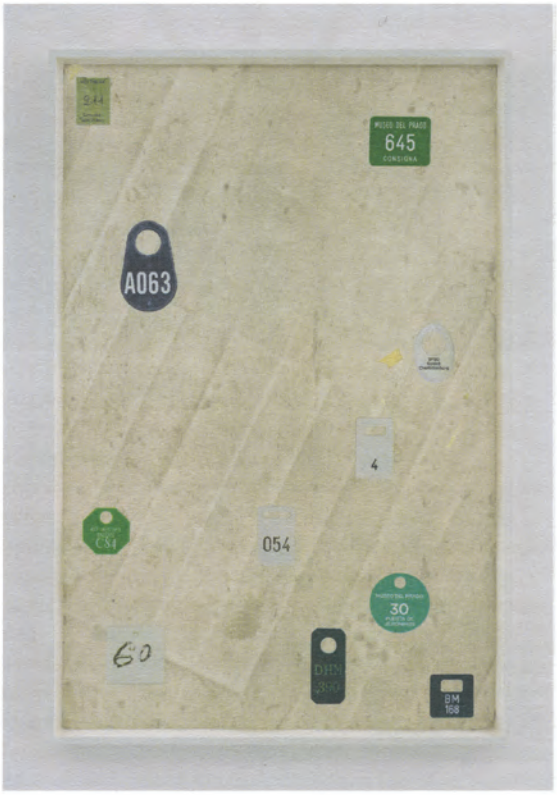
Paul Sietsema

Matthew Marks, Los Angeles

Los Angeles-based artist Paul Sietsema, though long praised for his work with film, has maintained a practice that is equally dedicated to painting and drawing. Out of a total of fifteen works shown here, thirteen were exquisite photorealistic renderings in ink and enamel on linen and paper, all produced this year. To only emphasize Sietsema's impeccable illusionism would ignore his subjects' weighty address of temporality, obsolescence and circulation. The artist's project is a self-reflexive analysis of cultural production, specifically of the distribution status of art objects, from their exhibition to their acquisition to their dissemination throughout the culture industry.

Sietsema chose the color green as his point of departure here, whose manifold meanings include fecundity, inexperience, envy and greed — the latter being the show's most salient topos. Most works address money or incorporate it literally in the form of coins, credit cards or dollar bills, while other pieces variously allude to age-generated value, museological effects and painterly processes. Sietsema's chosen color emphasis plays out in the main gallery's installation in a wittily entropic manner, beginning with the chromatically saturated *Green painting*, moving toward the lichen hues of *1997* and *1998*, and ending with the rather pallid pairing of *Telephone painting* and *Figure ground study (50/50)*, both of which employ green only sparingly. This flow from purity to dilution hints at the eventual rupture of artistic, technological and financial systems. As such, Sietsema's indefatigably analogue works are increasingly relevant in the face of digital omnipotence. Indeed, his unrelenting reliance upon and allusions to outmoded technologies — as in *Telephone painting*'s rotary telephone — uncannily address the speed of evolution and the inevitability of obsolescence.

by Thomas Duncan

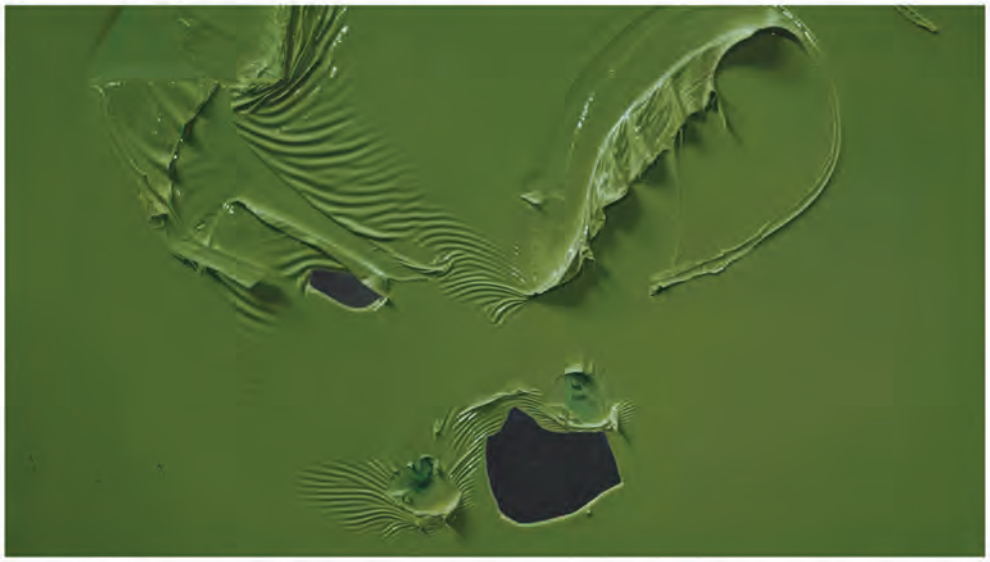


Paul Sietsema
Collection 4 *(2016)*
Courtesy of the Artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York/Los Angeles

Duncan, Thomas. "Paul Sietsema." *Flash Art,* January/February 2017, pp. 74–75.

Los Angeles Times

Review Paul Sietsema's first L.A. show of new Conceptual art was worth the 14-year wait



In this detail of Paul Sietsema's "Green painting," trompe l'oeil painted gashes and marks in the enamel swirl around actual gaps exposing black linen beneath the surface. (Matthew Marks Gallery)

By **Christopher Knight, Art Critic**

NOVEMBER 10, 2016, 6:50 PM

For his first local solo show in 14 years — and one of the best gallery exhibitions of the season — L.A.-based Conceptual artist Paul Sietsema has fashioned a challenging reconsideration of classic artistic themes of decay and transformation. It begins with the color of money.

"Green painting," one of 13 recent drawings and paintings and two film installations at Matthew Marks Gallery, scuffs up an emerald field of enamel paint on taut linen. Like the money-green monochrome paintings Stephen Prina made in 1989, when that market-mad decade for new art was cresting, Sietsema uses green color as a monetary sign.

What appear to be linear marks and ripples made by dragging the stick-end of a brush through wet vinyl paint, like an act of vandalism tearing through a pristine surface, is in fact a *tour de force* of illusionistic paint-handling. In purely abstract terms, the gashes recall the tradition of 19th century fool-the-eye paintings of paper money by John Haberle and William Harnett.

Near the bottom, though, there's a twist: A large, dark shape is actually an exposed patch of the painting's underlying linen.

This is not art as the illusion of money, in the manner of Haberle; instead, the art object is itself exposed as a material form of currency. Abstract monochrome painting, once the modern representation of an ethereal spiritual condition, is transformed into cold cash.

"Figure ground study (50/50)" re-creates pages of the New York Times used as a drop-cloth for a paint can and stirring stick. Displayed in an aerial view, the newspaper's scrupulously hand-drawn international section is open to a full-page banking ad, one for a home furnishings sale and smaller stories about Chinese human rights abuses and the legacy of French colonialism; the open paint can, its circular lid and the angled stick between them create a double-image of a percentage sign — %.

Knight, Christopher. "Paul Sietsema's First L.A. Show of New Conceptual Art was Worth the 14-Year Wait." *Los Angeles Times,* November 10, 2016.

Paul Sietsema, "Green painting," 2016, enamel on linen. (Matthew Marks Gallery)

Paul Sietsema, "Figure ground study (50/50)," 2016, ink and enamel on paper in artist's frame. (Christopher Knight / Los Angeles Times)

Other trompe l'oeil paintings show a rotary-dial telephone and a credit card, both slathered in a puddled layer of poured white paint. Their histories are loaded.

The rotary phone updates market-leader Andy Warhol's classic image of an old-fashioned black candlestick telephone as a symbol of painting as an obsolete medium of communication. "Swipe painting (Chase)," which appears to drag a credit card across the canvas to make a gestural flourish like the cartoon brushstroke in a Roy Lichtenstein, uses the plastic card's printed ID to serve as Sietsema's signature.

The artist's name is equivalent to his account number. "Chase" puts a wicked pun in the parenthetical subtitle: Art today is currency chasing its own tail.

The two film installations are accompanied by clattering mechanical projectors. In an art world marked by the proliferation of sleek and silent video projections, the machinery underscores time's passage. An artistic embodiment of *vanitas*, a reminder of death's inevitability, they unspool films whose formal structures and abstract narratives are based on auction house categories for classifying and selling art.

Inquisitive rather than critical, Sietsema's work is neither disparaging of art and commerce nor a celebration of it. He instead looks squarely at present reality — and then fabricates marvelous art of it.

Knight, Christopher. "Paul Sietsema's First L.A. Show of New Conceptual Art was Worth the 14-Year Wait." *Los Angeles Times,* November 10, 2016.

frieze

PAUL SIETSEMA
Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

For LA-based artist Paul Sietsema, the term 'currency' – in all its slippery meaning – is especially resonant. Known for his meticulously researched and constructed films, Sietsema also specializes in highly crafted *trompe l'œil* paintings and ink drawings that speculate on artifice, mediation and history. His latest show at Matthew Marks Gallery presented works that all pointed, to some extent, to the subject of time, not only suggesting art's connection to 'currency' as a value and medium of exchange, but also to how art objects transition from a marker of 'the now' to an antique collectible.

Sietsema's 16mm film *At the hour of tea* (2013), for instance, pictures a pocket watch, palette, skull, coins, Roman glassware and other vintage objects, all diaristically accompanied by recent calendar dates. Here, patches of paint dreamily merge with the textures of antique drinking vessels, as palette daubs blur into relics of museological display. Dividing each segment of the film is a folded paper envelope resembling an inbox icon that unfolds to describe a historical painting in the outmoded formal language of Modernism. Do these tableaux belong to our time? Can we even say what 'our time' might mean, given today's virtual telescoping of past and present? Such a collapse of temporality also informs the fastidious ink paintings *1988*, *1990* and *1994* (all 2014), which depict years drawn from building inscriptions and modified for their personal resonance to the artist. While these *trompe l'œil* feats echo Minimalist objects and On Kawara's painterly calendar, they also resemble epitaphs on tombstones. I, too, will one day pass, Sietsema suggests, as will all art, into an endless sequence of historical markers flattened, made equivalent and unmoored by increasing technological mediation.

If, as André Bazin wrote, photography 'embalms time, rescuing it [...] from its' these and many of Sietsema's works mimic the language of photography. In three ink drawings on paper, *Black veil*, *Plank drawing* and *Painted oval* (all 2014), Sietsema offers us impeccable photographic replicas that, although reminiscent of Sigmar Polke's half-tone patterns, owe more to Mark Tansey's meta-paintings. *Black veil*, for example, depicts a hand folding a veil as if alluding to painting as an act of illusionism – since what does a veil promise if not there being something behind it? Alternatively, *Plank drawing* depicts a hand holding a painted board as if allegorizing the Modernist picture plane, while *Painted oval* shows an oval shape being painted in a rough style recalling Expressionism. While this type of reflexivity often characterizes Sietsema's choice of images, just as compelling is the laborious process behind these works, created by painting the negative spaces with latex, spraying the surface with ink and lifting the mask to reveal the image in a negative process paralleling analogue photography.

Yet, although Sietsema privileges photography, film and other mechanical means of communication, he also suggests that they, like painting, are faulty translators. The more literal *White painting* (2014), for instance, shows an antiquated rotary telephone with its receiver off the hook sitting in a pool of enamel. In this white-on-white composition and the chromatically ravishing *Red painting* (2014) – with its echoes of Alberto Burri and illusions of blistering, peeling paint – appearance intermingles with actual substance as the rendered image cleverly incorporates the material of the exposed canvas.

Indeed, such slippage between representational registers is central to Sietsema's conceptual strategy. As a case in point, *Palette drawing* (2014) presents the viewer with a photorealistic depiction of a painter's palette – its smears doubling as abstract marks – while the 3D animation, *Abstract composition* (2014), abstracts various antiques into prosaic text on a rotating piece of cardboard. Each object appears as a textual description punched through the cardboard in a method used for industrial stamping. 'Chinese Porcelain, Autumn Landscape, Victorian Settee', we read, as each collectible oscillates between an archived object, visualized image and banal entry on a discarded piece of flotsam.

This liquid slide from state to state, medium to medium, image to thing and thing to image is what Sietsema suggests ultimately equates art with currency – since what is more mercurial than our regime of virtual capital and fetishized, symbolically invested art objects? In this light, Sietsema paints currency as the ultimate symbol of our abstracted, slippery world. And though this show may have seemed hermetic to some, the key to its hidden riches might have been found in the first painting that greeted the viewer upon entering the gallery. In *Untitled zip* (2013), a lone Eisenhower dollar, the word *liberty* emblazoned above the head, slides down a canvas in the manner that coyly deflates Barnett Newman's signature 'zip' motif. Significantly, this is a found canvas, rescued from obsolescence and invested with value. And yet, despite this attempted recuperation, the drift depicted in the painting is unstoppable; as this index of the moment – this coveted 'liberty' – slips slowly out of circulation and into history.

DAVID GEERS

Geers, David. "Paul Sietsema." *Frieze,* January/February, 2015, p. 141.

modernpainters

REVIEW: Paul Sietsema at Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

by Brienne Walsh, Modern Painters 04/01/14 12:11 PM EST

Paul Sietsema's "At the hour of tea" (still) 2013, 16 mm, silent.
(Courtesy of the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York)

In his solo exhibition at the MCA, which was organized by the Wexner Center for the Arts, Sietsema explores what it means to make art today—a time when much of what we say, think, or look at, whether we like it or not, is produced and circulated in the digital realm. Immaterial platforms equalize all objects, no matter their historic or cultural value. On sites like Tumblr, Facebook, eBay, and Amazon, physical artworks become flattened vessels of value that can be linked, traded, or appropriated for the often sinister purpose of selling commercial products or personal brands. By insisting on using analog processes in the creation of his films, paintings, drawings, and sculptures, Sietsema reclaims various modes of hand-based production from digital technology—and in so doing, rips his work from what he describes as "a kind of social ether infused with planktonlike masses of monetized hooks and barbs." The value of his work is not merely visual—to appreciate it, you must understand his method.

Walsh, Brienne. "Paul Sietsema at Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago." *Modern Painters,* April 2014.

The artist has stated that film is central to his practice—and that his work in other mediums is really just another way to process ideas. One of the three 16 mm films in the exhibition, Figure 3, 2008, becomes a thematic umbrella for the other works on display. At first glance the film looks like an ethnographic slideshow of artifacts—ancient vases, tools, and coins—culled from an archaeological site. In fact, the objects were made from plaster in the studio, calling the liquid value we might place on such historical objects into question. When we discover they were created by Sietsema, they attain market value as contemporary sculpture—but this assumption is disabused by the fact that the artist destroyed the pieces. Ultimately, all that's left is the film-as-document, which in the exhibition is shown as an ethereal light projection.

Sietsema frequently uses objects in his studio to confound expectations based on visual assumptions. From afar, Brush Painting (grey), 2013, and Studio Painting (green), 2012, look like combines covered in paint but reveal themselves on closer inspection to be two-dimensional depictions of a paintbrush (in the former) and a roll of tape, a file folder, and a paint-can lid (in the latter). After seeing a number of such works, Untitled (collection), 2007—a wall sculpture near the exit composed of, among other objects, the actual paintbrushes and paint-can lids depicted in the paintings— is shocking. The effect is that you feel haunted by objects you've already come to accept as existing in another place entirely.

The four ink drawings in the 2012 "Calendar Boat" series are rendered in such detail that they resemble vintage photographs of sailboats. Despite their beauty, they (like the other works) are ultimately just containers for Sietsema's ideas. To replicate the image four times, the artist read a pre-digital manual on touching up photographs and employed the restoration techniques to build each image bit by bit on a blank sheet of paper. Sietsema frequently speaks of using cliché to understand what has been lost as the digital world takes over the analog. Here, cliché is embodied both in the source image and in the handmade means of drawing (rather than scanning the picture digitally.) The cliché offers an access point for almost any viewer under the easy guise of nostalgia—using it, Sietsema forces us to think about the cultural conditions in which we live.

Paul Sietsema is on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago from September 7, 2013 through January 5, 2014.

Walsh, Brienne. "Paul Sietsema at Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago." *Modern Painters,* April 2014.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

Flash Art

Paul Sietsema

MCA / Chicago

Paul Sietsema doesn't rely on the seduction of color. Most of the 37 works that populate his exhibition at the MCA Chicago are monochrome or rendered in muted hues. One press representative confides in me, "This show's a difficult sell." But for those who can look beyond the subdued colors and commonplace imagery, Sietsema's pieces provide intellectual rewards.

Part of the MCA's "ascendant artist" series, the exhibition surveys the 45-year-old artist's recent output. Other shows in the series have featured Rashid Johnson, Amalia Pica and William J. O'Brien. Of these, Sietsema's exhibition contains the most challenging work. His paintings, collages and films — and especially his ink drawings — are informed by ideas of artistic representation and the transmigration of concepts across time and mediums. A prime example is *Ship Drawing* (2009). At first glance, the work appears to be a photograph of a schooner. In reality, this "photo" is an ink drawing, perhaps of a page torn from a magazine. The ambiguousness of the source material (photograph? magazine page?) and its literal "re-presentation" as a drawing gives the work a surrealist edge. It's a Magritte-like idea ("Ceci n'est pas une pipe"), but Sietsema advances it in a more subtle way.

Other works in the exhibition are equally deft in their illusionistic qualities. A lesser artist could be accused of showing off his virtuosity at the expense of intellectual content. But Sietsema's pieces are sophisticated and provocative. They disarm the viewer while questioning the idea of representation. Sietsema's *Light fall* series tackles these questions on a grander scale and with more emotional impact. Each image in the series was sourced from a '50s MoMA catalogue of Abstract Expressionist paintings. The energy and physicality of the '50s action paintings still resonate in Sietsema's contemporary pieces, despite multiple transmutations from original painting to catalogue photo to large-scale ink rendering. It's a compelling series of works within a surprisingly rich exhibition.

Mercurio, Frank. "Paul Sietsema – MCA Chicago." *Flash Art*, March/April 2014, p. 93.

ARTFORUM

LONDON

Paul Sietsema

DRAWING ROOM

In "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," author David Foster Wallace narrates an excruciating, ill-fated voyage: a seven-night Caribbean cruise funded by his editors at *Harper's* magazine. Over the course of this dense forty-nine-page essay, Wallace learns to differentiate between "rolling" and "pitching" at sea as he is overfed, tortured by incessant disco drumming, and generally exasperated. Many thousands of words too long for a glossy magazine article, excessively detailed, and structured in free-floating non sequiturs, this amazing text itself seems lost at sea: a novella-length allegory for the waves of words rocking about in Wallace's mind.

Paul Sietsema's recent London exhibition, too, seemed to be located symbolically at sea. Four drawings, each titled *Calendar Boat* (all works 2012), depict a found vintage photograph of a cruising sailboat. Sietsema painstakingly re-created the original using a labor-intensive mechanical picture-rebuilding process usually reserved for restoration. Each unique drawing, identical to the others down to the details of its creases and imperfections, varies only by virtue of a differing year printed on each sail (spanning 2010 through 2013)—as if the copied boat floats not just in the water, but across time. *Blue Square 1* is an ink drawing minutely representing every flaw, tear, and discoloration on the surface of a found square sheet of paper. Colored an ocean-map blue, the square becomes a kind of monochromatic trompe l'oeil, fastidiously mimicking a rippled surface. Several paintings depict ordinary tools—a paintbrush, a hammer, a chisel, nails—smothered in enamel paint, as if drowned on the canvas. *Telegraph* is a 16-mm film consisting of a sequence of stills looped to play uninterruptedly. Each frame shows strips of weathered wood arranged and rearranged against an inky black background to form a crude typography, eventually spelling out L/E/T/T/E/R T/O A Y/O/U/N/G P/A/I/N/T/E/R. Made up of debris from Hurricane Katrina, the disjointed letters are almost indecipherable, yet they seem to transmit their mysterious message with some urgency in the dark gallery. Like a note in a bottle, Sietsema's coded words may never reach their intended audience of struggling would-be painters but flash their warning nonetheless, like a beacon.

Sophisticated, quiet, and richly satisfying in its attention to detail, Sietsema's exhibition seemed an allegory of the slippage between the tangible materiality of paint and the elusiveness of artmaking and its history. There were echoes of Bas Jan Ader's lonely voyage in 1975 in his tiny sailboat and Lawrence Weiner's 1968 sculpture-as-language reading ONE PINT GLOSS WHITE LACQUER POURED DIRECTLY UPON THE FLOOR AND ALLOWED TO DRY. And as the darkened gallery soaked up the projected light of *Telegraph*'s driftwood lettering, one might have reflected on the tendency of language itself to behave like liquid: spilling, seeping, drifting, or pooling—as the poet Kenneth Goldsmith has described digital language—on a screen. In Sietsema's ongoing "Figure/Ground" series, begun in 2005, thickly painted objects are left to dry on newsprint, a material able to both "absorb" the stories and images that generate history each day and literally mop up a household spill. Here, Sietsema manipulates his materials' overlapping conceptual, linguistic, and physical qualities with consummate skill.

Paul Sietsema, *Calendar Boat 1*, 2012, ink on paper, 64⅛ x 50⅜".

In Wallace's essay, he suddenly digresses, complaining of his frustration with students who grow bored when he teaches Stephen Crane's story "The Open Boat": "I want them to feel the same marrow-level dread of the oceanic I've always felt, the intuition of the sea as primordial *nada*, bottomless." Sietsema's "letter to a painter" may similarly hope to caution young artists of the treacherous depths of contemporary art, with its bottomless deposits of history, language, and technique. In this assured exhibition, Sietsema proved himself a veteran artist, able to navigate the high seas of contemporary artmaking, deeply reflective as he charts his own course.

—*Gilda Williams*

Willams, Gilda. "Paul Sietsema – Drawing Room." *Artforum,* February 2013, p. 255.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

SPIKE

A Certain Kind of Realism

Eine bestimmte Art von Realismus

Zakaitis, Jonas. "A Certain Kind of Realism." *Spike Quarterly*, Spring 2012, pp. 72–83.

PAUL SIETSEMA, an artist whom at least two upcoming generations will title as »the artist of the generation«, we heard someone saying. »Sietsema – the best kept secret of the last decade«, was another remark. It remains to be seen if any of this is true, but for the time being we have a piece by *Jonas Žakaitis* trying to look at the works and into the mind's inner workings of this enigmatic American artist.

Zakaitis, Jonas. "A Certain Kind of Realism." *Spike Quarterly*, Spring 2012, pp. 72–83.

I

The only time I met him was maybe 30 years ago. It was summer in Lithuania, and we had all gathered in a small resort by the lake for this big national humanities conference. We: young graduates in our mid-twenties. Philosophy students, art critics, anthropologists, promising theatre directors yet to stage their first plays; a group of rebellious poets – in general, an inedible broth of sarcasm, postcolonial theory, hope, egomania and uncontrolled erections manifesting itself through long quotes from *Being and Time*. We were all drinking heavily, cheapest wine and beer, eating greasy potato pancakes, barely sleeping at all; each emitting at least five words per second on any given subject, William Carlos Williams vs. Ezra Pound, Heidegger and the beginnings of philosophy, the semiotic square, Carl Schmitt, Le Vide. A pulsating wall of sound, pure potential energy.

We had all heard some biographical facts about him, but nothing for sure. Apparently, he was an old Lithuanian émigré who left for the US before the war while still in his teens. Ended up fighting in Japan, getting an American passport, studying philosophy in Chicago and then Freiburg, within two years published a series of articles on phenomenology that made even German academia believe in Husserl's reincarnation, and then suddenly dropped everything. Went back to the States and spent 40 years teaching in the smallest provincial university nobody had heard about without publishing a single word ever since. Of course when he for some reason showed up at that conference, a very old man barely remembering a word in Lithuanian, all of us could distinctly see a blue halo of mysterious genius around his bald head. He looked like Nabokov's wax sculpture with a permanent half-smile, eyes blurred out under thick rimmed glasses, legs and arms moving in senile staccato but somehow at the same time very lightly.

I remember one night we were all drinking in a narrow corridor of a hotel, squatting on the floor in an orchard of bottles and cigarette butts, and he at some point silently joined us. It was really late, but the old man seemed to be enjoying himself, drinking the cheap wine with us and listening to the endless overlapping monologues. No one dared address him directly, but everyone fought for his attention as if expecting some kind of a verdict. In the end nothing happened. Whenever you are thinking of something he said, whenever you are thinking of something – this is the only thing that he said that night – you are already outside of that thing. And if you are thinking of a thought, you are already outside of that thought.

Some twenty years later I visited his widow in Southern Ohio. I was on my way to another conference, a bigger one this time, more mature and sober, but also hopeless and boring (the conference). The old lady was still living alone in their house. A red brick building wearing three white isosceles triangles as rooftops – one on the garage, one above the entrance door and one on the main house. How do you look after all this space, I asked her. I don't, she said, I cannot walk up the stairs anymore, I just stay here in the living room and in the kitchen, Amy comes twice a month to clean up for me, she is a nice young woman, lives three blocks away. And your husband's study, was it upstairs? Yes, his study was that small room on the right, I don't think I've ever been in there since he passed away. His library and manuscripts are still there? I asked. Oh no, she said, he never had any books. I couldn't believe that. Really, not a single book? She nodded.

A MATERIAL OBJECT CAN EASILY BECOME A REAL THOUGHT, JUST AS AN IDEA MIGHT MODIFY AND ARTICULATE MATERIAL ENTITIES

I think I spent at least an hour just sitting in that room, drifting away. It was empty. No pictures, no papers, no clothes, nothing. I silently checked all the drawers in the writing table, opened the closet, kneeled to look under the couch, it was all empty. He had nothing. He was just sitting there and thinking, and this hollow room was the only remaining record of his thoughts. Something clicked in my head then.

What if he swallowed the world and expectorated it back exactly as it was before? What if every single particle of matter was now a concept of his?A thought so general that it coincides with the world as it is. A savage thought in which everything coexists without either a sequence or a hierarchy. And being outside of that thought?

*

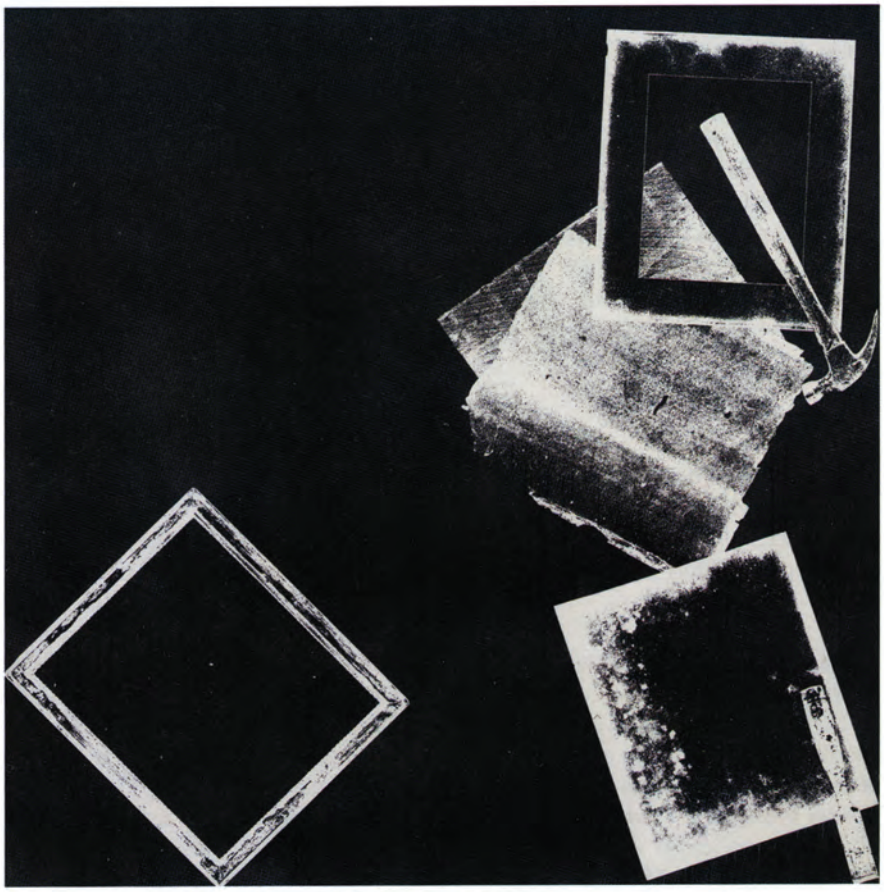
This reminds me of Paul Sietsema's philosophy.

(Sometimes I am not even sure which memory comes first – the bespectacled philosopher's ghost or Sietsema's thought textures. They seem to form a perfect palindrome.)

1) *All the material structures and all the mental structures are completely interchangeable.* This is the first and fundamental principle of Sietsema's thinking. It is crucial not to reduce this statement to any kind of overreaching materialism or idealism. There are ideas and there are things – but the border between the two is completely fluid. A material object can easily become a real thought, just as an idea might modify and articulate

Zakaitis, Jonas. "A Certain Kind of Realism." *Spike Quarterly*, Spring 2012, pp. 72–83.

Untitled figure ground study (facing German suffering), 2011
Ink and enamel on paper / Tinte und Lack auf Papier
89 x 94 cm



Painter's Mussel 4, 2011
Ink on paper / Tinte auf Papier
184 x 182 cm

Zakaitis, Jonas. "A Certain Kind of Realism." *Spike Quarterly*, Spring 2012, pp. 72–83.

material entities. This interchangeability has many routes, but let's take one example: a metaphor. If we start thinking of metaphors as real transport (rather than an embellishment of speech) we can see that, for instance, each architectural element of a house (floor, ceiling, door, or window) has developed into a corresponding cluster of figurative, narrative and moral ideas (»debt-ceiling«, »pillars of society«) which give actual shape to perception. Or, to use a fleshier historical example, there is a metaphorical arch that links Harvey's early 17 th century discovery of the cardiovascular system with the development of an abstract idea of a closed circulatory system and then again with the transformation of Western European cities into vast flowing networks of coalescing roads. This leads us to Sietsema's second principle:

2) *Equality.* All things and ideas might differ in their intensities and levels of relevance, but there is no essential hierarchy among them. Numbers, for example. All things can be quantified and in this respect arithmetic becomes the general structure of reality, which punctuates and orders the entirety of things. On the other hand, arithmetic itself is a single discipline with a limited set of premises and a particular history: It can itself be reified and reduced to other domains like culture or politics. In general, every single thing can be a general rule, a principle structuring reality, *and* a particular, limited entity. This not only goes for concepts, but also for material things: a piece of hand-woven rope is a concentrate that embodies a certain economy, social stratification, topography, or imagination. Now this draws us to the next point which can be flagged by a timeless question: What is an object?

3) An object is an aggregate of all the registers it cumulates and embodies. So for instance a ship is: a system of economic exchange, an idea of distance, a musical score, a narrative device, a disease, a way of making pictures, levitation, optics, otherness, innovation, a storm, a feeling, or a way of measuring weight. Furthermore, this list can be thickened as follows: A ship is not *within* economy, but rather is a body of economy; a ship is not within a story, but rather is the actual architecture of the story. Yes, this is where Sietsema's thinking gets a bit complicated. Even more complicated because its extreme complexity coincides with its extreme simplicity: a ship is a bare existing thing and at the same time an infinitely complex being that slides out of any particular context, perspective, image or time.

Which brings us back to the empty room.

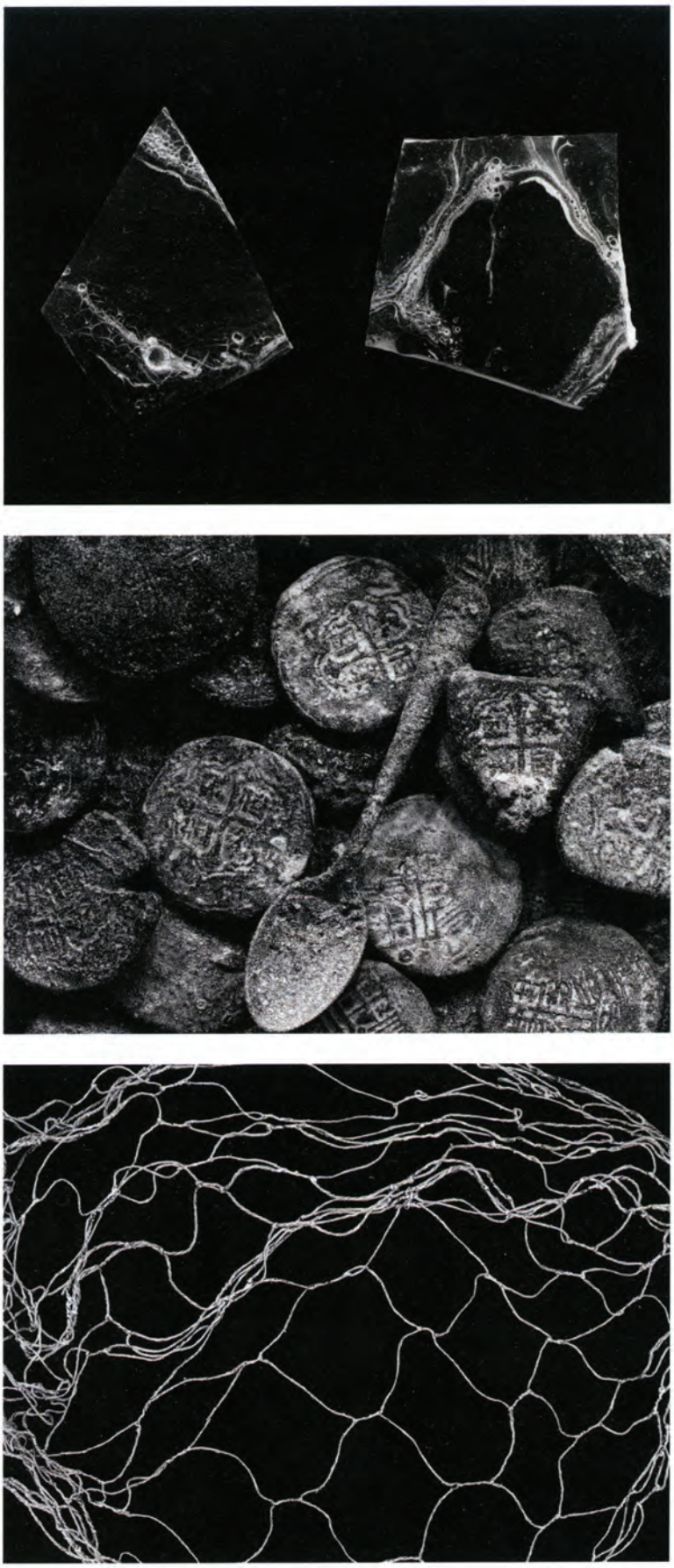
II

I've only talked to Sietsema once.

It happened in Amsterdam some months ago. Having heard rumours about the obsessive research Sietsema was doing for his film projects (like supposedly digesting all the available anthropological data on the South Pacific tribes and then spending years weaving nets and making pots in his studio only to film and destroy them afterwards), I felt slightly uncomfortable waiting for him in a bar with a glass of beer in hand. I was sure that I would immediately recognise him when he came through the door simply due to his phrenological superiority.

Nothing like that happened of course, Paul appeared to be a laid back guy of average human complexion, a bit like Robert Smithson impersonating the archetype of an LA-artist in *West Coast East Coast* (1969), but with a richer vocabulary. I remember we ended up talking a lot about David Foster Wallace that night. Paul told me that Wallace was a huge inspiration for him back in the mid-90s when he was just starting out with his work at UCLA. I guess LA has never been a mecca for history-oriented art, but when Paul started getting more and more interested in the ways historical reality is represented and started treating these modes of representation as the medium of his own work, people around him in the art school became more and more certain that he was taking classes in the wrong department. But then reading Wallace put things into perspective. I didn't really get the Sietsema/Wallace link immediately (especially given that we jumped from beer to vodka in another bar), but now that I think of it, it makes sense.

As a writer David Foster Wallace dissected all the possible protocols, technologies, media and institutions (both mental and brick-built) which channeled language in the world around him. But he would do that without trying to, for instance, unveil how the mass-media »constructs« the Self, or how a given technology determines what can be communicated through it. Wallace was not about deconstruction either. I think what he was actually trying to do was understand the whole complex picture of what it meant to exist and experience something in a world where every single thing is always already connected with a myriad of representations of itself, where any moment in time is simultaneously experienced through different points of view (oftentimes by the same individual) and where you can remain pretty desperate and clueless about what it all means. And I think to a large extent that is what Sietsema is trying to do as an artist as well, just without the existential anxieties so dear to Wallace.



Stills from / aus *Figure 3*, 2008
16mm film, black-and-white, silent / 16mm Film, schwarz-weiß, ohne Ton, ca. 25 min.

Zakaitis, Jonas. "A Certain Kind of Realism." *Spike Quarterly*, Spring 2012, pp. 72–83.

Figure 3 (2008) was the first piece by Sietsema I came across. Structurally the film is pretty straightforward: it's a looped 16 mm projection, B/W, with silent images that steadily change every couple of seconds. If it wasn't for the projector purring beside you, you'd probably think it was a slideshow. At first glance what's happening on the screen seems to be a kind of a Rorschach test, the images seem to be zoomed in on something that could equally well be fragments of abstract paintings, debris from a plane crash, or natural formations like rocks or fossils. You can almost feel your cognitive apparatus lassoing in the dark. Then slowly these images start to mingle with clearer ones, you start discerning round shapes that look like ancient plates pieced together from broken fragments, then some pots, details of ropes and nets, then some ancient coins and spoons. As the film progresses, it turns into something like an archaeological presentation of various artefacts excavated from somewhere deep and far. But then again when the camera zooms in, you start seeing amebae, corals, Mirós and planets. This is what glues you to this projection: It's neither the things you actually see on the screen, nor the things you recognise or imagine, but the weird magnetic field between these two poles. As if some new object would be moulded in real-time by your mind fusing with the images.

IN A WAY SIETSEMA STARTED FROM BOTH ENDS SIMULTANEOUSLY, PRE-MODERN LABOR AND THE MODERN IDEA OF AN ARTWORK

The rumours I heard about Sietsema's research for this film and the time it took him to make it (5 years) turned out to be mostly true. The artefacts of the South Pacific tribes that Sietsema researched, handcrafted and filmed in his studio, were part of a pre-industrial economy where each individual could potentially produce everything available in her cultural milieu. With colonisation, these artefacts transformed into a trade currency for the natives on the one end and precious exotic objects for the Westerners on the other – things to be looked at and collected, materials for Kunstkammern and eventually museums as we know them today. In a way Sietsema started from both ends simultaneously, pre-modern labor (and the actual experience of time, body and materiality that comes with it) and the modern idea of an artwork. On one hand a world shaped around the physical properties of a human body, on the other a world of disembodied images. And *Figure 3* as an in-between state where all the things are actually made, but exist only as anthropological images of themselves. A celluloid amalgam of objects and their representations.

Empire (2002) is Sietsema's other major film project which I keep watching, even if I still don't get a large part of the things that happen there. It starts in a similar way: you see some unidentified B/W objects slowly emerging out of the black screen and then suddenly disappearing as soon as you look at them in full brightness, as if you get the after-image first and the thing itself second. Then the camera starts circling around something that could be a surface of a grotto, a detail of a modernist sculpture, or a mountain – it is impossible to determine the scale. These images are followed by hallucinatory rhomboid shapes coming in and out of focus, a couple of seconds later three orange stripes fill the whole screen. As the camera slowly zooms out you realise that these stripes are actually a detail of a large-scale abstract painting that (the camera keeps zooming out) is hanging on a wall in a richly decorated living room. This orange-filtered shot of the canvas appearing within a room is repeated again and again, until you once more start losing a sense of scale. It feels as if the whole room is turning into a painting, nothing but a flat composition of surfaces and colours.

The room in *Empire* is Clement Greenberg's living room, or to be more precise, a model of it reconstructed by Sietsema from a photograph. The iconic canvasses wallpapering the living space of this power-critic of American avant-garde seem to form a single body (with Barnett Newman at centre). It's hard to pin it down, but it feels like there is a single line of thought running through the paintings and all the objects in the room – as if there were a mental space in which everything was interchangeable. The space within a painting = the corporeal space = the space of the mind. As in *Figure 3* everything becomes so condensed that it's hard to discern between the act of looking and the things themselves.

But I guess (this article is coming to a very abrupt ending, a train wreck almost) this is what Sietsema engineers: when things are condensed into a single body together with their histories, cultures and representations, you slowly find yourself thinking about them in a new field. Paradoxically, a field without any determined shape or history. —

Zakaitis, Jonas. "A Certain Kind of Realism." *Spike Quarterly*, Spring 2012, pp. 72–83.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

THE FEDERAL

INTERVIEW

Gintaras Didžiapetris talks with Paul Sietsema

GINTARAS DIDŽIAPETRIS
Should we start from the past? Or are there other ways to relate to what is around us or to the way we speak?

PAUL SIETSEMA
All photographs and movies of me as a child were stolen along with my father's movie camera when our house was broken into many many years ago. I often wonder if I have fewer memories of this time because there is no media to produce them. There is only the present and whatever accumulates around you in the present makes up your present conception of the world.

The gap between distances in time and space is filled with media, which is anachronistic by nature, removed from the string of linear time our existence and perception is governed by. Working against the anachronistic quality of media are fingerprints left by the ghosts in the machine, the imprint of the shaping elements of cultural and mechanistic constructions. Communication (our common goal?) finds its basis in agreed upon, mutually understood sets of experiences, definitions, etc.

I have been intrigued by the idea that a game can be played where these vehicles of comprehension find surrogates in distances of time and space instead of present cultural factors or contexts (I.E., education, age, experience, etc.).

This media game allows for the entry and activation of elements of language(s) that usually remain out of view; they can become present and begin to direct information, enhancing experience through resonance between the container and the contained. An activated container whose culturally unpacked quality (visible rather than invisible mechanics) casts the contained in a wider lexical array than would otherwise be the case. This could be seen as media's attempt at quantum mechanics, at catalyzing ambiguity. So the past, in this case the activated past lives of a medium, which accrue historical and cultural information as they move through time, can be used to create an experience that reinforces even more the expanded possibilities of language in the present.

Of course a very key aspect of this is that perception exists entirely in the present, which creates a phenomenological field upon which the past can exist no more than the future. In this zone the reliability of either becomes unimportant, even if the tools and objects of the past are used, their specific recognition (or lack of) is no more important than a new experience of a new aspect of the absolute present (if

Didziapetris, Gintaras with Paul Sietsema. "Interview." *The Federal,* October 2011, pp. 21–28.

such a thing exists), just a landscape for the mind to traverse.

GD

One thing I keep coming back to, maybe you could give an example of something you describe here:

"I have been intrigued by the idea that a game can be played where these vehicles of comprehension find surrogates in distances of time and space instead of present cultural factors or contexts (I.E., education, age, experience, etc.)."

I have a friend who describes the iPhone as a 'black box'—a world without inside, where to know exactly the way it works is almost impossible. I then wonder if such abstract machines are human self-portraits or a much more complex set of problems that are being dully used as a phone?

PS

In the sentence you mention above I was talking about something that is at work in things I am working on now and also of course things I see out there in the world. It has to do with media forms that by nature de-prioritize the importance of systems of linear time and Cartesian space, etc., in the presentation of information.

For example if I were developing a project which used a conception of my daily existence as a projective form and I planned to set the depiction in another time, all symbols or representative elements of my life would need to be translated into related elements of that time period and its cultural context. Since I would be the one doing the translating my conception of that time would be what structures, defines and constructs the aesthetic array which constitutes the context. In that sense the make-up of the context will have resonance with my depiction of my life because the context has mixed or couched frames; the historical (time period), how I see and choose to depict that time period, etc. These contextual elements become descriptive devices and themselves gain potential to tint and organize information. It is a way of pushing syntax into semantics.

As for the iPhone, it does seem to be a kind of self-portrait, although an anonymous one, because it relies on depictions of cause and effect, rather than actual cause and effect. There is now an evolved layer of non-tactile technology between action and reaction. It feels as if this evolution of user interface has cut the umbilical cord to the industrial age. The subtleties and importance of skill as it relates to the hand's manipulation of actual physical objects, tools, etc., the importance of pressure, timing, touch, seems to be leaving us. For a long time user interface was partially based on conceptions of, and experience with, mechanical call and response, traced back to the operation of manufacturing machines, guided entirely by the hands of skilled labor. As these conceptions of the hand become less important to our understanding of the world the importance of using them as the operative layer for devices disappears also. Apple had to reconstruct a language of interplay based on postindustrial tactility. The interface is an exercise in extreme ambiguity, a purely abstract construct that could take any form since with the representation-based touch screen there is an infinite number of ways to describe and implement an action. It is the distance between this layer of code, which relies entirely on ambiguous subjective representations, and a user without access to the code that creates the 'black box'. The form of the black box privileges manufacturers over consumers in economics, and governing bodies over citizens in politics. I suppose this is part of the reason I am interested in representation, I like the idea of reformulating ambiguous syntactical distances as generative semantic

devices, or at least describing the form of where true meaning might or might not exist now.

GD

It seems to me, that what you are describing comes to a kind of Medievalism, when an object you are trying to define already exists, but does not have a form yet, and I wonder if this is something that can overcome a representation (a design of a chair could be an example not of the way people sit, but a subjective imagination of a sitting-form) and if it can itself become something?

With 'form' I don't necessarily mean materials. It is an image of time and style, beliefs and economy and social organisation. I'm intrigued with what you say about iPhones and their "ambiguous subjective representations" and that, in a way, I call abstraction in my previous question.

PS

I'm hoping it's not just a case of not being able to see the forest for the trees, but I do think that there has been a shift in the immanence of form that Apple has so masterfully taken the reigns of. With a medieval chair (I don't have so much experience with the medieval, in California and the US in general History as we know it starts in the 1700-1800s) I suppose you could say you have a simple function (to hold upright without standing, and earlier in furniture evolution simply to recline away from the ground, which of course is a way of separating us physically from 'lower' life forms while conceptually/culturally doing the same) that itself obtains a form based on aspects of utility, available materials, technology (joining methods, carving tools, joining components, etc.) and also since the thing is being made and the momentum of culture seems to be to fill all blank spaces with intentionality, the eventual addition of external ornament and interior (structural?) formal/cultural play. It's incredible how little the chair changes throughout history, the design of early Egyptian chairs varies only slightly from chairs being made today. And chairs are of course one of those things that changes while staying the same across cultures and time. They are a cultural node of sorts, sometimes it seems as if their biggest secondary function is to display cultural difference as discreetly as possible. And of course they are a prime example of how history is made up not only of things being described but also things describing themselves, as you say, at a certain point (very very early on in the evolution of the chair) a chair became not just a chair but a chair that was representing itself as a chair, a chair is also a projection of a chair. This of course is a product of consciousness.

The chair relates very directly to the body, and for a very long time to the scale of the hand and handiwork. It seems that what separates new technologies from old, changes in interactivity and the uprooted feeling many of the aesthetics associated with new media and related objects have, is that the scale of the hand, and presence of the hand becomes close to irrelevant. It makes you wonder where we are headed when we take steps in the direction of artificial intelligence and delocate the hand. The limitations of the hand and mind that existed and that have shaped our environment for so long have undergone major shifts with automated manufacturing and computers to process expanded problems quickly.

And while sometimes it feels like at some point in the near future chairs will be left behind, I think that is still pretty unlikely. My guess is we won't turn into bodiless digital plasma and enter the machine anytime soon. We are stuck with our bodies and simple minds which poses the issue

of how these new technologies that no longer rely on them will continue to relate to them.

I think one of the reasons I like art is that for the most part the mind, hand, body problem still exists all the way across the board, and like the explicitly cultural chair it has a way of representing changes in form without them being lost in the execution of the thing.

I don't see representation as historical but rather perceptual, the historical aspect exists only as a mix of experiences (personal and media based) that is one of many things building our perception, and of course our ability to project. I do think the threshold of something gaining a representation is the threshold of understanding. Once this is crossed the thing is a representation of a kind.

GD

Tomma Abts describes the moment when a painting of hers feels complete comparing it to a birth of a character that becomes alive. It comes back, in my mind, to what you have previously said about visible mechanics and that could be also seen on a larger scale. I've read you saying that your film *Figure 3* was partly meant to be dealing with contemporary art paradigm—could you say few more words here?

PS

Figure 3 came out of my first experience showing in a museum. The curator was working on a big travelling Robert Smithson show while putting together my show and I was astonished at how Smithson's work and mine seemed to be treated so similarly. There seemed to me to be an attempt to present my work in a historical light, to display the work in a museological style as a sort of anthropological view of what I had done. I of course saw my work (a film, *Empire*, and some related things) as an activated current artwork that should exist entirely on it's own, to activate a present-space and face forward only, not drag me into the space or attempt to place me within the museum. The slow unavoidable transformation of my work into a series of artifacts led to my interest in exploring the phenomenon directly, almost dumbly, through a sort of short circuiting of the scenario; if my work is going to be turned into an artifact I might as well make artifacts and show it in a museum and see what kind of resonance this redundancy can create. It also allowed to me to treat the surface aesthetics of the objects a little like pawns, or red herrings, and do my work behind the surface of the object, while allowing the redundancy to structure the ideas behind.

For the last fifteen years or so my work has revolved around what I think it means to make something now, to be an artist now. I feel the pitfall of this is that people sometimes think it's postmodern, or intellectual, but really it's simply something I could not help doing from before even when I was aware of postmodern art, etc. I think there are just ways of communicating that stratify themselves to create a fuller gesture. Rather than just say something, you construct a mechanism that models the things and then maybe says it, or something like it. I like the idea of a strong mechanism that gives a weak statement, to push the perceptual activity deeper into something, and ask the viewer for a bit more. Or perhaps they just miss everything, which of course can be a little thrilling since this parallels how we come across, pass by, pay attention or not pay attention to all other things we come across in our lives. Not all objects need to scream for our attention and understanding.

When I started *Figure 3* I was interested

in making a working method that itself symbolized what I thought it meant to make something now (or then, that was 2005-2008). I noticed that I, and others of course, would use images and information without respect for the authority they previously seemed to have, they could become simply material, almost rootless. It wasn't appropriation, but what the extreme democratization of imagery and ideas across time that a new and easy access to information made possible. In formulating *Figure 3* I likened this change in space from iconic top down information control to equalized information distribution to certain early island cultures in the South Pacific in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, just before colonialization changed the economic and object producing nature of these places.

I had completed my previous film project *Empire* in 2002. In that project Clement Greenberg was the iconic center. The power structure of his position as a critic in New York during a phase of muscular painting, and the western intellectual whiteness he personified seemed to me to weave in and out of ideas of late capitalist ideas of information, power and capital. With *Figure 3* I wanted to make something that was anti-iconic. I was moving from a study of modernism to a study of post-minimalism, or rather the post-minimalist gesture as it relates to the beginning of the loss of the phenomenological relation between the human body and manufacturing. The hand based manipulation of quasi industrial materials by such artists as Richard Serra, Robert Morris, Eva Hesse, etc., seemed to me to be a farewell of sorts, an attempt to reclaim a bodily connection to materials before it was lost forever to the growing autonomization of industrial production. Economically speaking, post-minimalisms aesthetic core, its ephemerality, transmutability, the de-skilled quality of its making, etc., seemed to me to be a backlash against the compact transportability (saleability) of the modernist object.

When considering the South Pacific cultures I was looking at for *Figure 3*, I became fascinated with the point at which a cultural production that had not changed much (or at all) over long periods of time (partially due to the limits of sea travel, available materials, and the geographically reinforced isolationism of islands) came in contact with western trade/value systems. I liked the idea that on the islands, bowls, bags, etc. were made not by specialists, but rather with shared skills by most or all the members of a tribe. When colonial 'explorers' landed on the islands they qualified the utilitarian objects these islanders were making and using as art, a concept alien to the makers. They began to trade western items such as metal buttons, hats, and eventually guns for the curiosities they would bring back to London and other cities to sell or simply collect. Not only transforming former simple utilitarian objects into objects of exchange, but also whetting the islanders appetite and desire for objects outside their manufacturing skill level. When the European private collections of the islanders artifacts went public the form of the modern museum was established.

I wanted the collapsing together of my consumption of images and information and my eventual output as an artist (which I saw as a kind of metaphorical parallel to the new aura of image/information culture, where distinctions between production and consumption begin to break down) to be symbolized structurally within the work, and so I set out to create a certain kind of stasis in my methods of making the piece. I decided I wanted my materials (the conceptually loaded stand-ins for the islanders materials) to reflect the condition

of the importance of the image and replication in general in my cultural milieu. To extend the quality of this stasis I also wanted to place myself in the ambiguous position of both maker and collector in the piece, to inhabit both sides of the original islander producer/colonial collector dichotomy. I wanted to find a way to produce and consume an image at the same time, and to display artworks I made while at the same time displaying the objects I 'collected'. It was important to me that the perimeter of these objects, the found and the made, be coterminous.

I basically extended the range of materials I would use to make the artifacts to those of replication. Sculptural casting techniques, photographic and printing materials, materials common to acts of recording and replicating in the pre-digital anthropological record, gum Arabic and aluminum powder, hydrocal, etc. Similar to my use of pre-digital retouching techniques in drawings to make up the entirety of an image several years prior, I wanted the objects I was making to be made up of materials of the reconstitution, recording, and dissemination of anthropological information. As a sort of game I misused many of these materials, such as mixing printing ink into hydrocal, or mixing aluminum powder and gum Arabic to make casts. This conceptualized material play, a replacement of the material activation of post-minimalism with a self-consciously photographic/replicating array of materials, was extended to the processes in which these materials were used. I made forms for vessels out of the hydrocal (used to replicate objects and imprints in the field in anthropological study) and then mixed printing ink into more hydrocal and covered the form. I hammered the shell of cured material off and put the parts of the vessels back together, which made for a vessel that looked like the historical ones I had seen, made of reconstituted shards, but whose process had been formative rather than one of recovery. Two paths to the same formal end. There were other symbolic processes involved, such as making 'carrying straps' out of paper and covering them with a white fire retardant paint. I used a blow torch to burn the paper on the inside away so I was left with the paint shell, which I then filmed. Part of the idea here was that a process similar to chemical photographic developing was used to make the type of highly photographable object I was after, and it was just the vestiges of the object that was left over to be pulled into the next step on the path to the viewer, the 16mm film frame. I liked the idea that all these binary physical processes would create a sort of concrete chain to the viewer, and each link in the line could be loaded with some kind of information.

I ended up filming the objects I made very simply, a simple display, itself like an exhibition or a slideshow, of my collection of objects that could be at once both the self-made utilitarian objects of an anachronistic pan-geographic individual, and at the same time simply a display of the prized objects of a collector of artifacts. 16mm film was well suited to this for the concrete binary aspect of it, and how it establishes a kind of perfectly ambiguous space for the contemplation of objects, where something can be two or more things at once without dissonance.

GD

I try to imagine your studio throughout time. From the very first project you were working on, to something you are doing now, it seems like it had to become parts of the places, problems and images we find in your work. Did you change studios over time? And how does it feel to start something new, when something is finished? I remember that in one of the last

images of your *Anticultural Positions* film a fragment of your studio table changes, in a kind of animated zoom-out, from a fragment to a table seen in a room, as though you become aware of the place for the first time!

PS

So far I have changed studios for every larger project I've made. My first film, made in 1997-1998, I worked on while I was at UCLA in a very small studio given to me by the school. The program was not very academic and it felt more like a residency with lots of freedom and very little or no direction provided by the professors, which I liked very much. I used parts of my home and local environment to develop the piece. My small backyard was for a while a parallel workspace that informed what happened in the studio. I guess this is common for me, a pendant space to whichever one I'm working in that informs the otherwise somewhat sterile space of the studio.

With *Empire*, my next film-based project, which took me from 1998 through 2002, I was working in the large living room of my Hollywood apartment, a large half-timber triplex. The building was originally built as costume ateliers in the 1920s for Paramount pictures, and was strange for how large the main room was with very high ceilings and nice large south facing windows. Next door to me was a Chinese photographer in his 80s who had known Moholy-Nagy and would tell me about his color multiple exposures which sat unseen under old newspapers and magazines in his apartment. He was slowly going blind but still took pictures, he just got a camera with auto focus and auto exposure. He was proud that Bela Lugosi had once lived in his apartment and would occasionally bring out an interior design magazine it had been featured in at that time, along with the Moholy-Nagy books with his name and photographs in them. In 1998, after my previous film, and since I never studied film or photography, I became interested in exploring the photographic material structuralism of the early avant-gardes as a way of further articulating a layered armature for my work, a way to insert information in the container. I suppose eventually looking through the old prints and negatives of my neighbor and hearing stories about Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy may have been an influence, if not a bit of strange coincidence. The entombed quality of my neighbors work also led me to be very aware of my interest in using the matrix of aesthetics associated with the photographic avant-garde as a sort dead language, calcified building blocks to be put in new positions and given new meanings. *Empire* was partially meant to be 'in memorium' of all the avant-garde aesthetics I was using. I was trying to point towards the complexity, position, and form of new mediums using the lexicon of these clichés that become so empty they can be reloaded and contain their original meaning plus whichever new one their repositioning makes possible. Living and working next to someone who had been a part of this early photo-based avant-garde made very clear the impossibility of its dumb repeatability in the present and also fed my interest in the dusty patina of irreverence.

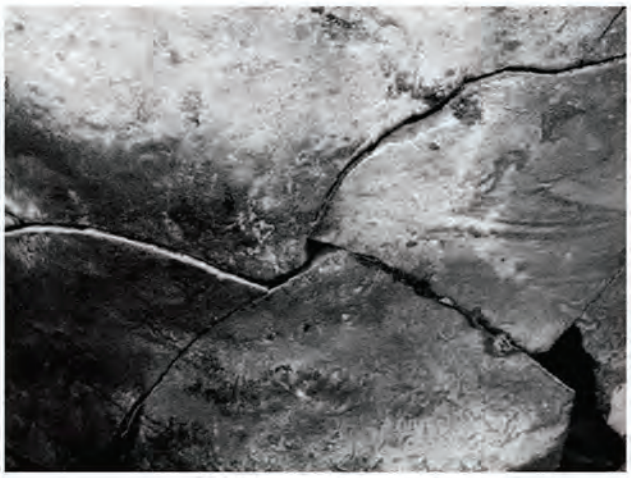
With *Figure 3*, which I worked on roughly from 2003-2008, I again moved my studio, this time to an upstairs space further east in Los Angeles. It was a smallish office with many small rooms in it. I took out the walls and had to put large beams in the floor and ceiling. From the street my space is one flight of stairs up, but when I had an engineer look at the structure of the building I found out it was 5 stories tall, lower in the back (it is on a small hill) and two levels below ground. The building is quite

old by LA standards and was not very well built, most of the columns down below were shifting out of place and so had extra constructions attached, jerry-rigged, the old wood and exposed structures made the whole thing feel like a ship. Putting in the very long beams (30-40 feet?) also made me think of ships, and I began to think of my studio not only a site of production and display, but as a cargo ship's hull as well. This was a nice fit with my thinking about *Figure 3* and the early colonialist explorers in the South Pacific. I installed evenly spaced fluorescent lights on the low ceilings and blocked the windows out, put together special tripods that would hold my cameras horizontally, parallel to the floor of the studio. My studio felt a little bit like a scanner, or the inside of a camera, and I liked the idea of scanning/recording the objects here, in this big apparatus. The low ceilings and even lighting, the lack of daylight to let me know the hour, together created a kind of flattened timelessness that I enjoyed, as if I was taking myself out of space and time to make the piece.

When it comes to my projects, for better or worse, I don't feel like I am ever starting anything new. Ideas slowly take workable form over years and by the time I'm actually starting something it has so many roots going back 2, 4, and sometimes 10 or more years that I always feel like I'm just finally getting around to working on something. Of course there is always the aspect of the work when it is finally being made of being dropped into a specific environment (whatever the current one is) with different ways it can synthesize itself, embed itself, react, etc. I think part of the reason I have taken certain amounts of time with my work is to create drift in the temporal context of the things making. Rather than my methods taking a long time and so the piece taking a long time, I think it's more a meeting in the middle kind of situation; I think my methods are partially to keep my hands and head busy while the right temporality is laid out, the right amount of attachment and abandonment achieved, and the right amount of time to let the piece settle a bit more, packing down the sediment, creating a harder surface for the ideas, and producing maybe a bit more invisibility.

Spaces contain the remnants of ideas and actions, memories infest a place. *Anticultural Positions* was my way of taking the work tables (and all the marks, all the material accretions) I had been making work on for over ten years (all my major projects!) and hand them over to an alternative history, to finally get rid of those memories. I still use the tables, but I can't see them anymore.

MOUSSE



Paul Sietsema, *Figure 3*, 2008
Regen Projects, Los Angeles

DIG FOREVER AND NEVER IT BOTTOM

by Andrew Berardini

In his 16mm film Empire, Paul Sietsema juxtaposed the formalist realm of Clement Greenberg's living room with the gilded, faceted giddiness of an 19th-century salon, skillfully plying tricks of scale to lead the viewer into a limbo of spatial uncertainties. In Figure 3, presented at the last Berlin Biennial, the artist once again confounds his audience by making replicas of anthropological artifacts out of pure papier-mâché. Andrew Berardini met up with one of LA's most mysterious and intriguing artists, who doesn't seem overly concerned with sunny California, but rather with revealing, through completely self-produced films – extremely elegant and packed with references – the power of cliches...

Perched above a gay porn and magazine shop on Sunset Blvd, the studio of Los Angeles based-artist Paul Sietsema embodies an elegant, intellectual helter-skelter: layered in every corner splattered all over the floor, reaching in every direction. The mess of Raskolnikov before he had to hawk his books or like a sheet of baroque music for those who can't read notes, a jumbled mess that you know, intuitively, makes sense to someone, just not you: books stacked on books, spread in toppling towers all over the room, originally a cubicle farm with hardwood floors, now a one-man think tank and film studio. The work of Sietsema in practice if not appearance has a simple elegance, but when opened up and explored however, the work is almost bottomless, rife with ambiguity and endless bifurcations, always chasing after elusive meanings and histories. A rigorous roaring machine of intricate cogs and refined parts till something that started with colonial traders exploring the South Pacific ends in the foyer of the MoMa, stopping in on the experimentations of the avantgarde, iconography, seventeenth century knick-knack cabinets, capitalism, and Clement Greenberg's living room, though perhaps not exactly in that order.

Berardini, Andrew. "Dig forever and never it bottom." *Mousse* 16, December 2008, pp. 26–29.

What are you working on these days?
I basically make these film projects. I've made three so far and this is what I usually end up showing.

I saw one in Berlin, at the Biennial.
That was the last major thing. The shows that are coming up at MoMA and Reina Sofia are basically that film and some drawings. I spend a quite a while working on projects. I've been doing this since the late 90s. There's usually this umbrella, which are the films, and then there's usually a sculptural activity. There are two or three years of, not necessarily research, but deciding what I'm going to do. Then there's the making of the film, which I do myself. It's extremely small-scale production. I make drawings while I'm doing that also because the sculptural activity and the films are pretty consuming, and I like to expand the way I'm working by bouncing ideas off other mediums. Except for painting I basically use every medium possible.

So what kind of sculptures are you doing for the films?
There are a couple here. I started making twenty or twenty-two different types of artifacts in 2002, when my work on Figure 3 basically began. This one here stopped half way through. With it I was looking for a material that I could put on wet and build up, sculpt it based on a photograph. If light hits it the right way, it turns into this very realistic looking thing. Everything is built to be lit and shot on film. It's basically paper-mâché but I'm using printing ink; a lot of this was about going through books, so I was mixing printing ink into everything. Drawing too. All basically using the same ink. These are not in the film these are things I basically ditched halfway through, and I still don't know what I'm going to do with them yet.

Paul Sietsema, *Figure 3*, 2008
courtesy: Regen Projects, Los Angeles

And the ones that were in the film?
Most of those are destroyed in the making, which is something that I've been moving towards. For the last project that I did, which was called Empire, the last film, I basically made these sculptures of rooms.

I remember, Clement Greenberg's was one of them.
I made them out of such cheap materials that they're basically eating themselves alive. I don't want to call them trash, but it's like the stuff here in the studio. It's nothing that's meant to last and it never was. Except that when the thing was done, I'd put two years into a couple of these and I just didn't really want to destroy them. It just seemed like this extremely dramatic gesture. Why do that? Then museums stepped in and said, we'll take these off your hands. So I said, hey, why not?

It must be a nightmare to try and conserve them.
The problem is that at the time I never wanted those to be shown anywhere. I had a show at the Whitney and the curators, maybe partly because they'd taken one into their collection, decided that they wanted to show them. It became this argument. I was thinking well, absolutely not, it's not the art. If you look at the film, those are irrelevant. I sort of thought these things would eat themselves and they're so difficult to put back together, they are basically flattened out and it takes eight people about three weeks to put them back together. But they've already done it twice; the sculpture of Clement Greenberg's living room is back up in New York now. It was the Whitney wanting to show those things and they owned them so I couldn't say no. So it was either cancel the show or work with the curators, and this was 2003 and was my first museum show...

Berardini, Andrew. "Dig forever and never it bottom." *Mousse* 16, December 2008, pp. 26–29.

No, you probably shouldn't do that.
No, it's a terrible thing to do. But they did switch where they were showing things. I was able to show the film in the main space and to show the other things elsewhere in the museum. But they basically took this anthropological view of my work... The curator that did my show was also working on the Robert Smithson show at the same time which was coming up and of course with somebody like him, it was like everything he'd done laid open, an anthropological view of what he did. He's no longer around, that kind of a view of him makes more sense, that's fine. But it was my first museum show. And I was thinking don't treat me like that, don't treat me like someone you need the background story on. This is my first show, maybe nobody will care. So why do that? Just let the art be itself.

But the question is difficult, such as could you show a sketchbook?
As an artist working today, you take a lot in and put a lot out. But it's not the abstract expressionists simply throwing paint around. Now there's so much consumption of culture and images that goes into the making of the work that the directionality of production is really mixed and unimportant, which led me, in 2001 and 2002 when I started this project, Figure 3, to think about the anthropological object. Something that I would make as an artist and so is produced at some point by somebody but also collected. It confuses the production/consumption model a little bit. The way I was mixing things in.

Was it a way of looking back to the anonymous handmade object, something not made for mass consumption the way they are now?
The funny thing is, it sort of was. While making Empire, the project that centered around Greenberg, I was very into working with these iconic, logoistic names. For Figure 3 I wanted to make something that was anti-iconic and sort of anti-capitalist. The best model for this was cultures without monetary systems, cultures where skill is spread out over everyone in the culture. So if you need something, if you need a bowl for instance, you have the skills to make it and so you make it yourself. There's no specialization of labor or an economy to reward specialization of labor. So everybody has the same set of skills. In the form of the objects capitalism just isn't there. And capitalism has driven the form of all the objects around us in countries like this for so long that you can't extract it from anything.

But there seems to be some sort of deft critique of museums as storehouses hidden under the quiet elegance of the work?
Part of what I'm doing is about the history of museums. I was looking at the first objects that were collected when the first western ships went around to the different islands in the South pacific. I ended up finding the books with the drawings and photographs of the first things that these "explorers" picked up. To me, these objects symbolized a supposedly pure culture, uncontaminated by trade, which then became capitalism. These objects were the ones that were dragged back to London or Cologne or wherever else and sold off at fairly cheap prices to collectors who wanted knickknacks, and then slowly the shift to cabinets came, and then to publicly viewed cabinets, and then to museums. It's where museums started. That's part of what's wrapped up in the objects I chose.

Paul Sietsema, *Figure 3*, 2008
courtesy: Regen Projects, Los Angeles

But I don't feel like there's an agenda at all pro or anti-capitalist in these works?
No, not at all.

But as an artist you make choices, why do you make these set of choices over another?
Part of it in Figure 3 is that I didn't want the overwhelming noise of the iconic figure in the piece because that's what I'd done with Empire and after I'd done it, things shifted into other artists doing it a lot. Key iconic elements in conceptual structures, the logo was all over the place. When

something becomes that prevalent it will usually push me in another direction. It was also a test to see how much does art participate in the world. How important is logo? How much is the fact you have an iconic production important in the art world and how does this compare to the world of consumer products? It was also a test for to myself as well. What would happen if I put out these things that didn't have iconic names that you couldn't easily attach journalism or historical location to? I'm interested in the cliché image that these things put forth, what you might get out of them when you're looking at them. A lot of what I do is trying to choose subjects that are basically invisible things you can see through. There is not quite enough there to satisfy you, so you look for something else, so maybe instead you look for what happens between things or why these things are connected together. With Greenberg's room, the way it's shown in the film, it's not really very meaty, not so gratifying visually, so you're always pushed to conceptual levels.

Just to address something that I've found in a lot of your work and in this talk, I can't help but feel like you have an unusual relationship to research.
There's something about the information being shaped. If I research something, I'll set it aside for a year or two before I'll do work with anything that has to do with it. Because there's this natural selection process. If you do it right away you have no idea what you want to take from your investigation and what you don't, you'll just replicate it.

When someone waltzes into the gallery what kind of experience do you want them to have? Because it's not likely that the average person is going to be an expert, especially on all the things we've been talking about?
For the most part, I think I choose fairly simple things that they'll be looking at. Most of the objects in the film are fairly simple objects. They're something that people will have some sort of familiarity with. When I look through everything, all the material, all the images, there's something about the commonness of an image I'm looking for, which had something to do with Greenberg's room. I was looking through a lot of images of rooms with paintings in them, rooms of different artists, collectors, critics from the time. And beyond his collection of ideas, Greenberg's room was the most iconic. It seemed to stand for all of them. Every other one was twisted in some direction that seemed to lead away from the aura I wanted to project, but his was the one that could take the place of all the others.

The platonic form? (Laughter)
Yeah, which I kind of like. It's what happens in advertising, it's what happens in design. You look for the thing that's going to erase everything else, and take it over, which lessens the importance of certain information because you're putting forward something that takes the place of familiarity with the viewer. Even though my relationship with it is specific, it has to do with my wanting the project to have (though this is not really something I think about too much while working) an internal system of some kind; it just makes more sense on the outside. I've always been interested in the virtual. If I replace these existing systems with something that's extremely thorough, you could basically dig forever and never hit the bottom.

Paul Sietsema, *Figure 3*, 2008
Regen Projects, Los Angeles

Berardini, Andrew. "Dig forever and never it bottom." *Mousse* 16, December 2008, pp. 26–29.

modernpainters

NEW YORK

Paul Sietsema

Matthew Marks Gallery // May 7–July 1

OUR LIVES ARE a jog through veil upon veil of illusion. Megascreen billboards, altered news photos, political hallucinations played out on 3-D televisions—reality has become so virtual it's no surprise that numerous artists are pushing back with their own deceptive surfaces. Encountering Paul Sietsema's bewitching show, for instance, one is led to ask: What am I looking at? A framed sheet of what seems to be photographic paper, creased and perhaps exposed yet imageless, is paired with a similarly framed and creased photograph of a yawl at sea. Later one finds a series of photograms and, apparently, some messy silkscreens and a monochromatic abstraction. The work is disparate enough that one ponders what could possibly be uniting it all. It's not until one comes upon *Untitled figure ground study (facing German suffering)*, 2011, that an answer suggests itself. The piece looks like a notebook, a pen, a roll of tape, and the top of a paint can all doused in gray pigment and affixed to a sheet of newspaper that has been framed and hung on the wall. Closer inspection, however, reveals the newspaper to be an elaborate drawing, each letter, design element, and photograph meticulously rendered in ink. Soon one realizes that all the pieces are actually drawings masquerading as something else: a photograph, photogram, or collage. Sietsema leads an expanding wedge of trompe l'oeil artists that includes Tauba Auerbach, Heather Cook, and Marc Handelman. Although trompe l'oeil asks viewers to stop and contemplate the hoaxes perpetrated by their minds, Sietsema's versions here are especially attuned to the niceties of representation. To create the composition for *Painter's Mussel 2*, 2010, the artist opened a frame with a hammer and chisel and removed the photograph it contained. The elements involved in this procedure—frame, glass, photo, matte, hammer, chisel—were painted with a resist medium, placed on a sheet of paper, and sprayed with black ink. Sietsema then removed the elements to disclose an image suggesting a photogram. The picture of the boat, too, is actually an ink drawing posing as a photograph. The 14 works in the show are not only astonishingly accomplished teases; they also remind us how forcefully belief pulls us through our visual landscape—the belief that what our eyes report is accurate and what we see in fact exists. That said, the seductions of Sietsema's work are no mirage. **—Daniel Kunitz**

Kunitz, Daniel. "Paul Sietsema." *Modern Painters*, September 2011, p. 90.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

Art in America

Collection 2, 2009, Dust and enamel on paper in artist's frame, 40 x 26 inches; 102 x 66 cm

Photo Finish: Q+A With Paul Sietsema

by Aimee Walleston

Paul Sietsema's solo exhibition of sculpture, films and drawings at MoMA last year was organized by the museum's department of drawings. Indeed, the artist's dexterity as a draftsman—evident in a current show of exquisitely complex drawings and paintings at Matthew Marks—is remarkable. But while Sietsema can make trompe l'oeil images to rival the "perfect" naturalism of photographs, his intention is to excavate sites of image production.

Perfection in each mark reveals not simply a craftsman's talent, but the contemporary terms of artistic creation and image reproduction. What does it mean for a human hand to painstakingly reproduce an image that could be more economically rendered by a color printer?

In a 16mm film work from early in this decade, *Empire* (2002), the artist compared American critic Clement Greenberg's apartment to an

Walleston, Aimee. "Photo Finish: Q+A With Paul Sietsema." *Art in America*, May 13, 2011.

18th-century rococo dwelling, constructing miniature models of each environment and filming a tour through each—à la Robin Leach's "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous." The piece shows the roots of Sietsema's interrogative odes to art-making and art culture, and his methodical devotion to minute detail. His newer work—including photo-perfect ink drawings of the front and back of a photograph of a boat (*Boat Drawing*, 2010) and enamel paintings on paper of various museum coat check plaques (*Collection 3*, 2010)—is equally inquisitive but far less straightforwardly diagrammatical. *A.i.A.* speaks to Sietsema about the escalating intricacies of his current work.

AIMEE WALLESTON: The content of your ink drawing, *Painter's Mussel 4* (2011), is a framed photograph pried apart—suggesting an aggressive rejection of photography. By producing, by hand, images so technically perfect as to confound the viewer into believing a human made them, are you are trying to beat printers and photographic techniques at their own game?

PAUL SIETSEMA: I see hand- and machine-made things as existing in a continuum; one is not better or inherently more interesting than the other. Who made the machines, anyway? I guess much of my work is developing the right machine, the right process, in order to make the work. And if I confuse what a hand or what a machine should be doing, or thinking, maybe something will come out of that.

I guess my feeling about hand versus machine is ambivalence-which is probably how the machine feels about it, too.

WALLESTON: In *Boat Drawing* (2010), you copy the front and back of a photograph of a boat, replicating in ink the aging and crumpling of photographic paper. It's almost as though these effects were equal to, or perhaps more important than, the actual content of the image—the boat, people, waves and so forth.

SIETSEMA: *Boat Drawing* was built up in layers, with equal attention paid to every small piece of real estate, so the equalizing of the paper the boat is on with the boat itself is pretty inevitable. I was interested in layering or couching various aspects of different mediums. I use watery acrylic inks, and I like the parallel of the brush in ink and the boat in water. I like the match-up of the flat white topographical field of the sails, the portrayed photograph and the paper the drawing is on. So it's a boat captured in the ocean, captured in a photograph, the photograph captured in photographic paper, and the photographic paper captured in the paper of the drawing. The overall combine of esthetics ends up consisting of the residual physical aspects of each.

Eight or ten years ago I remember watching one of the *Star Wars* movies that had just come out, and noticing that Lucas had decided that in order for computer generated images to look right, he needed to add back the errant, random, unseemly aspects of materials. Robots needed dust and rust and dents to look right. These formal qualities were a natural byproduct of [traditional] photography, but this aspect of [traditional] photography and objects had to be reproduced in a newer [digital] medium.

With the boat I like the way the antiquated layers intersect with the antiquated image of sea travel. On the boat, one of the figures is waving-maybe as a farewell to photography?

WALLESTON: The two *Untitled ink drawings* (2011) are both completely abstraction-one is a dark abyss that gives the illusion of refracting light, the other a light square edged with blotches. What are you trying to say about working with ink?

SIETSEMA: I wanted to make images of ink. Maybe one way to think of them is as homage. The larger one would be an homage to the brush, the smaller and lighter one to the hand. I suppose it's a way for the materiality of the ink to take center stage, along with its delivery device.

When I was making these I also liked to think of them as portals: the larger and darker one as an actual portal, a kind of dark cave, the smaller and lighter one as an image of a portal (the shape made positive with finger and hand prints). I originally put the darker one next to the doorway into the gallery, but that seemed a little too literal or maybe redundant. Where it is now, across from the entry, I like to think of walking straight ahead (bypassing the show) and into the drawing, into whatever is across its threshold—which in this case wouldn't necessarily just be Metro Pictures, the gallery next door.

WALLESTON: You've made two enamel drawings based on the plaques you received from museum coat checks around the world, *Collection 2* (2009) and *Collection 3* (2010). They recall passports plastered with travel stamps-a traveler's memento. Was that the point?

SIETSEMA: When I was in New York in 2002 in preparation for my show at the Whitney I had a large parka with me. I wasn't so familiar

with the weather in New York, and fearing an un-Californian climate I wore the parka for a meeting with my curator at the museum. I checked the coat and got a nice little plastic plaque with a number on it in return. It had become far too warm for the parka by the time I was leaving the museum so I decided I'd leave the jacket at the Whitney and come back for it later. I ended up uptown past the Whitney's closing time and had a plane to catch back to LA early the next morning. There was no point trying to get the coat back and I didn't really feel like the little plaque was such a bad trade.

I realized that as a matter of fact I felt pretty good that something of mine, even if it was just a coat, was now in the collection of the Whitney, even if that meant, in this case, that it was just in the building. I began to leave personal belongings in coat checks at other museums and began to assemble my collection of plaques. My drawings of them are my way of showing different parts of this collection.

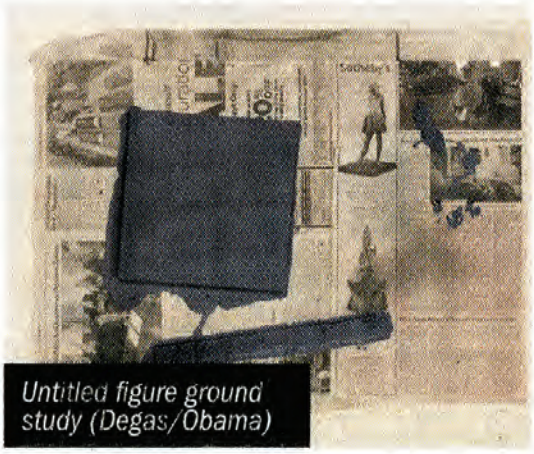
Walleston, Aimee. "Photo Finish: Q+A With Paul Sietsema." *Art in America*, May 13, 2011.

Time Out New York

Paul Sietsema

★★★½☆

Matthew Marks Gallery, through July 1 (see Chelsea)



Untitled figure ground study (Degas/Obama)

Were it not for the image of a schooner near the doorway to Paul Sietsema's New York solo debut, it'd be easy to miss the boat on this Los Angeles artist's work. Not-quite-right details reveal that what looks at first like an old photo is in fact a meticulous painting on paper, complete with the effects (stains, wrinkles) of aging. Throughout this restrained if stimulating exhibition, Sietsema reveals evidence of his hand in pieces that appear printed or reproduced, questioning his role as a craftsman in the digital age, while demonstrating how painterly skill adds value and interest to an artwork.

In the past, Sietsema has exhibited films of sculptural objects he created; here, two-dimensional works allow us the intimacy to appreciate his handicraft. Two untitled pieces resembling expressive abstractions in black ink include depictions of Krylon Short Cuts paint bottles, humorously highlighting how Sietsema doesn't cut corners in his labor-intensive process. At the bottom of one rendering, the phrase BROKEN DOWN AND EXPERIMENTAL... BROKEN DOWN BEAUTY speaks to the pleasure of piecing together the artist's deconstructions. In a similar vein, *Painter's Mussel 2* and *Painter's Mussel 4* feature the image of a disassembled framed photograph, painted to resemble a photographic negative.

From the aged "photograph" of the boat to trompe l'oeil images of paint-soaked objects—a notebook, a stirring stick—arranged on pieces of newspaper, Sietsema pits old technology (the paintbrush) against new, and floats an inconclusive if engaging argument that artistic survival means cleverly thwarting expectations.—*Merrily Kerr*

Kerr, Merrily. "Paul Sietsema." *Time Out New York*, June 2 – 6, 2011, p. 41.

ARTFORUM

Paul Sietsema

06.02.11

AUTHOR: JORDAN TROELLER

05.07.11-07.01.11 Matthew Marks Gallery | 523 West 24th Street

The fifteen acrylic ink drawings by Paul Sietsema exhibited here toy with the afterlife of medium-specificity in an age Rosalind Krauss has described as "post-medium." Best known as a filmmaker, in these works Sietsema subjects the medium of painting to the language of photography. Controlled and precise, these paintings seem to be the work of a machine rather than the artist's hand; they resemble large-scale photograms, collages of newsprint, and photographed pools of gray-blue paint. The diptych *Boat drawing*, 2010, renders the front and back of an aged chromogenic print. Watery inks in muted tones reproduce every idiosyncrasy of its absent photographic double, including slight tears and creases in the paper, mold spots, and color-printing imperfections. This trompe l'oeil effect recasts the question of medium in the terms of metaphor, suggesting that painting may speak best in the guise of photography.

Throughout this exhibition, Sietsema transfers the modernist investigation of materials—light, pigment, paper—onto a symbolic register. Several works depict studio tools, such as paint sticks, picture frames, and, in *Untitled (short cuts 2)*, 2010, cans of Krylon Short Cut paint. Yet it is often unclear from looking at these works how such materials were (or were not) used in their production. Elsewhere, in the series "Painters' Mussel," 2011, Sietsema paints photographically: He applies liquid rubber to resist an ink wash, and then lifts the rubber to reveal the white areas of the paper, as if the painting were a photographic negative. Given this symbolic formalism, the main challenge is to identify the role played by iconography of a very different sort: How do the charged newspaper headlines in two works with reproductions from the *New York Times*—the violence on the US-Mexican border, the delayed closing of Guantánamo—relate to the work's self-reflexivity? The connection risks arbitrariness. As a result, the range of possibilities for art can feel increasingly circumscribed in this show. It is hard to know if this is the work's aim or its limitation. Perhaps it is both.

Troeller, Jordan. "Paul Sietsema." *Artforum,* June 11, 2011.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

Art MONTHLY

Art and illusionism

Discussing his installations of stuffed toys from the early 1990s, Mike Kelley remarked on how we customarily 'project into the toys and see them as living things', 'repressing' their object nature. In *Craft Morphology Flow Chart*, 1991, toys were arranged taxonomically on a series of tabletops, as though Kelley were a minimalist let loose on pop material, blocking out the illusion of figuration by making us focus on the quirks and conventions of manufacture. Of *More Love Hours Than Can Ever be Repaid*, 1987 – a dense wall-hanging of home-made dolls – he remarked that 'worth is very much tied to the work ethic, to the wage system, the more hours you spend on a thing, the more love-worth it has'. He jointly implicates commerce and illusionism in art's tendentious creation of value. This 'repression' of the object – which he intended to expose – has become, inversely, a tool artists use to evade consumption, or at least to gain enough distance from it to frame it as a subject. It is a means of exploring how art objects can simultaneously assert and efface themselves, and how their production can be enacted performatively to elude the conditions that would appropriate it. Illusionism has become a means of effecting a critique rather than dodging it.

Paul Sietsema
Empire 2002 film still

Michael Fried's essay 'Art and Objecthood', 1967 – a modernist indictment of minimalist 'theatricality' – describes 'the risk ... of seeing works of art as *nothing more* than objects' (those italics indicating the extent of his consternation), a risk that he claimed modernist painting had faced down by mobilising its 'pictorial essence', in the form of the 'medium of shape'. Minimalism, meanwhile, had willingly succumbed to this mooted threat. Fried never stoops to equate objecthood with object value, but he betrays a note of connoisseurial distaste. Minimalism, for him,

Prince, Mark. "Art and Illusionism." *Art Monthly*, September 2010, pp. 11–14.

Mike Kelley
Craft Morphology Flow Chart 1991

is too profligate with its interactions. He suggests that what distinguishes the minimalist art object – its rejection of pictoriality and the phenomenological engagement it demands of its viewer – is its debasement.

Gabriel Kuri's recent marble sculptures take these terms to a point Fried only intimated by bracketing modernist shape with minimalist objecthood and explicitly associating them both with commerce. Banknotes, till receipts or train tickets separate leaning slabs of marble from each other and from the wall, as if the stones were an over-compensating mechanism for holding the paper in place, or the paper were makeshift wedges to facilitate the spectacle of a Serra-like balancing act. *complementary cornice and intervals*, 2010, has rows of colour-co-ordinated bathroom products ranged along the top of three slabs, transforming them into shelves of high-end interior décor. Their curved corners are signs for classic modernist shape but also elegant design features. The plastic bottles act as fugitive windows onto an everyday world, touchstones in a commercial continuum. They are tokens forcing the monolithic marble to surrender its aloofness, just as the marble raises them to the status and worth of art objects. Kuri's marble sculptures resemble theatre props in a more literal sense than Fried meant. They illustrate the absurd role they have been assigned: to press a bit of paper to the wall or prop up some chic toiletries. Fried defines as 'theatrical' the need for a viewer's active engagement to complete the minimalist sculpture: surely this engagement can be seen as a nascent form of the use we make of a functional product.

Whereas Kuri makes art materials functional, Ariel Schlesinger's *A Car Full of Gas*, 2010, goes the other way, converting an old Mini Cooper from a design commodity to an art object by effectively crippling it as a vehicle. A large Propane gas bottle sits in each of the front seats, with a valve let into one of the passenger windows that emits a tiny lick of flame. The cute little car becomes an image of threat, a potential car bomb or, alternatively, an absurd rocket emitting its take-off fire. Its sculptural reinvention is won at the expense of its functionality as a car or design object. Product value cedes to art value, and the agent of this transformation is illusion. The car is not 'full of gas', but rigged up to appear so, like a stage prop.

With each slab cut to a slightly different shape with different but related appendages, the serialism of Kuri's marble sculptures is its own reflection upon the generic forms of art production. Cheyney Thompson's 'Chronochromes', 2009, translates these forms into a set of parameters for the practice of painting. Installed in a row of canvases of radically varying width but uniform height – dictated by the width of the canvas roll – the paintings appear as standard products in a potentially endless series. Thompson adapts the colour theorist Albert Munsell's system of complementary colours by coding his palette in conjunction with the times of day at which the colours are applied (from white at noon to black at midnight), channelling aesthetic decision-making into a metaphor for shift work, or what Thompson calls 'wage labour'. Installed in a line, the paintings unravel like a delicately printed carpet, fading in and out of visibility as they veer towards the white end of the spectrum. In conceptual terms, however, they are always making themselves invisible: the motif is an enlarged high-contrast image of the weave of the linen canvas support. The paintings are images of their own 'objecthood', an illusion complicated by their superficial resemblance to modernist all-over painterly composition, which, in this context, is a sign for high art with a high value set upon it. Thompson sets up a tautological loop through which the production of value is continually negated. Illusion becomes a means of self-denial.

The traditional still-life genre of *trompe l'oeil* is an ideal vehicle for this abrogation of value, simultaneously concealing and declaring its means, illusory and elusive. It requires a level of skill, and an outlay of labour, that is revealed and disguised according to whether we are taken in by its illusion, or it fails to take us in and

Prince, Mark. "Art and Illusionism." *Art Monthly*, September 2010, pp. 11–14.

Ariel Schlesinger
A Car Full of Gas 2009

therefore betrays its own workings. This 'failure' can be a means of advertising – as an adjunct to the main business in hand – how much labour has been required to achieve the illusion; and labour, of course, is an index of worth. Object value is brought in and out of visibility, and thereby emphasised. Luigi Ghirri's photography uses *trompe l'oeil* illusion to subvert advertising imagery. Subsumed into his own photographs with their alternative agenda, the advert's corrupted appeal is neutralised and redirected. The effect is eerie, bringing the original image back to life, bypassing its commercial claims on us and, by extension, its claims on the mechanisms of art photography. *Lucerna*, 1971, shows a pair of cartoonish dumbells lying in the shallow space of a shop display window. Their chains are threaded through a poster that fills the rest of the window as well as Ghirri's picture, as though they were fastened around the ankles of the woman in the poster who is mounting a cobbled hill. The window display facetiously states the obvious – that the woman, frozen by the camera, is going nowhere. Ghirri's photograph, reactivating the poster's illusion within its own illusionistic space, frees her from the frozen trap of the window display's conceit, and from the shackles of her commercial servitude.

This liberation exploits the ambiguity between the object and the illusion it creates, rather than fixing on either. On first encountering Ugo Rondinone's *still.life* sculptures – installed at Sadie Coles HQ in London last autumn – we might take them for modest assertions of simple objecthood. Walnuts and potatoes were placed at regular intervals along the floor. Branches traced the edges of the floors and walls, like spoofs on site-specific sculpture. The panels of brown cardboard might have been packing material left over from the show's installation. When we realise – possibly, at first, from the press release, as the workmanship is so consummate – that these are highly finished imitations made of bronze-coated lead, perception refocuses. Gently poking the surface of one of the 'cardboard' sculptures, I found its inordinate weight and stiffness as disorientating as landing on a static escalator one expected to be moving. The reference to the traffic of the art business is a clue that this is a means of first appearing to escape production (using the modesty of natural objects as a way of disrupting value) only to proceed to stress it further, when the production's complexity is revealed. Apparently random configurations prove to be the result of laborious construction. The cardboard 'creases' become the delicate surface delineations of monochrome painterly abstraction. Nature is reimagined as artifice, objects as art objects. It is a radical reversal of the convention that the Readymade has become. Alchemically, base materials are converted to precious metals. And yet, peculiarly, despite the increase in weight and worth, the effect is of voiding rather than consolidation. The object represented may be emphasised by its replication, but it is also absent, forcing us to imagine or remember it through the medium of its stand-in. It is not so much that the sculptures are ghostly as that their objecthood is haunted by the illusion they create. We pivot between the object and an illusion of it, between the value accretion of art production and the relative worthlessness of the found objects, so that, unable to settle on either set of terms, each rhetorically negates the other. If value is exponentially created, it is as soon erased.

Nothing is as it seems, which might be the antithesis of Minimalism's 'What you see is what you get' dictum,

Prince, Mark. "Art and Illusionism." *Art Monthly*, September 2010, pp. 11–14.

although, like Minimalism, these objects proceed from a blunt avowal of themselves as nothing but material. The reversal that follows involves an equivalent temporal shift. We are shuttled between the time of production – pragmatically measured as 'wage labour' – to the time of illusion: open-ended and exploratory. Production facilitates this effect then absents itself, like stage hands vanishing into the wings before the action begins. Imaginative time is released from the shell of commodified time. For example, the lengthy gestation of Paul Sietsema's films offers a parallel temporality to their creeping camerawork. Several years are required to produce 20 minutes of film. And yet, we are left with the slow pan of the camera through the models that he and his assistants have built, rather than the painstaking work required to construct them. Time as money, strictly counted out in the present, produces a perceptual time, gauged to contemplatively access the past. Every object that appears in the films is produced within Sietsema's studio, which makes film's fictionalising of reality tautological, necrophilically reanimating what is understood to be inert. The model-making process may describe existing objects, but the resulting films, showing only the models, are hermetically concentrated, rendered indivisible from themselves.

Illusionism might be an embodiment of the process Pierre Bourdieu describes by which art 'disavows the economy' while remaining 'haunted' by 'economic interest'.

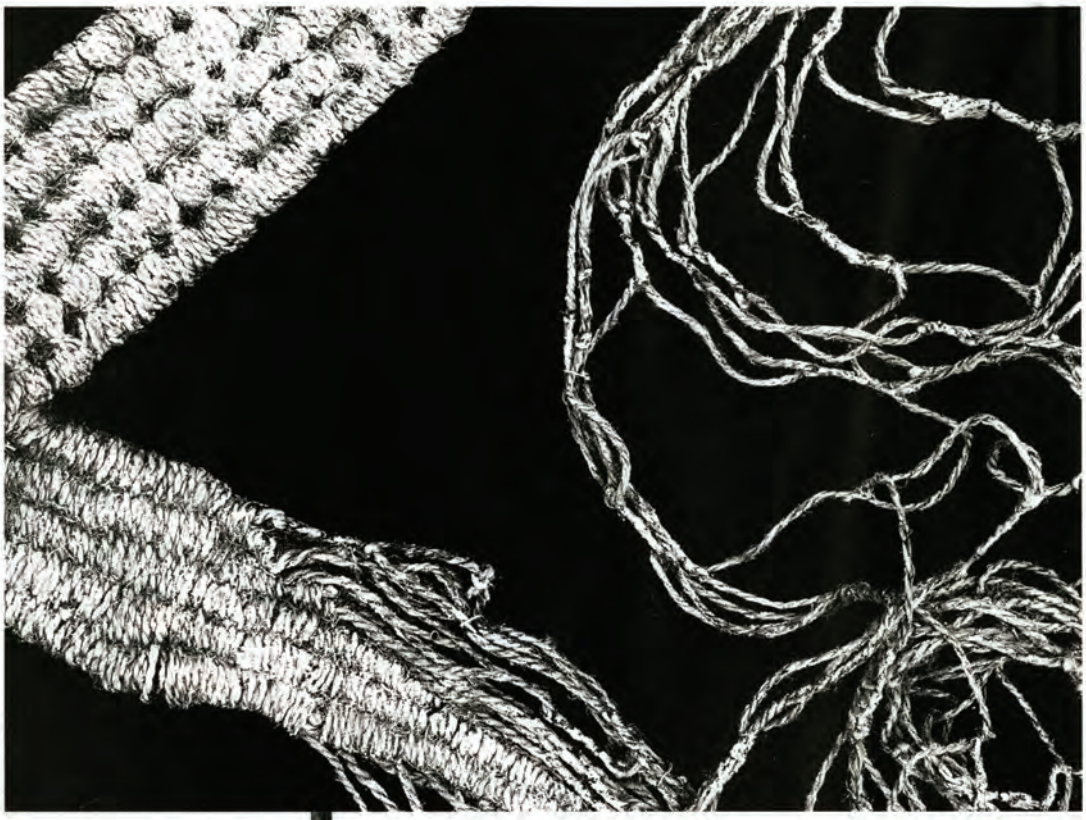
Empire, 2002, has this self-reflecting process meditate on forms of art-historical hermeticism. In two of the sections the camera scrutinises an interior: the first a reconstruction of the New York apartment of the modernist critic Clement Greenberg (based on a photograph that appeared in a 1964 issue of *Vogue*); the second, a Parisian Rococo drawing room, its hexagonal facets inset with mirrors. In the former, the camera repeatedly zooms up to a Barnett Newman zip painting hung over a sideboard displaying books and *objets d'art*; in the Rococo section, it circles around the shards of a chandelier. The spaces Sietsema has chosen to recreate are apexes of the intersection of cultural and economic prowess: a critical crucible of American post-war Abstract Expressionism and an architectural emblem of the excesses of the French *Ancien Régime*. They belong in a distant past. Sietsema stresses this otherness by shooting the models in monochrome negative. The labour required to create a convincing enough illusion of the interiors is a way in which the film measures itself against the economic clout of its subjects. And yet, however fine the verisimilitude, the models are impoverished stand-ins, made of paper, glue and plaster. With its glacial trawl and repeated reorientation of viewpoint, the camera strives to penetrate the remote worlds that the model can only inadequately testify to. Registering this inequality, Sietsema's production becomes critical of itself. Imagination and reminiscence are registered as inefficient, in economic terms, in that they circumvent the object and require no more than a worthless replica to initiate their illusions.

Whereas the Conceptual Art of the late 1960s brought the incommensurability of ideas to bear on an increasingly decadent minimalist objectivity, recent illusionistic art responds to the vicissitudes of the past decade: an ever-expanding art market, a corresponding shift towards object-friendly formalistic practices and a financial crash that has subsequently straitened the flow of commerce. Conceptualism's 'dematerialisation' found a form (or lack of form) for commercial disinterestedness; contemporary artists, however, vacillate between the object and its negation. This is a method of negotiating the market and never a belief that it can be rejected, except rhetorically. Its structural disingenuousness is also its strategic realism. Illusionism might be an embodiment of the process Pierre Bourdieu describes by which art 'disavows the economy' while remaining 'haunted' by 'economic interest', a 'duality' or 'duplicity' which cannot be reduced to either 'disinterestedness' or 'self-interest'. Disinterestedness, of course, can prove to be the surest route to economic success.

Sietsema manages to have it both ways: 'repressing' the objecthood of the models he is filming, along with their production, he slips free of the grip of consumption, while producing a film which buys itself into the economic and cultural capital of the motifs those models represent. And yet the inevitable failure of his tableaux to become their subjects is a symbolic escape from this trope. The work's refusal to allow itself to be synonymous with either of these positions – disbelief or its suspension – is its only possible freedom, what Sietsema calls 'a sustained perceptual becoming'. This escape consists of real space – and the objects that inhabit it – ceding to time, which slips through your fingers. It is like the passage from Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Transparent Things*, 1972, in which a pencil is taken as a cue for an imaginative reconstruction of the history through which it has passed. Nabokov transforms the pencil from dumb object to pregnant illusion. Of course, this narrative is as much a fiction as its context, but it seems as if it belonged to another order of disclosure, signifying the surrounding narrative as a fiction that has been breached, or, vice-versa, signifying the pencil's narrative as a dysfunctional digression from the realism of the story. The novel falls through a temporal trapdoor only to re-emerge when we surface back into the 'present'. Object becomes illusion, space becomes time and, briefly relieved from the demands of function, is free to roam. ▮

MARK PRINCE is an artist and critic based in Berlin.

Prince, Mark. "Art and Illusionism." *Art Monthly*, September 2010, pp. 11–14.



Paul Sietsema
Still from Figure 3
2008
16-millimeter film, black-and-white, silent, approximately 25 minutes

PAUL SIETSEMA

INTERVIEW WITH CARTER MULL

(In thinking of making this interview,) I traveled to Café Stella for mussel's and frites. Delightful, rich, sophisticated, and, for better or for worse, impervious to fleeting analysis. And, with this, the meal was more about the lighting, the atmosphere, the company – the entre was really just the motif that drew me in – its content opening up to the larger context of Stella on a Tuesday night, in all its complexity. With mussels in mind, I can't help but presume that you're familiar with the Broodthaer's text from Pense Beté (1963-64)?

I would hope I could say that it wasn't Broodthaers that started me eating mussels but it just might be. I was not a big fan of Broodthaers or mussels when I visited Belgium on a small excursion from preliminary meetings held in Holland for a largish group show I was to be in in Arnhem in 2000. The curator of the show, who had been a close friend of Broodthaers, told me stories of the two slipping through the windows of the mudrooms that sit in front of the houses in that part of the country, pilfering leftover change from the pockets of coats left there by residents who were going on about their lives beyond the next threshold. I was given a tour of the storage room of the museum in Ghent the curator was in charge of, the only manifest of the (literally) dusty objects being the one in his head. He showed me all the Broodthaers he had, describing the works mostly in terms of his relationship to Broodthaers, the works taking on the quality of lent books or traded cards. I remember being embarrassed by the poetic quality of the work, the artsy patina. Not having travelled much at that point I associated the aesthetic with Café Stella, which had just opened in Los Angeles, and whose owner, interior, and waitstaff had all just been imported from France. It took me a little while, getting a feel for Belgian culture, hearing more stories about the curators locally notorious artist friend, to start to understand that there was something far more mischievous about the aesthetics of Broodthaers works. The style and patina, rather than something merely to be swallowed quickly on the way to meaning, was in fact a small world of critique built of various

Mull, Carter. "Paul Sietsema." *Marcel,* no. 3, September 2010, pp. 1–2, 6–9.

overly poetic clichéd aesthetics. When Broodthaers mentions the idea of making 'insincere objects' as having started him on the road to making art rather than writing poetry (his poetry having been a sort of anti-poetry to begin with), I don't believe he's merely talking about the idea of the economy or commerce of the art world becoming a part of his creative production (although this is certainly part of it) or the other sometimes mentioned idea of the supposed virtuous quality of the written word versus the world of images with its danger of suspicious aesthetic enticements; insincerities (although I do think this plays a role also). I think he is also referring to the multi-valenced quality that swathing ideas in physical form (rather than words alone) can lead to: That types of activation or meaning, specifically balanced ambiguities, can be used to form these outer layers that are necessarily present in objects and images, much like the shell of a mussel. The shell, as he says, is something the mussel casts itself, a form at once its own but of course shared in the anonymity of related nearly identical forms throughout the ocean. Broodthaers plays on this in his poetry, activating the nearly identical word forms of 'mussel' and 'mold' in French, highlighting the crossover of the idea of reproduction and identity. In Pense Bete, a series of short poems appropriated from La Fontaine's "Fables", he alludes to words polished to the point of becoming "like diamonds"; of hermeticism and secrecy. In the text there is a point at which the appropriated fables are pared and altered to a degree that just barely balances word transformed to object, hardened like diamonds, between non-meaning and an open ended ambiguity that allows for a kind of perceptual habitation, a sort of loadable cliché; a shell that casts itself.

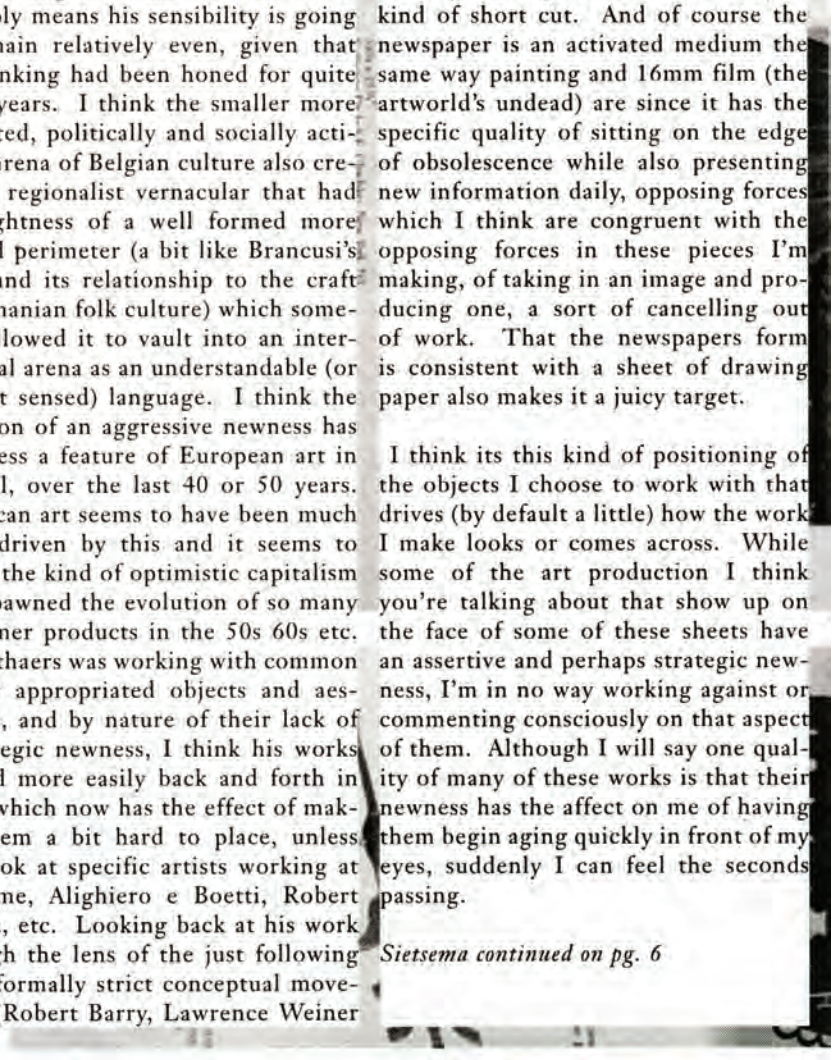
Its interesting – this sense of habitation resulting from a play between non-meaning and open endedness that somehow allows for Broodthaers work to float in its own context, having relationships to works produced at the same time, yet allowing for his practice to seem singular, despite. Your works of the last couple years, produced in Los Angeles, more or less across the street, and worlds apart from this simulation of a bistro spoken above, seem to levitate on their own. I often thought that Empire broke open a resurgent interest in a new way of addressing big M modernism, and the project seemed to be ahead of the curve by a year or two... The more recent drawings stem from New York Times stock pages and art review sections complete with auction house advertising, and studio paint marks, among other things. These drawings play into conversations around the production of artworks that consider the exhibitions as fiduciary space. Yet your work has such a different look from these other productions-! This again, seems to give you distance, or allow the work to float in its own context. With all this in mind, I can't help but wonder if you think of part of your practice as having a metadiscursive relationship to the conversations happening in the art world during your multi-year project production periods?

It's hard I think to get a handle on how much Broodthaers' works floated in their own contexts, how separate they seemed at the time. I think that part of what makes them singular looking back is that he had a consistent position that generated the works, and that starting to make artworks at 40 probably means his sensibility is going to remain relatively even, given that his thinking had been honed for quite a few years. I think the smaller more separated, politically and socially activated arena of Belgian culture also created a regionalist vernacular that had the tightness of a well formed more refined perimeter (a bit like Brancusi's work and its relationship to the craft of Romanian folk culture) which somehow allowed it to vault into an international arena as an understandable (or at least sensed) language. I think the assertion of an aggressive newness has been less a feature of European art in general, over the last 40 or 50 years. American art seems to have been much more driven by this and it seems to match the kind of optimistic capitalism that spawned the evolution of so many consumer products in the 50s 60s etc. Broodthaers was working with common mostly appropriated objects and aesthetics, and by nature of their lack of a strategic newness, I think his works slipped more easily back and forth in time, which now has the effect of making them a bit hard to place, unless you look at specific artists working at the time, Alighiero e Boetti, Robert Filliou, etc. Looking back at his work through the lens of the just following more formally strict conceptual movement (Robert Barry, Lawrence Weiner etc) Broodthaers and his peers come across as variations of romantic conceptual formalists. But of course if one were to look forward from Yves Klein, Lucio Fontana, Piero Manzoni and others just preceding him, the work looks a little less romantic, and much less formalist. This kind of game, contextualizing work, aesthetics, quickly becomes more and more cumbersome as things multiply and extra works, artists, and swaths of time become implicated and carried along. This kind of thing, the embeddedness of moments in different types of contexts is part of what drove my interest in the newspaper drawings. A sheet of newspaper, with its mix of different types of imagery and text, creates discreet fields of somewhat randomly attached pieces of information, sort of like a core sample, or a variation on an online search-a contextualizing perimeter of a certain kind.

It is a cliché that artworks fix a moment in time, I liked how the newspaper pages are a sort of dumb (although not entirely) surrogate for this activity, a kind of short cut. And of course the newspaper is an activated medium the same way painting and 16mm film (the artworld's undead) are since it has the specific quality of sitting on the edge of obsolescence while also presenting new information daily, opposing forces which I think are congruent with the opposing forces in these pieces I'm making, of taking in an image and producing one, a sort of cancelling out of work. That the newspapers form is consistent with a sheet of drawing paper also makes it a juicy target.

I think its this kind of positioning of the objects I choose to work with that drives (by default a little) how the work I make looks or comes across. While some of the art production I think you're talking about that show up on the face of some of these sheets have an assertive and perhaps strategic newness, I'm in no way working against or commenting consciously on that aspect of them. Although I will say one quality of many of these works is that their newness has the affect on me of having them begin aging quickly in front of my eyes, suddenly I can feel the seconds passing.

Sietsema continued on pg. 6



Mull, Carter. "Paul Sietsema." *Marcel,* no. 3, September 2010, pp. 1–2, 6–9.

I like things sometimes to have the quality of stretching backward and forward in time, being a bit untethered from a tight chronology, which I think can activate them a bit more as critical objects, place them in the category of being more of a surrogate artwork, which might relate to your thinking the works have the quality of being more a conversation about a conversation, although I don't think that's quite right.

How did the drawing work from the early 2000's evolve from compounding intense amounts of information into a single drawing, to making drawings of or from the newspaper and other selected sources (circa the last few years)?

The drawings made during 'Empire', which span the years 1999-2003 roughly, had a different relationship to the overall project than did the drawings made during 'Figure 3'. They were for the most part used to push the thinking of the piece, to open and develop and certain kind of headspace. They contained quite a bit of copied text, some of it from Greenbergs's writings, but a lot of it from magazine and newspaper articles. I was developing a sort of virtual/cookbook relationship to avant-garde methods and aesthetics, and I liked how re-writing texts allowed me to both consume and produce something at the same time.

One of the newspaper articles I copied was about taxi drivers acquiring 'The Knowledge' in London. (often the subject of spatial memory studies by neuroscientists, The Knowledge which was initiated in 1865, is the complex mental map of London all Black Cab drivers must construct before they are awarded a livery license.) The story, which dates from 2000 or 2001, was painted onto strips of paper and glued down as part of a large drawing called 'Taxi Drawing' that I started in 2002 and finished in 2003. I liked the congruity with my mapping of a conceptual/procedural framework in Empire, and also the contextual social 'found' field of aesthetics etc that was carried along with it. In 2004 I used the image of this clipping in the catalog for a show at Moma Oxford (an hour outside of London.) In a drawing from 2000, 2001 I painted in ink a Newspaper clipping from 1998 or 1999. It was an image of Rick Rubin with a quote about musicians writing their own songs or not. I was thinking about the little web of authorship, anonymity, copying, originality, and distribution this micro-cultural shard spun for me. I made a larger version of this clipping in 2008, showing the back this time to extend its quality as cultural chronological core sample. The back featured Ricky Martin and lists his nominations for Best Pop Album of the year, Top vocal performance, Song of the year etc. Ricky Martin's media splash coincided with the first experiences I had being in magazines, and he was featured in some of the same ones I was in 1999, which struck me as somehow very indicative of the magazine industry, and reached it's height with him on the cover of the issue of Interview magazine I was in that year; the 'Hot Sauce' issue.

As my thinking evolved between Empire and Figure 3 I became interested in exploring formal/material congruities

Between my drawings and structural/ physical activities in the film projects, and so shifted more to methods of reproduction (and object as shard) rather than the construction of a conceptual armature or framework.

The Newspaper drawings I think diagram my position (which I think of as a kind of non-position also). I tend to collect things in my studio and regardless of their size, every three months or so I can no longer move freely through the space and things must be thrown out. This process of elimination, what to keep what to throw away, is of course a sort of extensive editing process that shapes the environment of my studio and so the work I make in it, it patterns my relationship to the material I am using or thinking about. Around 1999-2000 I started collecting various newspaper pages, putting parts of them in my drawings, and as I began archiving my own press clippings the notion of the meaning or value (and constituent lack of the same) of these things became more and more interesting to me. Some of these pages, clippings, etc kept making the cut in my studio sweeps, I'd come across them 3 or 4 times a year and consider them for a moment and then store them away again.

My first film project dealt with the idea of visuality and clichéd aesthetics; beauty. Empire dealt with history, aesthetics, etc, as material and my most recent project, Figure 3, of which the more recent newspaper drawings are a part, dealt with the idea of the artist in different ways, as cultural colonizer, the position of being a consumer of information and images etc, and also a producer of something, and the complex relation this has to creativity and identity that is and has been the state of cultural production for a while now.

At the time I was interested in the idea of making something whose assertive qualities (aggressive in terms of production, and content for some) would be pulled back or held in tension by the possibility that what one is looking at is nothing notable at all. I chose the newspapers partially for their ephemerality (the idea of yesterday's newspapers lining today's birdcage, wrapping today's fish etc) but also because I have for a very long time used newspaper as a ground on which to perform other activites. From eating lunch or breakfast in the studio (lacking a proper table), to mixing pigment into latex, or as a mask for sprayed paints etc. That some of the newspapers I saved had various amounts of specific biographical information about me in them, made their ambiguity, their internal/ external to me, (biographical/autobiographical) position nicely activated I thought. And of course my having kept them around for various reasons (story, image etc) makes them all biographical to some extent, some by the politics of my choosing, and perhaps also for the default fact that they are artifacts of the studio, things I kept around for many years not as an archive but rather as shards drifting around the intellectual world of my studio, the site where larger works are made. Of course the choice to keep specific clippings was informed by the other printed aspects of each paper, if I was interested in an image or story that's great, but the other information on the sheet, ads, headlines, etc, all had to add up to something that had some kind of assertive energy. The matrix of meaning had to reach a certain quality or pitch, which means that the papers needed to posses an opposing inertia in the balance, a heightened meaninglessness. The length of time it takes to make the drawings, (the largest so far, "Event drawing" in the Moma show,

Paul Sietsema
Abstract 2
2009
Ink on paper
71 1/5 x 70 inches; 181 x 178 cm

was begun in 2006, finished late in 2009) and how few I produce, makes for a sort of extreme editing process; out of the thousands of possible pages over the years, under ten so far have made it into a finished work.

In my head there is a sort of shifting of states these works embody. I begin with a blank sheet of paper, the surface of which is treated to take in the inks I use in specific ways. This is taped to a board and I register the image of the newspaper I'm working with on it using pins. The image of the newspaper is then transferred and copied (painted) over a long period of time onto the sheet. This process of replication is important to me, the processes the ink is applied with have some congruity with the way a laser printer produces an image, mixing colors on the sheet to achieve tones, the image is copied paying attention to photographic/image/digital/printing noise and not the image of the newspaper, a broken down pixel by pixel, somewhat dehumanized view.

But there are also the "painted" marks- the paint rings, drips, etc, painted in enamel on the drawings surface . . .

Yes, once the image of the newspaper is complete, after a significant amount of labor (time) has been expended, this new 'sheet' is used as a ground for another mark or image. I am thinking about painting here; the canvas, the ground. The newspaper is a certain kind of surrogate for this to me. On top of this I have over the last several years been painting different types of paint marks, which I think of as partially being emblematic of different types of abstract or expressionist painting, although probably in relatively small ways. I make these marks using enamel paint usually, they are often manipulated, changed, edited, reshaped etc, and then repainted in enamel on the painted 'newspaper' grounds. Of course the redundancy of painting an enamel mark in the same enamel paint interests me, but much of the reason for using this paint is that it keeps the layers of the overall image separate, discernable. I've called many of these figure/ground studies for the various relationships they form. When the drawings are done they are presented as the full sheet. The blank piece of paper, with its edges discolored and mucked up by tape residue, it's surface occasionally mottled by the latex I use to mask the sheet from the over-painted liquid inks, and the registration holes sitting outside the newspaper image area, signify (and is also of course) the workspace, a small section of desk or studio that is carried with the work. The new ground, the newspaper, by nature of it's common-ness and the nature of it's representation is newly activated to perform a dual role as ground to the marks to come on top of it but also figure to the sheet it's painted on. The common-ness and found quality (although highly intentional) of the paint marks (a sort of nod to post-minimalist materialism as it relates to paint also) that sit on top of the newspaper image, undermines their ability to do the required work as figures and so I think they also attempt to subvert themselves to some lower category or level, try and flip positions a bit with the newspaper image field. There are of course also 'figures' in the newspapers, images, sometimes of people. The head of Deutsche Bank in one, a high school principal in another, an Amazonian preserved head in a third. I was thinking about the individual against the background of media representation. A corollary to myself and my representation as an artist in various ways. But figure/ground also refers to the relationship between abstraction and information, in the representation of a newspaper, or the representation of a paint mark, but also simply in the relationship of a story and its images. One of the represented stories is about a high school that misappropriated funds for a Martin Luther King museum, and attempted to construct an on the spot DIY museum in less than a day using whatever they could find on the high school grounds when they heard a newspaper photographer was coming to investigate the situation. The high school staff was forced to rely on whatever conceptions of museum or display existed in their heads at the moment to form the exhibition, a sort of beautiful idea considering this took place in outer suburban Los Angeles.

I think this kind of investigation which is limited to the sheet of paper, parallels the tone and 'identity' relationships of Figure 3, with its limitation of film as a medium, and it's investigation of the specific/general, created/found,

Mull, Carter. "Paul Sietsema." *Marcel,* no. 3, September 2010, pp. 1–2, 6–9.

Paul Sietsema
Boat Drawing (detail)
2010
Ink on paper
Diptych, each: 51 1/8 x 67 3/4 inches;
130 x 172 cm

produced/consumed, etc., rather than existing on a sort of sub-level to the film project as conceptual maps of a kind, the way most of the drawings from Empire did.

Your account of the intense and intricate investigation of the shifting state of the artist as both consumer and producer is striking. And it is fascinating to consider this process in relation to the classic formal idea of the figure-ground relationship. How does this type of complex dialogue between automatic processes and editing processes, consumption and production, and figure/ground manifest itself in your film work, specifically Empire?

With the films and other work of the last 10-15 years there has always been the idea of a sort of zero sum game; the found and produced having structured relationships to each other, creating what I think of as a sort of planar vacuity, with understanding shifted either to one side of the plane of meaning or the other by perceptual/contextual linkages.

In 1997, when I started making more extensive film-centered projects, I was looking for an armature that could contain but also be generative of an expansive extended form. I was interested in forms that could approach the versatility and topographical quality of language, especially the written word, with its almost limitless variations of form and surface, and the various relationships between the two, not to mention its inherent strong internal limits and history. I was thinking about the history of painting also, the perimeter of the canvas etc, its own internal history, the undead quality of writing and painting. I started using 16mm film in the beginning partially because it already has a 'found' quality to it, locked into its aesthetics, but for the last decade has still been very functional, very much alive. The anachronistic scaleless-ness of film seemed ideal for the kind of state or experience I was interested in building, where times and places could be both specific and non-specific at the same time depending on the angle of view.

16mm film is also one of a few mediums that has always been used, because of its accessibility, for both the collection and display of raw historical information (news reels etc) and the projective a-historical tendencies of the experimental; the avant-garde. I'd had enough of the art-making models that surrounded me in the mid 1990s, mostly minimalist post-performance mixed with a sort of conceptual revival, and was looking for a medium or structure that would force my ideas forward, push them in new directions, mesh them with a medium that would extend the field of interaction between projective ideas and received ones.

I began in 1997, 1998, to set up a sort of system of thought areas that would work together but be synthesized by (and so lost in the form of) the formal/physical/material matrix I was building. The idea of constructions of history, and particularly the history of the avant-garde, seemed like the right arena considering it's own specific and nuanced structural resonances to certain materials and mediums, which happened to be consistent with my own interests at the time, and its complicated corollary relationship to the history of film, photography, and ideas of space in general. My project, Empire, began in 1998-9 with me building an exploratory sculpture of Clement Greenberg's living room as it existed in a photograph reproduced in Vogue in 1964. I liked the sort of amped non-specificity of both of these things, the logotype quality of the name and the year, and was interested in how the baggage and context of both could be used as sort of dumb non-specific ordering devices. I decided to use Greenberg's library, the books likely found there, to help extend the structure, a sort of non-specific self-generating appropriation. The history of the avant-garde featured heavily in books published early that decade, many of them organized by shifting models of philosophical space (a genre in the field at the time) which find their resident forms, their most extended executions, in different pursuits at different times in history, from architecture, to literature, to music, to painting, to cinema, etc.

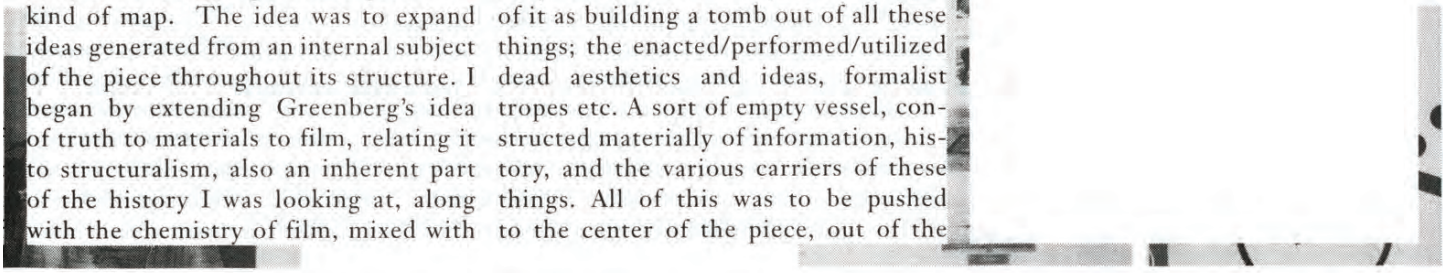
The redundancy of representing a version of a cultural history in the language of various objects and spaces and in fact models of representation of the avant-garde seemed to make a lot of sense. In the end I constructed a sort of matrix or armature, made up of

Mull, Carter. "Paul Sietsema." *Marcel*, no. 3, September 2010, pp. 1–2, 6–9.

various aesthetics of art history, from the beginning of modernist thought through the supposed end of the avant-garde. These different elements and their chosen representative forms existed on various levels of abstraction, in terms of the object made, but also the mode of representation (the film) and the various possible interactions of the two. The objects, spaces, aesthetics, etc. were lifted from different art histories, chosen somewhat randomly by using the logo year 1964 as a kind of perimeter (a year of great cultural change in and outside of art) cutting through all things selected in different specific ways. I collected and re-represented these objects, spaces, light-forms, etc. using a Bolex 16mm camera and 16mm film which was specifically a fundamental tool of the avant-garde but of course also of collecting historical images, with a wide range of possibilities for in camera effects (this is why the avante-garde liked it so much) which could be used to represent ideas formally that were fundamental to the aesthetic strategies of the avant-garde.

Also structuring the film were ideas central to the process of photography and film which I organized using Clement Greenberg's ideologies as a kind of map. The idea was to expand ideas generated from an internal subject of the piece throughout its structure. I began by extending Greenberg's idea of truth to materials to film, relating it to structuralism, also an inherent part of the history I was looking at, along with the chemistry of film, mixed with different film stocks ability to define periods by association, which allowed a somewhat anachronistic, formalist, structuralist version of a history to emerge. The binary aspect of making tangible things that I filmed, and using physical cross processing to develop the film (for example) made the entire process very concrete. I was interested in transposing complex manifestations of thought-forms into the various aesthetic/formal strategies of the avant-garde in order to build up a space that matched the character of current information models, whose forms are guided by the nature of the digital world, rely on the recognizability of common languages but 'misuse' them. Where the hierarchy of 'important' information or histories is disrupted due to the number of competing voices which exist along various points of the scale between pure babbling abstraction and more traditionally weighted and vetted historical canonical forms of recording history and information.

The idea was to present a sort of "nothing", to use both subject matter and medium that were dead, deactivated, over, and have the specific type of relationship between them be the only possibly active force of the piece. I thought of it as building a tomb out of all these things; the enacted/performed/utilized dead aesthetics and ideas, formalist tropes etc. A sort of empty vessel, constructed materially of information, history, and the various carriers of these things. All of this was to be pushed to the center of the piece, out of the periphery and into the spotlight, and be recorded and presented in the language of a corollary medium, which I think is what digital processes and mediums do (and is also I think just the nature of the evolution of media in general): Push what was once an invisible mode of storing and displaying images and information into objecthood, collect it in its own new form the way it would with anything else, because this is part of its ability, and utility. I think these kinds of increasingly dematerialized formal devices by nature both produce and consume history, they project or produce, make visible, new information and forms by nature of making visible what was invisible (the once clear windows of previous mediums themselves becoming a subject), and layering it into whatever information is being conveyed, perhaps unintentionally, making the difference between production and consumption, between appropriation and exposition, less pronounced and in the end, less relevant.



Mull, Carter. "Paul Sietsema." *Marcel,* no. 3, September 2010, pp. 1–2, 6–9.

frieze

Paul Sietsema

Cubitt, London, UK

Set in the year 4022, author and architectural illustrator David Macaulay's novel *Motel of the Mysteries* (1979) follows an amateur archaeological team who stumble upon the buried site of a trashy motel. From their future perspective, it is taken as a royal burial site, all of its contents assumed to relate to some elaborate, sacred ritual. (One scene that sticks in my mind involves a man wearing a toilet seat around his neck, a standard-issue 'This Toilet Has Been Cleaned' strip fastening the lid to the back of his head.) For some years Paul Sietsema has been carrying out a similar – if subtler and less comedic – carefully constructed anthropology of aesthetics. His 2002 film *Empire* examines the contents of Clement Greenberg's 1960s New York apartment alongside a rococo Paris salon, while *Figure 3* (2008) comprises a series of display shots and close-ups of pre-colonial pots and plates from the South Pacific. These quiet, ostensible documentaries reveal themselves only reluctantly: the filmed subjects of both were intricate, three-dimensional miniature reproductions that had undergone a Thomas Demand-like translation from sculptural medium to photographic one.

Sietsema's most recent 16mm film, *Anticultural Positions* (2010), the sole work in his exhibition at Cubitt (the last show under curator Michelle Cotton's 18-month tenure at the gallery), makes the educational style of *Figure 3* explicit by presenting itself as a lecture given by the artist – delivered, quite specifically, 'at the New School, Monday, February 23, 2009, at 6pm.' Divided into eight sections, the 30-minute silent film presents Sietsema's talk as short paragraphs of subtitles on a black screen; he discusses landscape, material and the provenance of painting as being 'capable of bringing us astonishing news from the country of the non-circumscribed, from the country of the formless'. The argument is interspersed with eight segments, shot in black and white, which cut between images of various imprints and leftover marks in what seems to be the artist's own studio. The negative spaces outlined in paint, scratched wood and crumbled bits of concrete hint at the possible appearance of the absent work being described. At the same time they begin to take on organic qualities – of snow, coral and sand – as the studio becomes the ghostly 'formless terrain' the narrator is searching for in art.

Anticultural Positions was Sietsema's response to giving a talk about his work but this self-portrait is, characteristically, a conceptual feint, presenting something visually uninteresting and defined by absence. While the film takes its title from an influential talk given by Jean Dubuffet at the Arts Club of Chicago in 1951, in which he outlined his preference for the thoughtless, unintentional gestures of 'savage peoples' (as he had characterized Art Brut three years before), the actual narration of the film is lifted from Dubuffet's 1952 essay, 'Tabled Landscapes, Landscapes of the Mind, Stones of Philosophy'. The 'I' of the lecture is really a voice from nearly 60 years before; you begin to even suspect the marks and splotches, as prepared props, intentional, 'fake' mistakes.

Sietsema's film manages to create a chronological distance within itself by pasting Dubuffet's mid-century view as a commentary on the present, like an aged professor expounding charming but dated views. That charm also creates a perverse intimacy that leads us to recognize the fulfilment and failures of his words. Sietsema's studio detritus is an illustration of what Dubuffet in his essay called a 'swarm of facts', but their (possibly) unassuming creation and discovery simply left behind in the studio at the same time attest that Dubuffet's search for 'the little, the almost nothing' didn't have to be sought in an exotic elsewhere. Sietsema suggests that our contemporary sensibilities might have attained Dubuffet's stated aim, that these unintentional marks are always made, maybe even already there; we might have found the 'passion, mood and violence' Dubuffet sought, but that it too has been assimilated, rationalized and conceptualized.

Chris Fite-Wassilak

Fite-Wasselak, Chris. "Paul Sietsema." *Frieze*, October 2010, p. 245.

The New York Times

Spirals of Self-Reflection, Made by Methods Mysterious

ART REVIEW

KEN JOHNSON

Acute — some might say neurotic — self-consciousness is one of modern art's salient features. Before the art world went nuts in the 1960s, this meant focusing on the basic processes, materials and actions by which works were made, as in Abstract Expressionist painting, for example. Now cerebrally ambitious artists like to reflect on all the conditions impinging on art: on the gallery and museum system; on the ideological prejudices and blind spots of art history and criticism; on publications by which information and rumors about art are disseminated; and so on.

Few pursue the inward- and outward-spinning spiral of self-reflection more ingeniously than the Los Angeles artist Paul Sietsema, whose exhibition of drawings and a film at the Museum of Modern Art obliquely outline the intellectual environment of art today.

It is a puzzling show: it takes considerable looking and thinking to assemble its pieces into a coherent whole in your mind. Some aspects are more readily apparent than others. The drawings, mostly made of black ink on large sheets of paper, display different sorts of photographic imagery. Some appear to be much-enlarged reproductions of close-up archaeological pictures of ancient artifacts. Several depict what look like dug-up antiquities bearing low-relief writings, as in one that has the words "November Gruppe 1921," which refers to a Weimar-era association of German Expressionists.

Some reproduce old, yellowed pages of art reviews from The New York Times, including short pieces by me, and Roberta Smith's mostly favorable review of a show of Mr. Sietsema's work at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2003. Puddles or circles of paint deface some of the newspapers, as if they'd been used in the studio to protect floors and tables.

Paul Sietsema
Museum of Modern Art

"Paul Sietsema" remains on view through Feb. 15 at the Museum of Modern Art; (212) 708-9400, moma.org.

Each of a trio of high-contrast drawings measuring almost 6 feet by 6 feet registers the silhouettes of film reels, pick axes, hammers and other tools embedded in fields of unidentifiable stuff suggestive of studio detritus on the floor. They call to mind the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock, which were made on the floor.

It is not difficult to see that Mr. Sietsema's diverse imagery is about art and the representation of art. In this respect he follows in the footsteps of Pictures Generation artists like Sherrie Levine, whose photographs of famous photographs subvert conventional ideas about photography and originality; and Louise Lawler, whose photographs taken in the homes of collectors and museum storage rooms document the private lives of famous artworks.

What is more interesting and also harder to comprehend is the way Mr. Sietsema makes his drawings. They appear to combine both photomechanical technologies and manual labor, but in most cases, it is nearly impossible to tell what is really going on in them. Wall labels don't help, as most of them describe the drawings only as "ink on paper."

In the exhibition catalog, an essay by the show's organizer, Cornelia Butler, the Modern's chief drawings curator, says nothing illuminating about how they are made, nor does a maddeningly pretentious and vacuous conversation between Mr. Sietsema and the critic Bruce Hainley shed any light on questions of technique.

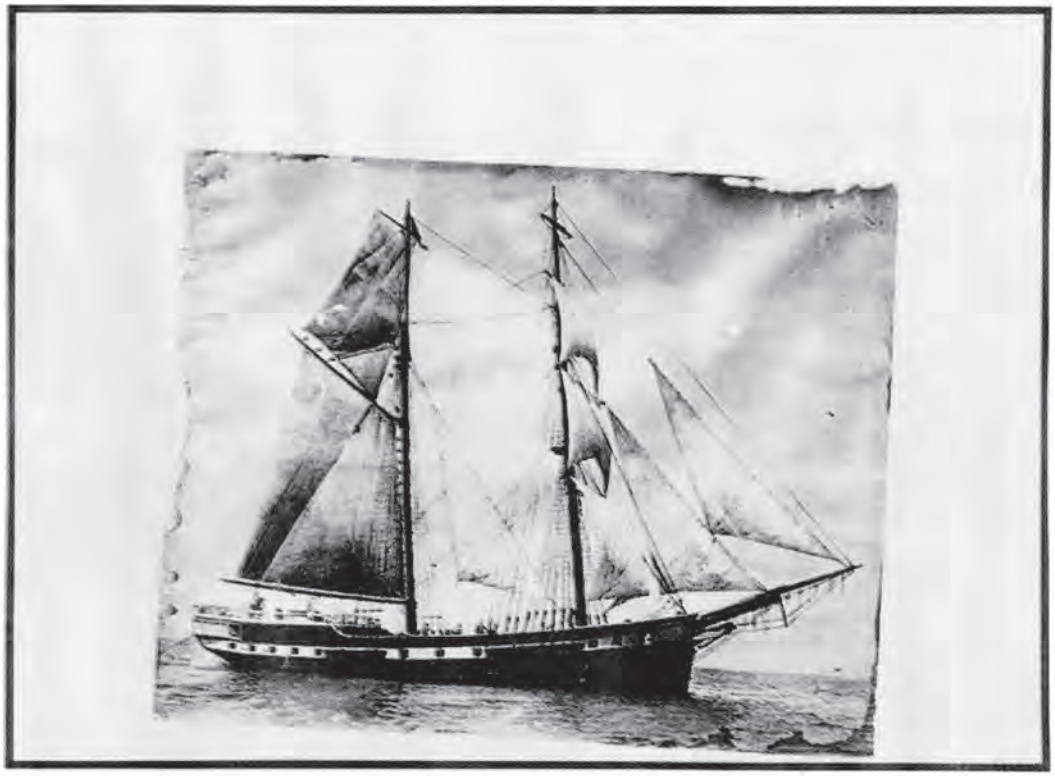
Among the most intriguing works is a pair of separately framed pictures of the front and blank back of an old, beat-up photograph of a schooner. Each is tilted at the same angle, as if it had slipped in its frame. Whether the two images are photographic reproductions of the original picture or hand-painted copies is hard to determine, no matter how closely you study them, though the pieces are clearly made with assiduous care. Robert Gober's craftsmanship comes to mind. In any case, they constitute a beautiful, poetically resonant meditation on nostalgia and on forgetfulness (if you see the empty, backside view as an erasure).

Running on a whirring projector, the 16-minute black-and-white film "Figure 3" shows a series of still images of what appear to be old artifacts. There are partly broken ceramic bowls and vases; pottery shards; dirty, woven mattes; old, crusty coins; and so on. The film is grainy, dusty and seemingly old itself, so it looks like an archaeological documentary made early in the last century.

It turns out, however, that all the supposed artifacts represented were made by hand by Mr. Sietsema. So the film is an elaborate fake designed to prompt thought about how we imagine, preserve, authenticate and forget the past and how institutions of art, archaeology and history shape that process.

To viewers who have not immersed themselves in art theory over the last 30 years, Mr. Sietsema's project may seem obscure and insular. But it pertains to uncertainties with which most of us are familiar: what is real, what can we count on in these epistemologically slippery, hypermediated times?

Johnson, Ken. "Spirals of Self-Reflection, Made by Methods Mysterious." *The New York Times,* January 8, 2010, p. C34.



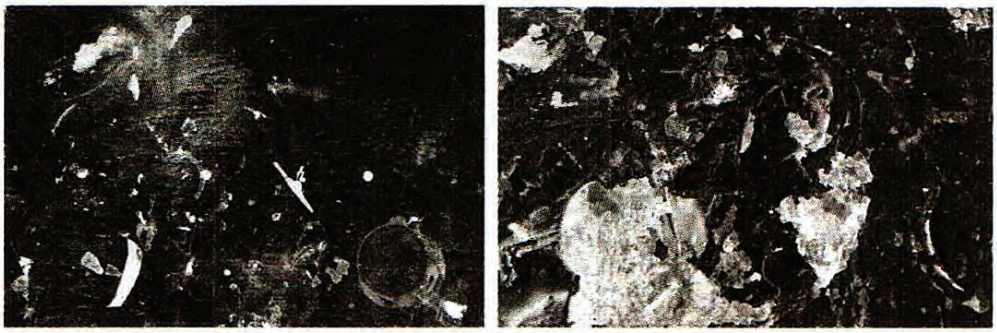
TOP, MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY; ABOVE, MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Top, Paul Sietsema's tilted schooner (is it a photograph of the original image or a painting?), and above, a still from Mr. Sietsema's 16-minute black-and-white film "Figure 3."

Johnson, Ken. "Spirals of Self-Reflection, Made by Methods Mysterious." *The New York Times,* January 8, 2010, p. C34.

Time Out London

Paul Sietsema



Two stills from 'Anticultural Positions', 2010

★★★★

Cubitt King's Cross to Shoreditch

'Anticultural Positions' is a 16-mm film based on a talk given by Paul Sietsema, although only the transcript runs along the black, soundless projection, as subtitles. It's actually a deconstruction of the lecture format because the text isn't even Sietsema's, but originates from a 1951 talk by Jean Dubuffet – the French painter discussing his theory of unintentional mark-making, and the prospect of an art uncontaminated by deliberation or convention.

Alternating with these maudlin, subtitled sections are sequences of imagery: monochrome stills of the work-surfaces of Sietsema's LA studio, their various incidental scratches and encrustations – paint drips, oil streaks, chemical stains and so on – acting as a visual correlative to the text, a physical terrain evoking Dubuffet's 'country of the uncircumscribed'. If such phrasing seems a little academic or overly cerebral, well, that's partly the point.

What Sietsema has done is set up a series of shifting, elegiac contrasts between mutual ways of viewing the world: between the intellectual and formal on the one hand, and the accidental and formless on the other. The rigidly determined language of the subtitles, with their stark alphabetic designs, also contrasts with the involuntary abstraction of Sietsema's studio spillages. These patterns seem to transform – if you let your thoughts drift – into facial features, strange animals, or beautiful gaseous nebulae; setting up another binary between an idea of the world as something measurable and external, and – to again quote Sietsema quoting Dubuffet – the 'immaterial world which dwells in the mind'. Fantastic, intelligent stuff.

Gabriel Coxhead

Coxhead, Gabriel. "Paul Sietsema." *Time Out London,* July 25, 2010, p. 37.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

Figure 3
Paul Sietsema
THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Bruce Hainley: Horticulture. Architecture. Archaeology. They're the disciplines I could muster to provide some overarching themes to your three films. I'm not sure how helpful any of them might be, except to suggest a movement from the individual to the structural and ending in the remainders of the social, the shards of civilization left behind, the traces of how people live their lives. At a certain point in each film, construction—making, constructedness; the construction of the things within the films and the construction of the films themselves—momentarily overtakes any thematic concerns. Does anything about this kind of approach appeal to you as a way someone might start to consider what you've made?

Paul Sietsema: To write a statement in a language, to choose a language in which to write a statement. That is a beginning. I see those categories as languages, tools that can be picked up and used, tools with a kit of parts varied by area of interest (region) and by degree of accessibility (more or less common words), but most importantly as containers of preexisting dialogues related to art and its clichés. Plants/flowers are almost always interesting and so possibly have the quality of never being interesting enough. Architecture is interesting only as it crosses with the social and the personal (like the doorknobs of Wittgenstein's villa). Archaeology exists as the dumbest of metaphors, so vast as to white itself out, a suit so large it falls from the body.

As the inevitably biased outsider reading my own work, I have noticed a tendency that is somewhat constant: in one way or another, the works I make can veer into categories so simple as to make the idea of them disappear in front of a viewer.

The structures I have made for the films usually explore different clichéd aspects of the overall categories I start with. In *Untitled (Beautiful Place)*, I was interested in shared ideas of beauty, the visual. I had collected images of plants and flowers from many different types of sources for years prior to making the work. With *Empire*, it was the idea of taking the idea of art history and presenting it based in the language of some of its internal aesthetics that interested me. With *Figure 3,* I was most interested in the idea of material, as in matter, as it relates to material culture, and in the collection of personal belongings as artifacts put into action to parallel the contemporary art mechanism. Important for me with all three is that they are extracted from the camera. Flowers, historical locations, objects,

Hainley, Bruce with Paul Sietsema. "Skeleton Key: A Conversation with Paul Sietsema." *Figure 3: Paul Sietsema,* 2009, pp. 41–51.

and artifacts are all highly photographed categories and are woven into the development of photography as anthropological and social construct. It has been my project for the last ten years or so to extend the more structurally activated aspects of photography to its contextualizing elements, the social, cultural, aesthetic, historical. The resulting new matter is what makes up the films.

BH: I've always found it compelling to consider your work as and in relation to sculpture. In fact, it would seem funny if someone tried to convince me that you were a filmmaker rather than a sculptor. About a decade ago, when we first talked, I asked you about your relation to film—in particular, to experimental film. In terms of hyperbolic constructedness, I distinctly remember your balking at the mention of the Brothers Quay and shrugging that film wasn't an overwhelming influence on your project, despite your love of watching movies. In the MoMA show, drawing will contextualize your work. Obviously, I'm trying to articulate a question about the parameters of a medium and how an artist's relation to them changes over time. I'm flailing, but perhaps my flailing indirectly asks something about your relation to location (the Bay area; Tinseltown) more than to anything else.

PS: Drawing has always been the beginning and, perhaps, the end of every project I make. Not making sketches per se but investigating the relationships between imagery, form, and material that predominate in our mediated experience of the world. In the beginning, I was coming out of three great years in San Francisco (1993–96) in which I had been attempting to pare everything away from my work that was not absolutely necessary, and I had in fact reached a somewhat bizarre stage at which the mere presence of the hand intervening with a natural and mostly invisible system was the high point and perhaps the end point of the deformalizing of my work. I suppose I was looking for where to embed my hand and its intentionality in the system of things, where to find the newest and most active location for this activity, which at the time was not simply a surface, or the placement of an object, or a design or arrangement, not a composition of paint/color on a canvas—rather it was something existing somewhere between an object or situation and our perception of that object or situation.

At this time I spent quite a bit of time studying and thinking about James Turrell and his *Mendota Hotel Stoppages*: an early piece of his in which he slowly altered his studio with subtle shifts, over months, in the architecture and lighting of the various rooms, slowly developing a cinema existing entirely of shifting light throughout the day. Guests would experience this cinema by spending a day in the studio, sitting on the floor in various rooms. The piece, of course, was entirely ephemeral and grew naturally out of his current environment. The viewership consisted for the most part of friends of his. The subtle, nearly invisible shifts Turrell made in his personal space and the social proximity to him of the viewers is very compelling to me. A closed circle of language in which the activated experience is difficult to locate because it is so subtle and so embedded in the situation of light and space and in a social body. Since my first film, I have thought of the way I work as being some kind of parallel to that work, but rather than use the minimalist concentration/parameter of light and space, I attempt to expand the realm experientially to contexts such as art history, art criticism (the inclusion of Clement Greenberg and others), and the situation of the strange quality of being a contemporary artist, which I try to address a bit in *Figure 3*. Using film—which seems to be extremely well suited to spatial/phenomenological explorations as well as having capabilities for strong internal and external dialogue—allowed me to attempt to connect more textual structures with the forms of space they often inhabit.

In the beginning, I was looking for a container to hold such a form and had attempted to combine photography, video, performance, sculpture, etc., into

Hainley, Bruce with Paul Sietsema. "Skeleton Key: A Conversation with Paul Sietsema." *Figure 3: Paul Sietsema,* 2009, pp. 41–51.

one sprawling thing. But I found this too alien to the natural form of things in the world, their compressed quality, and so I finally stumbled upon film when a friend who worked at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley showed me some of her own found-footage films. The spatiality and haptic quality of 16mm film seemed a perfect container for an expanded practice. Since then, part of my project has been to embed my "study" deeper into the form and history of film and photography and, by extension/inclusion, use it to build a sturdy container for an activated experience. In a similar way, I think the reason I make all the objects in my films has something to do not only with wanting them to have the intentionality of having passed entirely through my head/hands, but also because this activity runs parallel to the practice that Turrell established with the Mendota Hotel project—a certain kind of invisibility limited by the walls of the studio.

Although in a sense I have always considered the films spatial drawings of a kind, the parallel processes of drawing and working with film have been ways to try to keep myself from falling into the situation of not being able to see the forest for the trees. What I learn from one process helps me rethink and see the other in a new light, helps me keep the work from existing inside the camera too much, or at least turns "inside the camera" into a formal idea rather than a physical or mental limitation.

BH: The interrogation of form leads me to question the form of the interview in which we find ourselves involved—an art world staple, its Morton's salt. What kind of questions should be asked? What would it mean to derange or dramatically rearrange the ideology of this form? I'm writing to you from a South Carolina beach. I just came back from a run. The weather is cool, unusually so for this time of the year. So many of our conversations have occurred over dinners out. Via Turrell's Mendota Hotel project and its relation to the studio, three things come to mind: travel, dailiness, and food.

PS: During a road trip with a friend quite some time ago, when we passed through New Mexico, en route to a sacred piece of land, an ancient city, I saw a sign stating that under no circumstance should photographs be made there, because the local culture believed that something was diminished greatly when its image was stolen. I had heard of this before, of course, but the sentiment being depicted on a somewhat faded and clearly homemade sign, intended to stand up against the mass of tourists with Nikons passing through, drove home the difference in culture as well as activated the idea of reproducing an image of something from a moment in time. After dealing with images and the idea of photography for quite a while, I have come to have a sort of relationship with this idea—that sign keeps popping into my head.

I do not like to be photographed, I do not like to be filmed. I am here in Spain installing a show, and the attempt was made (inevitable in European museums) to film me discussing my work, how I work, etc. I always try to do what the museum asks, to satisfy them and to engage the structures in which they work. But each time it becomes an impossibility once the camera is rolling: I am wearing a microphone, and the last thing in the world I feel like talking about is my work. Clearly, I have no problem with written or transcribed interviews, but the process of translating the interaction into the abstraction of the written word seems essential. I do spend a lot of time working, and I spend a lot of time thinking about my work. I consider this time to be somewhat private, and it is also very important to me. The idea of including all of it within the world of the reception of my work reminds me a bit of the road sign in New Mexico. I feel like something sacred would be lost.

If the moment of image capture as it relates to a camera could be boiled down to "picture of," "picture by," and "no picture," I exist in the "picture by" and "no picture" categories. I use a camera really only in or relating to my work; otherwise, I prefer that all personal experiences, all friends, family,

Hainley, Bruce with Paul Sietsema. "Skeleton Key: A Conversation with Paul Sietsema." *Figure 3: Paul Sietsema,* 2009, pp. 41–51.

acquaintances exist in memory. As memory, images are extremely beautiful to me, and I have always worked to maintain the system as uncorrupted as possible by base mechanical intervention (the camera, etc.). This preoccupation with the limitations of the photographic frame, the extreme editing of a situation or memory, may be why I have found such inspiration in certain types of fiction. For example, David Foster Wallace for the last ten or so years. Dennis Cooper's writing I find to be just about the top of the form right now. Something about the couching of the situations he's representing in found-language structures, ads, blogs, e-mail exchanges, phone conversations, etc., allows for an expansion of the subject that I find extremely compelling. It is as if the text is stretched over an object that already belongs to the world, woven into an existing fabric. I can feel the emptiness, the lack of the form, backing up against the language, creating a sort of contextual void. This emptiness is tinted by the structure used, by the slight amount of spatiotemporal specificity or vernacular on which the language hangs. The experience of reading Dennis's writing never fails to substitute a more crystalline version of the quality of experiencing things in everyday life; it particularizes what exits the contextual void, the realm of abstraction, and slips enough into recognizable cultural form to become something understandable, familiar, in our eyes.

I think I'm trying to get at something specific about representation, something about structure and reception vs. depiction. For instance, here in Spain it is cooler than usual. Almost cold. Some of the people I'm traveling with have gone to Cadiz, a beach town, while I'm here installing in Madrid. I have been thinking of running every day, not having had time to do so in a year. And I've been thinking of our dinners together since I necessarily eat out just about every night. An answer symmetrically composed in relationship to your question that could, of course, take an infinite number of other forms and directions.

BH: What's your favorite Dennis Cooper novel? I'll pony up and say that I'd have a hard time choosing between *Period, God Jr.,* and *The Sluts*. With *Period,* prose has been pared down to a skeletal script, and its mirror form amazes, since with it Dennis almost achieves the impossible, the text disappearing into its own erasure, a spooky Möbius strip. In *God Jr.*, he interrogates virtual worlds—video gaming, etc.—as a kind of mourning. No one has written more searchingly about this elegiac possibility (saying so long to one way of being for another kind entirely), nor has anyone approached its strangeness, a virtual world and its creatures, figments, taking on something like consciousness. Cooper dissects his own five-novel sequence with *The Sluts,* in part poking fun at himself, his "obsessions," but all of its vernacular hijinks (chat room conversations, online reviews) allow him to push further than ever before in terms of intensity; the construction of the object (subject?) of desire through the hustler review site, e-mails, opening up a dossier on the question of how anyone desires, whether it depends on something or nothing, or what the connection is between something and nothing.

Of course, I'm tempted to say that the best art resists and shrugs off language, although many find this unnerving, mysterious, and crave reassurance, assuaging: thus, the endless artists' interviews, press release synopses, what Trisha Donnelly calls the "TV version" instead of dealing with—i.e., looking at, repeatedly—the work itself, its perversities.

PS: Perhaps strangely, part of what I like most about Dennis's work is how—maybe because of the way the language is abstracted or formalized, the form it takes, its vernacular—it feeds into the stream of daily experience more easily than some more immersive fiction. For this reason, the environment in which I take it in for the first time always seems important to me. I remember reading *Period* before going to sleep after coming home from Book Soup in Hollywood, where I bumped into you and Dennis, his new book in the bag

Hainley, Bruce with Paul Sietsema. "Skeleton Key: A Conversation with Paul Sietsema." *Figure 3: Paul Sietsema,* 2009, pp. 41–51.

I was carrying—such an odd coincidence and one I embarrassingly felt compelled to share with Dennis. It was perfect, the reading in one sitting, because having taken in the whole I was able to go to sleep with the entire structure turning over and over in my head, something akin to trying to sleep on opium. Thoughts taking form—language directed, clarified, and edited to the point of becoming sculptural.

Starting with *Period* and, of course, with *God Jr.* and *The Sluts,* Dennis's interest in sculpture made more sense than ever. I think I may have told you that I read *The Sluts* in Paris, also in one sitting, between about 3 and 7 a.m. I was there for a group show and had nice parallel experiences enhanced by my unwillingness to adjust to Paris time (unusual for me) and my decision to allow whatever natural drift might occur in my waking and sleeping hours due to the travel. I read *The Sluts* my first or second night there; I was staying in my favorite hotel, which is very, very cheap but has these amazing large round rooms. It was dark and silent, except for the pink glow of a red neon sign from the street below. The only direct light in the room was the single lamp under which I was reading the book. Every time I looked up from the book, I saw the glow of the room, the signs and streetlights, the red neon, the diffused reflections of the silent street outside scattered on the round, polished enamel ceiling of my room. Hardly being sure of where I was, not feeling oriented in time or space due to jet lag, I allowed the strange time of the book to organize my experience of the world. Ads out of time; e-mails time-stamped but somehow so hollow; blogs and their shifting/false identities; various voices, the only subjective aspect of the book, deteriorating as it progressed—all of which was then formalized by way of various violent deteriorations of the body, slowly erasing in retrospect anything we could begin to "trust" as experience.

One of my favorite things is to be on a long flight, somewhere over the Atlantic, six hours from LA and six hours from my destination, and to be half asleep, thoughts drifting, everything blending together, the feeling of being nowhere. The ways in which we experience the world, the tone of that at different periods, seem important to depict in some way.

TV versions, yes. An interesting phenomenon that does seems dramatically at work in the art world, until compared with politics—our highest form of government for the previous eight years having gained its power through its ability to sublimate antisocial ambitions into the conviviality of the media stream. Much contemporary art strives to be digested in the same way mainstream media is. I'm not one who thinks there is anything wrong with this, when done well, or especially when it interrogates the form while embodying the phenomenon. It does seem odd though to take the position, as some seem to, that there is no life outside this form. A strange phenomenon within the art world is that much art that deals with the look or aesthetic of the everyday, in the name of democratizing space, is of course the "everyday" of the television variety, which would seem antithetical to its intention until one realizes that most media (and political) experiences are cloaked in the language of the everyday in order to be most comfortable to and digestible by viewers. Something to do with bringing advertising straight to the subconscious: go ahead and bypass decision-making, judgment, acceptance or refusal—sneak past the guards.

BH: My move to LA in 1996 luckily coincided with the efflorescence of new possibilities for sculpture there. Dennis played no small part in this new wave, since Charles Ray had him doing studio visits at UCLA at the time. On top of everything else it accomplishes, *Period* remains one of the great essays on sculpture: it's not dedicated to Vincent Fecteau by happenstance. That house set off in the woods, its interior painted "inky" black, is the hellmouth point of intersection between writing (ink) and sculpture (house painted black), between the "real" world and the other world(s) that partake of it. Did you ever do a studio visit with Dennis? What was it like?

Hainley, Bruce with Paul Sietsema. "Skeleton Key: A Conversation with Paul Sietsema." *Figure 3: Paul Sietsema,* 2009, pp. 41–51.

PS: In San Francisco, a few years before I started at UCLA, I began looking to contemporary fiction for stimulation. I had always been extremely interested in the more immersive descriptive passages of Henry James as a form, a sort of all-encompassing fiction (mainly in one passage that describes a garden in way too much detail, enormous paragraphs that go on forever) in which I felt completely dislodged from the book, existing in some constructed world. I started reading anthologies to help me find my way to the writers who would give me what I was looking for, and Benjamin Weisman, Amy Gerstler, and Dennis stood out immediately. I started following the paths of these writers and realized that what they had in common was a connection to Los Angeles. My father still lived in LA, and I had always found the city compelling in ways that are hard to describe. New scenes, small changes in culture, can have a large effect, and they really take hold against the backdrop of a fairly history-less and supposedly culture-less and center-less city formed famously after the invention of the automobile and the mise-en-scène of the windshield.

In the mid-nineties, as LA began to seem a more and more attractive place to make art, I noticed that most of the artists I thought were interesting could be found in one place. I'm not sure when I discovered that Dennis was teaching at UCLA, but I do remember thinking that I must be in exactly the right spot for him to materialize the way he did. Studio visits with Dennis (the few I had) were similar to visits with others at UCLA: there was something extremely valuable about having a certain kind of access to these people, just having the chance to align personal sensibilities, ways of existing in the world, with work that I already knew well. Other than that, UCLA was an extremely open environment, where ideological and hierarchical structures simply didn't exist. It was about exchanges and interesting things happening moment by moment. There wasn't the sense of expectation that I sense now in various art schools, more a feeling that where we all were and what we were all up to was what and where it should be.

BH: Since we've been considering how writers employ readymade forms and how certain kinds of contemporary writing (fiction, poetry) could help a visual artist figure things out, I wonder if there is a book about art or art history that has helped you particularize how to look at something. Or is it only someone with a predisposition to the verbal who would think this necessary, rather than believing that the best way to learn how to look is to look, again and again?

PS: I didn't really have access to art in person until I was fourteen or fifteen and my family had moved near San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art. That was in the mid- to late 1980s, and much of the work being shown didn't do much for me: it was mostly large, oddly heroic, postmodern painting-ish stuff. It felt very removed from what I had had access to; the burly painters and sculptors working their messy genius in huge studios just seemed exotic, like modern-day Gauguins. One of my earliest formative experiences was going to a local library to look at art books. My mother had taken me to the library after I began to excel at drawing and spent more and more time doing it. All the books had heavy, archival plastic over them, which made them seem important and exotic. I think the books were mainly about Impressionist paintings, which didn't interest me so much, but the space of the books was extremely engaging and I would look through the four or five they had over and over again. I did take a summer extension art class when I was ten or eleven, and I remember the teacher talking about how when you draw, as in with charcoal, it is simply a burnt piece of wood that is making the image, a material having undergone a process, mixed with the hand creating an image, and in the case of representation, a sort of virtual world to exist in for a while. This really stuck with me, particularly during one of the early assignments in which I was learning about surface, material, reflection, highlight, etc., by drawing my father's silver tea service. The seemingly impossible coexistence of something as different as the dust of

Hainley, Bruce with Paul Sietsema. "Skeleton Key: A Conversation with Paul Sietsema." *Figure 3: Paul Sietsema,* 2009, pp. 41–51.

a burnt stick and the surface of a polished (if slightly tarnished) personal/cultural object caught my interest in a way that not many things had up until that point.

Later on, I came across some Joseph Cornell boxes in the SFMoMA collection, which reminded me of the little wall-hung, object-filled, painted-glass-and-wood boxes my mother used to make as at-home craft projects; but they also brought into the museum a scale of work that made sense to me based on what I had been doing—huge doses of the personal as it relates to the hand and the mind. The fragility and accessibility of those boxes gave me access to the space of the museum in a way nothing had previously, and I suddenly began to have a strange feeling of the proprietary whenever I went into a museum.

A few years after I discovered Cornell's work, the museum had a show of Robert Ryman's work. I remember being stunned at how little there was to look at, at how much of the work of looking was shifted to the viewer. Looking at his work, there was an active feeling of completion within me; I could engage and turn the work into something, or I could dismiss it and let it fade into its context, barely noticeable swaths of white paint on white pieces of paper taped to the walls. This seemed very important in the way that it relied on the context of the space it was in, the museum, a space I had come to know well through my three or four years of experience with it. The ghost of everything I had seen in the rooms seemed to inform Ryman's work in ways that recontextualized both, opened everything up to question, disposed of the feeling of art as souvenir, and brought the experience entirely up to the point of visual engagement. The quality of the continuous present.

A little while after this Ryman experience, I studied a few Gertrude Stein texts in an English class and again experienced this feeling. It is not lost on me that Gertrude Stein is at this point a modernist cliché, but at least she is a functional one: her work seems to function now just as effectively as when she wrote it. The language is experiential and fairly abstract, so it takes a lot of direct attention to traverse it; the experience of it overtakes our notion of what it is, when it is from. Reading such texts as "What Are Masterpieces," I am struck by the amount of cliché and pop culture she wove into her continuous presents. What I think was an early interest in certain vernacular languages eventually led her to pay more and more attention to the structure of her works, to echoes, voids, and repetitions in a linguistic structure that allowed that language to pull away almost entirely from vernacular or chronological contextualization or categorization. I imagine that the experience of reading some of her writing has not changed much since the time it was written, or at least has changed less than reading other, more rooted languages. There is a feeling of being caught up in the linguistic structure, wandering through the structure of sentences, grammar being uprooted and occasionally replanted, but not providing the assurance of rules that most languages rely on. Or rather intuitively restructuring the reader's relationship to those rules. In "What Are Masterpieces," an essay about the creative process (and particularly a modernist creative process: Picasso is mentioned) acts as a sort of red herring for a modernist experiential performance of sorts in which the reader is implicated.

BH: It was a room of Rymans at SFMoMA, I'm fairly certain a room that was an aftermath of the exhibition you saw—highlights from the retrospective, selected and installed by the artist, for semipermanent display—that really stretched my brain. Most of the paintings were small or smallish, perhaps eight of them, from different periods of his career. I first saw them when Vincent Fecteau was in one of his first museum group shows, across the street at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Those two things at once, the Rymans and the foamcore, interior-design-warped Fecteaus, said something in different dialects or vernaculars about the simultaneous engagement with abstraction and form as well as reference and conviction. Both provided lessons in the thorny art of saying no, while achieving something enormously giving, generous.

Hainley, Bruce with Paul Sietsema. "Skeleton Key: A Conversation with Paul Sietsema." *Figure 3: Paul Sietsema,* 2009, pp. 41–51.

PS: The idea of saying no, or at least something like it, has been in my head for a while now, when looking at work and thinking about things that interest me. When I started showing, after having finished my first film, there was a lot of interest and a number of offers to be included in shows. There was something about the fuzziness of it all that didn't feel right, and although I probably would have killed to have been in that position a few years earlier, my investment in the work, the time I had put into it, and what I felt I had developed had grown to such a level that I began to feel more protective about it. I could feel the randomness of various contexts and what they might do to a work. I had always been very, very particular about the way things were presented in different contexts, either finding an almost perfect preexisting situation or tailoring the context over fairly large amounts of time into the right one. This, by the way, is a bit of a way of saying no, since once word gets out about your tendency to change things around, many offers simply fall away ("too much work"). When I was making work earlier on, much more quickly than now, I could also feel randomness creeping in through the speed of reception. The speed of my work, both making and showing it, felt in tune with the natural cycle of things, and I could tell that by nature this was weakening it within a larger framework. This had more to do, I think, with cycles and scales associated with local commerce than with art, since living in San Francisco meant I had very little relationship with an "art world."

I slowly came to realize that an important aspect of the work should be that it runs counter to the socioeconomic calendar that everything (art included) operates on. This coincided with the realization that if I were truly going to figure out what it was I wanted to do, I should probably disengage from situations where I might be led in one direction or another based on reward for satisfying preexisting structures or fear of failure within them. In retrospect, it was possibly something like the difference between playing the game or taking the ball and going home. Of course, there are long lists of positives and negatives for both, and one usually becomes the other in the end if they are simply strategies and not a reflection of one's natural way of existing in the world. It does seem to be the difference between looking at the forest or the trees. Having an early interest in systems, I have tended to favor the forest, even though the work I like to look at and think about is almost always of the tree variety. There is something incredibly beautiful about work being folded into the scale of everything else, the amount of thinking, consideration, work that everything else gets, a work made, for instance, with the same attention, time, and thought as getting up in the morning, having breakfast, and catching a train.

It seems to me that Ryman and Fecteau say no to many things by saying yes in a big way to certain other things, for clarity's sake, perhaps, for strength of argument or formal beauty. I could look at one of Vince's sculptures forever, and I'm pretty sure it has less to do with what he's doing than with what he's not. The easy road that he's not going down formally, the twists and turns he must be making constantly to keep different types of recognizability from creeping in when making a sculpture. In parallel with the constantly turning and shifting surfaces of his work of the last couple years is line, surface, shape on the brink of becoming something in one's head while looking at it, a kind of sustained perceptual becoming. This to me is a kind of no. An opposite of spectacle. Ryman's almost severe adherence to the walls of the museum is also, perhaps strangely, a kind of no for me. Maybe it has something to do with a sort of inverted cliché. Ryman becoming a visual artist while working at MoMA, picking up a working method from the education department of the time, taking seemingly at face value the anti-figurative experimentalism that became so mainstream. Something about hiding things in plain sight, inhabiting structures from within in order to change them fundamentally forward and backward in time. Change from the outside leaves intact whatever inspired the change; change from

Hainley, Bruce with Paul Sietsema. "Skeleton Key: A Conversation with Paul Sietsema." *Figure 3: Paul Sietsema,* 2009, pp. 41–51.

the inside can forever change the perception of that thing in time. Which, of course, is the ongoing battle of language and history, the changing shape of the containers of information. What can be so scary about change, change in media forms can wipe out your world and, at the very least, change forever how it is seen. Apperceptive disjunctions.

But maybe to address your question more directly, I think saying no is simply part of the natural process of shaping something: it is a way of privileging what is being shaped over its momentary context, a way of establishing and reinforcing its boundary or perimeter while showing a kind of respect for its interior structure or sensibility . . .

BH: I think we've found some bread crumbs—maybe even some slices, if not an entire loaf—back to the films directly: those systems or fields of study (horticulture, architecture, archaeology) place the apparent subject of the films into the give-and-take of society, trees among the forest, as it were. Strange phrase—"can't see the forest for the trees"—and perhaps there are various ways now to see the trees and the forest, their vantage or perspective on one another.

The type of camera you used to shoot your first film—a Beaulieu—is invoked not only in the title but also in the possibilities of how its "beautiful place" determines what is seen. Do you find the camera a way of negotiating things in the world (the art object complicatedly among them) because of its limiting—well, let's not think of it as "limiting"—rather, because of its *directing* how the object is related to, guiding the eye through and around, into and across space-time?

PS: Yes, the trees and the forest do have a complicated relationship, and simply put, I guess I'm just thinking about it in terms of consciousness, whether or not one is aware or chooses to be aware of the situation one is working in and whether or not that situation is consciously structured into the work. I suppose it is an aspect of the postmodern, the highly conscious contextual critique, commerce, the institution, advertising, etc. Many of the early shows of living artists I saw were artists of '80s New York. The quality of Jeff Koons's work of the time in particular—embracing the object of critique while disassembling it—seemed very strong. Importantly different from the Conceptual art of the 1970s and the German Neo-Expressionism of the late 1970s and '80s. I'm now deep in the forest. In terms of this metaphor, I would like to add to the list of things you mention the category of film itself, so the list might be horticulture, architecture, archaeology, and film. And then perhaps history should be added. So: Horticulture. Architecture. Archaeology. Film. History.

Of course, there are other categories, other subsets. Part of my project has been to unpack these things and place them next to each other. Once filmed, these categories have a presence that is partially defined by my conception of them and partially defined by the things themselves, and this hybrid version could be added to the list of categories. Things that normally exist on different levels of abstraction end up being equalized, which the medium of film is well suited to doing. I guess relating it to language, it would be a bit like using nouns as verbs, objects as adjectives—an attempt to flatten a formal interior and exterior, a sort of extended version of the very basic modernist formal idea of "truth to materials" in which the internal kit of parts of a medium (painting, for instance) is mined and fed back into the process to expand the possibilities of that medium while forcing the medium itself to become more apparent. In my case, the materials are extended to more contextual elements—history, criticism, the media that convey depictions of things, etc. But this playing around with different types of space is what makes sculpture sculpture I guess, and work that lacks it I see not as sculpture but something else.

Bringing everything depicted into being for the camera, as I do, allows the camera to structure the depiction. In a way, the camera simply projects the possibility of movement through space, time, ideas,

Hainley, Bruce with Paul Sietsema. "Skeleton Key: A Conversation with Paul Sietsema." *Figure 3: Paul Sietsema,* 2009, pp. 41–51.

contexts, mixing them all up, and this activity is orchestrated mostly outside the camera, then collected again by the camera, allowing categories to jump tracks, chronological time and spatial scale to become unimportant. A shift to a new space, perhaps something closer structurally to the functioning of a computer, where all information originally was translated into pure abstraction, a series of 0s and 1s, which in terms of understanding allows for the possibility of complete restructuring of categories and locations, removal of hierarchical structures, everything has to be reconstructed based on a conscious knowledge of where everything belongs. Without that, any version of the world could exist; the machine has no preference.

BH: Two quickies: 1) Do you ever laugh at your own work? In other words, how does humor operate for you in your projects: e.g., how funny is the key in *Figure 3* supposed to be? And 2), a kind of "desert island" question: If your three films were shown, as they were in Amsterdam, each alone, in spare, separate but adjoining galleries, and if two other artists, living or dead, were invited to show works in some additional galleries or outside the desert island museum, who would the artists be, what works would you have them show, and a little bit about why, in relation to your three films?

PS: I'm still working through jet lag and have that funny feeling when I wake up, even as early as I did today, that I've slept all day. Strange. The only thing weirder is the midnight sun effect of late afternoon bright sunlight here in Los Angeles after the subdued (and properly timed) sunlight of Germany. I played a bit of a game on the plane where I tried to answer your question directly and choose two artists to put alongside my work. The list kept expanding and still not feeling quite right until I had maybe fifteen or so names and artworks (this after limiting the names to those of the recent past and not, by my self-imposed rules, from the present, since much of my appreciation of people working around me relies on how wonderfully separate they and their work are from me and mine). And then I realized that maybe I was attempting to dazzle a reader or viewer out of building specific ties to my work, or maybe I was relying too much on any single work of art or artist to decode things (which I never do). I do think that many artists are heading straight through the center of something, adding objects and ideas to the world, whereas I see myself as circling around ideas, addressing them less directly. I certainly am happy not to add anything new or valuable to the world's master list of objects but instead weave my work in between them, leaving the addition of new and important objects to the long line of new and important objects up to other, more industrious producers.

Perhaps instead of just installing the other artists' work with mine, I could make a film about the work. Of course, in order to free up the ideas, I might want to find other, more common cultural objects to stand in for the specific ones mentioned. Some of the ideas inherent to the work mentioned might better be relegated to film, given its enormous structural potential as an accessible physical medium with a long, loaded history similar to that of painting. I have heard that much of Ryman's work, and his progress through his work, has come from his "thinking through" the work of other artists while he was working at MoMA, which makes a lot of sense to me.

Yes, I do sometimes laugh at my own work, sometimes out loud in the studio, which always makes me feel a little crazy and maybe is due more to my embeddedness in the work, where small bits of humor go a long way, rather than any comedic content. The key is a good example, though. An artist I worked for used to talk about the structure of jokes and how it related to his work, which was not outrightly funny. There is maybe the structure of a joke in the placement of the key within the film, although not too many people fall out of their seats when it appears on-screen. The key for me is a sort of hub for various aspects of the

film. Of course, it is also a bit of a dumb joke about people wanting to know what I am up to in the film. It is a pass key in the spirit of the book *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake*, which "decodes" Joyce's book, an extended attempt to read reason into a resistant form. (There is also a "reader's guide" to David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, which strikes me as pretty ridiculous, considering that the book was formed to relate directly to a reader, and that both understanding and lack thereof are part of the experience and, I can only imagine, an intended part of the virtual form of superrealism Wallace was building.) The key is also an incredibly clichéd desktop icon (along with the padlock, also in the film) relating to access to computer files and other things. The film is pretty locked up, partially to heighten formal aspects of the piece as well as a more solidly phenomenological experience of it, and the presence of the key is meant to reinforce this. Rather than an explanation, what you get is the symbol of that explanation. Lastly, it is a cast of the key to the studio where the piece was made, an actual key, personal to me, that could allow access to the space of the making of the piece, which would presumably answer all the questions of the film.

Hainley, Bruce with Paul Sietsema. "Skeleton Key: A Conversation with Paul Sietsema." *Figure 3: Paul Sietsema,* 2009, pp. 41–51.

cityArts
new york's review of culture

Dig It

Posted by admin on December 3, 2009

Paul Sietsema at MoMA

By Andrew Goldstein

Paul Sietsema is an explorer and perhaps even a mystic of sorts, as evinced by his uncanny, overlooked show at the Museum of Modern Art. Given enough patient looking, the Los Angeles-based artist's drawings, sculptures and filmic work transport the viewer to a primordial place—a jungle confluence where the rivers of art and time meet.

The centerpiece of the exhibition is a 16-minute film called "Figure 3." Emitted in a darkened room from a noisily whirring projector, the film consists of mostly black-and-white stills of sculptures Sietsema made by painstakingly replicating Eskimo, Oceanic and other non-Western ethnographic objects that he found pictured in out-of-print mid-century catalogues. Even flattened through the filmic gesture and abstracted through extreme close-ups, Sietsema's meticulously cracked and dirt-encrusted pseudo-artifacts—pots, potsherds and woven items—bristle with materiality and process.

This obsessive commitment to re-creation is displayed throughout the show. The majority of works are large-scale ink drawings, depicting in hyperrealistic detail such subjects as a photograph of a ship at sail (and also, in another piece, the photograph's obverse), antique-looking text markings and a page from what appears to be an explorer's journal. As with the objects in the film, one marvels at how long it must have taken to produce the drawings. And here is where Sietsema casts his spell.

In the artist's work, the clearly extensive studio time required to make the drawings and sculptures collapses the historic distance of the objects depicted, creating a sense of time out of loop—a chronical confusion that brings Sietsema, and transitively the viewer, on an imaginary journey toward the artifacts analogous to an anthropologist venturing into the mists. Other pieces in the show fetishize the studio as the site of this journey, such as two drawings that compare an

Paul Sietsema's "Letter to a Young Painter" at MoMA.

archeological site (pick axes, debris) to the artist's work floor (hammer, ink cup, debris); several drawings depict paint-can stains on newspaper such as one finds on an artist's worktable. Two more pieces present a dark, obscured image of the artist's own face, grizzled with what seems to be an unkempt beard. In these works, Sietsema often seems more interested in aligning the artist with the romantic idea of the hardy explorer than in providing a critical view of post-colonial anthropology, or its idea of the reified "other"—though one piece, "Modernist Struggle," seems to provide a nod toward that.

Of course, this part of the artist's project is balanced by works in the show that deal explicitly with the here and now, the market and the art economy. One 2009 piece, "Event Drawing," depicts a copy of The New York Times, upside down, opened to a page displaying Roberta Smith's review of Sietsema's 2003 show at the Whitney. In the drawing, the newspaper is strewn with coins and bloody-looking ink. Another upside-down piece that functions as institutional critique shows a gossipy Times story about Henry and Marie-Josée Kravis, major MoMA donors, swanning around Art Basel Miami Beach. Art can be transportive, Sietsema seems to say, but it's always grounded in material realities.

Goldstein, Andrew. "Dig It." *cityArts,* December 3, 2009.

"The Famous Last Words." *F.R. David,* Winter 2008, pp. 182–87.

They seem meandering and meditative explorations, the films of Paul Sietsema. Drifting in between pure experiential/material abstraction and representational images of environments and objects, films that are seductive and alluring in their texture and annoyingly complex and layered in 'what they have to say'. Cryptic and atmospheric (audio)visual essays out of which all subtitles, explanations and even the slightest sliver of text are removed. In and with his films, Sietsema delves into and circles around notions such as reproduction and representation, simulacrum and versimilitude, the real and the 'copy', the orginal and 'the reconstruction', appropriation and recontextualization. Sietsema is currently working on his third film which will premiere in 2008 in SFMoma and de Appel. For F.R. David he submitted an 'image-text' which could be a 'message in a bottle' from an unnamed narrator. The "I" seems to be a Robinson Crusoe-like explorer or a Thoreau-like recluse on an abandoned island, describing his transformation, dis-integration and the discovery of a new consciousness. The text—originally conceived as a 'print' for display in an exhibition room, and typographically translated here—flirts with its own semi-illegibility and is shrouded in assumptions. Its status remains unclear, its function is continuously unresolved and it is marked and haunted by a strange sense of absence.

The Famous Last Words

I was a tortoise,
All yellow and black:
He walked slowly
away, And he never
came back.

TIME TAKES ON DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS *when measured by the sun, birds, and the appetite, rather than hacked into seconds and hours, as it was in my first days here. I had suspected it was the lack of timepieces, or, perhaps, the fact that every moment was lived, felt, and registered in an environment totally new to me, where, by necessity, I had to keep alert to avoid being struck by a falling coconut, cutting my feet on the many reefs here, making a wrong step. Whatever the cause, although I was never bored for a fraction of a second, every day felt so rich and long that a week became like several months, and proceeded this way until, in the end, in the moments leading up to the final transformation, any sense of what I had come to know as time was lost completely.*

And now everything is motionless, in complete silence. Not a sound from sky or earth. Gone is the soft touch of cool grass along my naked back, Gone the sun, once viewed through closed eyelids, the sweet smell of rich soil and vegetation, gone the sparkle of myriad crystal points of the morning's rain like so many stars in the canopy's underworld of shadows. How I longed for the feeling of fresh blood streaming through my body and the damp jungle air that had once filled my lungs.

In the beginning everything had seemed clearer; I had known it was one thing to dream of it and another to do it. I was making an attempt at it. Returning to nature. I crushed my watch between two stones and let my hair and beard grow wild. Climbed the palms for food. Cut all the chains that bound me to the rest of the world. I tried to enter this wilderness empty-handed and barefoot, as a man at one with nature.

Today I would have been condemned for such an existence; my hair hung down to my shoulders and my beard was so long that my mustache could be seen from behind. I ran away from bureaucracy, technology, and the grip of twentieth-century civilization. My only garment, if any at all, was a flowery loincloth, and my home was of plaited yellow bamboo. I drew no salary, for I had no expenses; my world was free for birds and beasts and barefoot men to help themselves to what they needed, one day at a time.

This experience was indeed a kind of waking dream, a trip deep into an utterly different existence. But a trip without drugs. For this journey was carefully planned and a solid reality. It is I am sad to say, quite impossible to reproduce the entire manuscript of this journey, which directly and simultaneously translated the subject, the rhythms, the forms, the chaos, as well as the inner defenses and their devastation; I found myself in difficulties, confronted by a typographical wall. Everything had to be written, for unfortunately there was no other form with which to capture the unexplainable experiences contained herein. And then written again, for the original text, more tangible than legible, more drawn than written, would not, in any case, be clear to anyone except those skilled in the decipherment of mysterious forms. What remains are the few words found here, the result of so many written while the transformation was at its height, and before my ability to record was lost forever.

In the beginning, the modesty and simplicity of my thoughts proliferated, all complexity and useless meanderings being absorbed by the matted bamboo walls that housed my new existence. The attractive plaiting became ever more engaging as the fresh bamboo aged and an increasing number of bars and panels turned golden yellow and intermingled with the green ones, like a live tapestry. At the same time and in the same way, the basketwork of the green palm roof began to flame into reddish brown. The patterns and figures in the

plaiting of my new walls had, surprisingly, taught me the enjoyment found in the escape from the instability and complexity of natural beauty, its capriciousness, the constant manifestation of its rain cloud of knowable things, and was in retrospect, the beginning of my newfound devotion to the regularity of the world of inert, crystalline, geometric forms.

As I had heard, the previous inhabitants of this island, this island on which I started out as but a tourist, were not able to trust entirely to visual impression the means of becoming familiar with a space extended before them and so were dependent upon the assurances of their sense of touch. Tormented by the dangers and entangled interrelationships and flux of the phenomena of the outer world, these inhabitants were dominated by an immense need for tranquility. They did not project themselves into the pictorial world of natural beauty that lay before them, but rather were drawn to the possibility of taking individual things out of this externalized world, out of its arbitrariness and seeming fortuitousness, of eternalizing them by approximation to abstract forms, and in this manner, of finding a point of tranquility, a refuge from appearances.

I thought, staring at those plaited walls, in hours just before sleep, sensing the early nuances of some kind of psychic shift, that perhaps it was not a distance in time that makes our consciousnesses seemingly different in makeup but a distance in space, and more presently, something inherent to this island and its desolation. The fear of extended space that habituation and intellectual reflection were supposed to eliminate seemed to be finding footholds in my consciousness in the same way that the tendrils of the jungles flora continued to reestablish their hold on the structure of my bamboo enclosure.

And just as the previous inhabitants of this island, its natives, I found myself longing to be delivered from my individual being, I found, as they had, that I was safe as long as I was absorbed into an external object, an external form, and could feel, as it were, my individuality flow into

fixed boundaries in contrast to the boundless differentiation of my consciousness. And they found as I ultimately did, that in this self-objectification lies a self-alienation. This affirmation of our individual need for perimeter represents, simultaneously, a curtailment of its illimitable potentialities, and a negation of its un-unifiable differentiations. In this identification I am not the real I, but am inwardly liberated from the latter; I am apart from contemplation of the form (a statue, a rock) I am only this ideal, this contemplating I. In this sense I am lost, to the contemplation of the form.

This impulse, which the previous inhabitants were given to as well, and was probably the cause of their disappearance, lies at the heart of the most profound understanding of the perceiving consciousness. For here the last trace of connection with and dependence on life has been effaced, here the highest absolute form, the purest abstraction has been achieved; here is law, here is necessity while everywhere else the caprice of the organic prevails.

It is here that this story truly begins, it is where I, your narrator, come into existence in the form I take now, for at this point during my stay on the island, a threshold was reached and a flash of sorts appeared, unexpectedly, in my mind, forming a new thought pattern, simultaneously blinding me to my previous ways and delivering to me a new and wondrous vision.

And what I learned, as well as they, and will never forget, in fact cannot forget for reasons to be made clear, was that by deliberately contemplating a form, and simultaneously visualizing that form, we conjure in our minds a pattern that is in tune with a larger and more expansive external field and which can, in time, be brought to reverberate with this field and thus coincidentally describe and eventually contain our own forms, our own existences. This reverberation is brought about partially by concentrating on the visualized image and its deeper meanings with sufficient mental tension, which holds in place a seemingly endless expanse of symbolic patterning that is capable not only of allowing our body, our form to

absorb this energy field as it is absorbed by it, but also commune with others who have entered the field throughout a continuum of cyclically shaped time. It is in this way that I first absorbed the energy of the previous inhabitants of this island and understood that I was becoming one with them.

Eventually, as my unintended internal resistances began to diminish, I found myself giving up the laborious efforts to manipulate the myriad mental elements that make up this energy field into some kind of meaningful combination, and a new and defining principle took over. Acting simultaneously on all of these elements, it combined them in a pattern, which was of unforeseen harmony, great simplicity, and considerable beauty, of a new kind.

This new energy field, the first time I experienced it, was projected above the plane of the jungle floor and through the reverberations of its crystalline form shifted the dirt, mulch, and plants into various two-dimensional representations of its own manifold structure; snowflake-like patterns of great beauty, a plane of compromised geometric multiplicity. This entire system, I noticed, shifted itself constantly, tuning itself to the mental field so as to maximize the amplification of the reverberation. I suppose what I didn't expect in the beginning, and what seems should have been so clear now, was that this field would eventually have the same effect on myself, on my own physical configuration.

My new form is strange, even savage, but it is not difficult to maintain. If looking at me you may first perceive larger fragments, leftover from earlier attempts at building a structure. Some of these fragments are lopsided, others show a kind of complicated symmetry. Some are loosely put together and will disintegrate further, others are more closely knit and will have stable form. During this eternity of random motion what used to be my consciousness is located elsewhere, and worry not, dear reader, will not interfere.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

Los Angeles Times

Goes the old-fashioned way

In the early 1990s, when Paul Sietsema was figuring out what sort of artist he might be, he picked up crushed cigarette packs and other castoffs on the sidewalks of San Francisco, made meticulous facsimiles of them and put his creations where he found the originals.

"I liked having a show along a sidewalk with something that I had invested in, but that nobody would notice," he says, leaning out of a chair that occupies one of the few uncovered spots on the floor of his cluttered studio in a commercial district of Silver Lake. "Or if they did, they wouldn't know what to do with it. They would have no idea why something like that would exist."

The 39-year-old artist has added layers of conceptual depth and technical complexity to his work since 1996, when he enrolled in UCLA's New Genres graduate program and began studying with Charles Ray, Chris Burden and Paul McCarthy. And with solo shows at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and de Appel Arts Centre in Amsterdam and works in the 55th Carnegie International in Pittsburgh and the 5th Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art, not to mention an exhibition coming up next spring at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Sietsema's days as an anonymous stealth artist are over.

But his sensibility is what it was. Although he has evolved into a conceptual sculptor and filmmaker who explores the shifting nature of perception and photographic representation, he still turns out labor-intensive work that's steeped in mystery. Where he once replicated the ordinary stuff of today with considerable precision, he now fabricates "antiquities" that conjure up an obscure yesterday.

"It's supposed to be outside time," Sietsema, soft-spoken and intensely engaged with his work, says of his recent work. "I'm asserting something I've made that doesn't actually match anything else on the planet one-to-one. The way it's placed in time is completely ambiguous."

Sietsema grew up in Orange County and spent untold hours collecting butterflies and, by his account, "watching television way too much." He likes Los Angeles partly because it's easy to "check out" and concentrate on his work, he says, but he's strategically plugged into the international art scene. He's represented by L.A.'s prestigious Regen Projects, and his works are in collections of such institutions as the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the Tate Modern in London and the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.

Muchnic Suzanne. "Goes the old-fashioned way." *Los Angeles Times*, May 21, 2008.

Curator Apsara DiQuinzio, who organized SFMoMA's "New Work: Paul Sietsema" -- an exhibition of a film and 20 objects that continues to June 22 -- calls his artistic universe "a layered world that fluctuates between historical periods, material phenomena, documentation and reverie."

The film "Figure 3" looks like an old-fashioned slide show of ancient artifacts, poorly photographed from books. Former art history students of a certain age are likely to find the images familiar, if only in a generic way. But these are not pictures of pictures of historical functional objects.

Using modern utilitarian materials favored by the Post-Minimalists, such as cement, printer's ink and string, Sietsema has fabricated a slew of "old" objects and selected a few -- cracked jars and bowls, pottery shards, crusty coins, a fishing net and harness straps -- for the film. Pictured from various angles, they seem to float in an equivocal time and place. But with the help of wall text and DiQuinzio's essay in the exhibition brochure, the artist has created a murky historical context for the filmed objects and some of the pieces on display, suggesting that they are remnants of some island culture that flourished before Western exploration and colonization.

Muchnic Suzanne. "Goes the old-fashioned way." *Los Angeles Times,* May 21, 2008.

ARTFORUM

1000 WORDS

Paul Sietsema

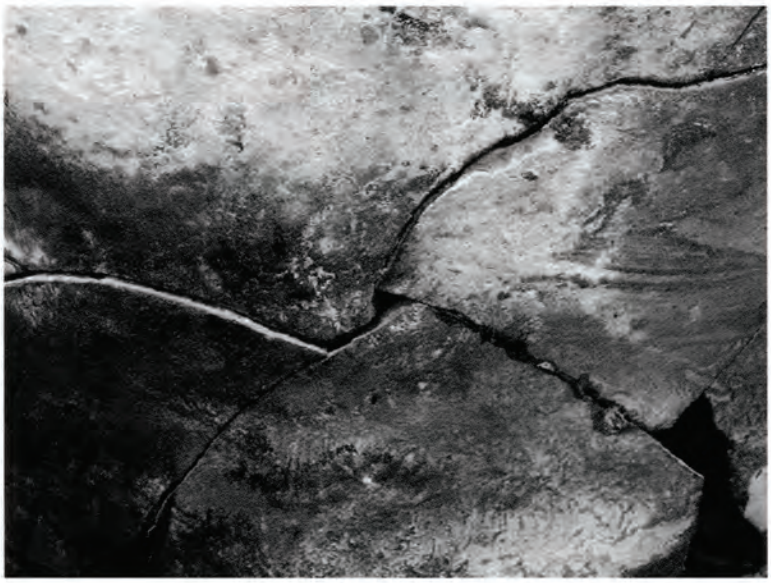
TALKS ABOUT *FIGURE 3*, 2008

FOR MY LAST MAJOR WORK, *Empire*, 2002, I made a film that basically offered a conception of modern art history using the objects in Clement Greenberg's apartment. I had come across a photograph of his place, taken in 1964, that I particularly liked: The room was filled with a mix of furniture, minor antiquities, and paintings of the period. In fact, the place seemed to perfectly display Greenberg's construction of himself as a white, quasi-academic intellectual. But to tell this story of art, I eventually turned to his library, imagining what books Greenberg might have actually had on his shelf, using them as a kind of armature for the project. In my research, I soon found that many of the texts coming out at that time revolved, as they looked at art from the Enlightenment through Cubism, around the "truth to materials" argument—which was, of course, a crucial underpinning for Greenberg's idea that a painting defines itself more fully by retrenching itself in its constituent parts.

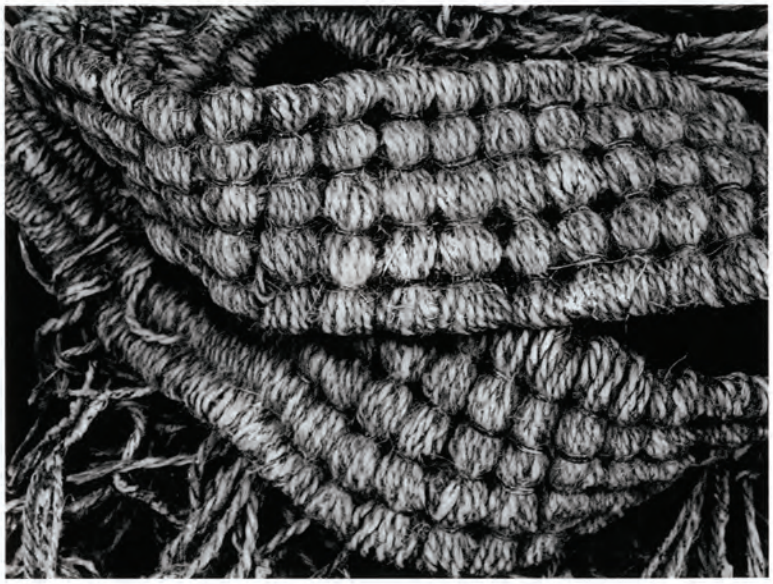
So, from there, I took a familiar approach from avant-garde film, employing a simple idea and extending it formally as I investigated the modernist perspective on an artwork's relationship to its own structure. In addition to showing the postcard image of Greenberg's apartment, I started to cut across 1964, first constructing, and then filming, individual objects based on artworks that had been made that year—taking up in particular the organic forms that were then appearing in the work of Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore, Louise Bourgeois, and, in a utopian architectural vein, Frederick Kiesler. Privately, in fact, I was thinking of my own film as a kind of hard-edged sculpture, appropriating a number of avant-garde aesthetics steeped in different materials.

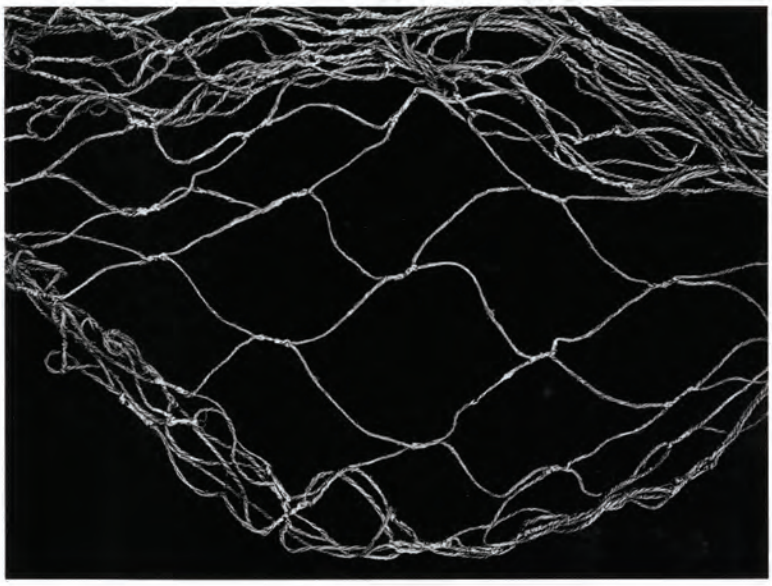
After finishing *Empire*, however, I found myself interested in a relationship that I felt the project had left unresolved: the relationship between the phenomenological experience of objects in space and that of objects on film. Perhaps because I hadn't been able to use the actual objects in Greenberg's living room, I wanted to look more closely at what it would mean to present a simple, discrete, three-dimensional object that would be experienced on film alone. I started thinking back to when I was first looking at Le Corbusier, some fifteen years ago, and understood why he would make these ramps running through a building's interior: You'd enter a room and cross it, say, and then you'd move up along a wall before the ramp would turn and you'd finally exit. Throughout this movement inside and outside, there would be these different viewpoints created, where you were intended to look out over

Subotnick, Ali. "Paul Sietsema." *Artforum,* March 2008, pp. 338–41.



This and previous spread: **Paul Sietsema, *Figure 3* (work in progress), 2008,** stills from a black-and-white film in 16 mm, 25 minutes.





Subotnick, Ali. "Paul Sietsema." *Artforum,* March 2008, pp. 338–41.

Film, I think, adds another layer to the object and to our encounter with it. There is the object and then the representation of the object, and so in *Figure 3* I tried to create a third category, where what you encounter is not simply either material or image but somehow both.

the room. In the end, Le Corbusier was giving you these specific vantages within a kind of sculptural architecture—presenting not just the structure or form of the building but also an *experience* of that building. It's an approach in which the encounter is more orchestrated and where one's sense of the physical context is clearly heightened by the way you're led in: It was an early sort of virtuality. In a similar way, film, I began to think, adds another layer to an object and to our encounter with it. There is the object and then the representation of the object, and I would try to create a third category, where what you encounter is not simply either material or image but somehow both.

Titled *Figure 3*, my new project, then, is a very simple film featuring still images of some seven or eight objects, appearing one after another—it's not precisely a slide show, since there are dissolves—over the course of roughly twenty-five minutes. At the very beginning, there is a series of straps—carrying straps, for instance, and shoulder straps. There's a harness, too. All these are modeled on objects from precolonial New Guinea, where they were made of leather. For my piece, however, I made them out of newspaper and tape, which I subsequently covered with a white paint that was also a flame retardant. After that, I burned away the paper underneath, leaving mostly just a shell of white paint. The burned areas would either disappear or blacken; I filmed them against a black background so they would seem to be disappearing into their surroundings. In a sense, the process mimics the physical chemistry of photography. What you're left with, I hope, is something like film as a spatial model based on the materials: an intermediate material between the actual thing and the film.

Of course, each strap looks like an Eva Hesse or an Alberto Burri, given all his burning, melting, and tearing of different materials. This is something I wanted. When making *Empire*, I'd become interested in books on structuralism and, more specifically, on anthropological structuralism—in how, when it came to people's relationship to materials in island cultures before the arrival of explorers, they were limited to what they had. They had trees. They had leaves that they could weave together. They had earth pigments that they could crush into paint to decorate things. This reading had led me to the objects from New Guinea. But in approaching my new project, I also began to think about how the objects I'd put forward in *Empire* didn't really have any true relationship to the celluloid medium—whereas a meaningful comparison could be made here between celluloid film and post-Minimalist materials using the anthropological studies as a conduit. If an artist associated with post-Minimalism were to use felt or lead, he or she would probably just roll it around for a while, mold it into a shape, tack it up, or cut it into strips. The sculpture took the simplest form that it could and was entirely based on the properties of the material. It was interesting to me that people never seemed to break totally with modernist ideas after Greenberg, and yet these modernist ideas also pertained in some way to an earlier time and place.

So, as I began making objects related to my reading in structural anthropology, I came up with a list of materials typically used by post-Minimalists and started using them myself as ingredients for sculpture—whether it was netting, coins, or storage jars with elements of Anasazi, Roman, and Chinese motifs. For the jars, I poured Ultracal over a form and then hammered it off before gluing the pieces back together. (The method of production mimics the look of things falling apart or decaying before being reconstructed by anthropologists.) Other times I would mix Ultracal with printing ink, allowing as well for different amounts of powder to mix with water in order to make objects seem like they'd come up from the bottom of the ocean, having accrued the patina of history, and had also undergone a process akin to post-Minimalism and to my own filmmaking. Every object seen here contains as many visual, material, and contextual elements as I can pack into—or subtly and materially embed in—the image.

As a result, I think, processes move in different directions at once. And this is important. The objects I've created are also deteriorating. Further, one can note that these things are *my* products—the relics of my activity, my artworks—but only as they're completely structured by appropriation from previous times. (In this regard, I like that the jars are an '80s cliché: the vessel, a simple, iconic form standing for our relationship to history.) In fact, audiences will probably be unsure whether I'm showing them stuff that I've found somewhere or whether I'm some artist who's long gone and this was my production at some point.

Part of my purpose here is to point out how radically changed our own experience of materiality is today. Even the "raw" materials we encounter are often a matter of design. And correlating with this shift, I think, is a change in our relationship to history. History is more obviously constructed and has started to unravel due to the proliferation of different information media. The very idea of history is a gray area, given this proliferation of media today. We live by the Wikipedia model: Things get tacked on, or rated and removed. Everybody can present his or her own model of history now, which then competes with all the others. Am I going to pick up a history book and read only one person's version, or am I going to Google for a while and try to construct my own story? This kind of "searching out and choosing what I want" makes history impossibly cumbersome, detailed, relative. And it undermines our reverence for the material within history. So I saw this new project as an opportunity to create a nice material situation that might bracket the prehistorical condition—meaning the one existing before Western explorers landed on the islands—from the posthistorical condition of our own time. □

Subotnick, Ali. "Paul Sietsema." *Artforum,* March 2008, pp. 338–41.

ART & DESIGN

Shape Shifter

by Kevin West

April 1, 2008 12:00 am

Paul Sietsema in his Los Angeles studio.

Los Angeles artist Paul Sietsema is not a sculptor, exactly, though when he starts a new piece, he works like one: Using paper, wood, glue and paint, he crafts meticulously detailed renderings of wildflowers, scale models of historic rooms and exacting replicas of primitive Oceanic artifacts. But unlike a traditional sculptor, who might set the finished object on a plinth and call it a day, Sietsema then converts his pieces from three dimensions to two. After the work of sculpting is done, the artist films his objects and then projects the footage on a gallery wall. That flickering image—the vision of something that is there and yet not there—is Sietsema's finished artwork. "I wanted to make sculpture, but there's something about the way that objects sit next to other objects in the world that I wasn't entirely interested in," explains the 39-year-old artist. "Like, it was hard for me to walk into a gallery and look at a painting or a sculpture. There's something about it that seemed a little archaic, I guess. It's probably because I grew up watching too much television."

Sietsema's newest project, Figure 3, opens at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on March 28, and if his past work is any indication, it will likely look simpler than the thinking that went into it. During an interview at his Los Angeles studio, the brainy and intense Sietsema unspools a nonstop dissertation on the conceptual content of his art and the sometimes elusive visual residue of all those ideas. One example: For his first major piece, Untitled (Beautiful Place),

1998, Sietsema constructed a series of hyperrealistic plants—he says flowers are "the natural diet of the camera"—and shot them with a variety of dead-stock films as a way to demonstrate "an array of stylistic influences based on the sort of history of photography." But even the artist himself acknowledges that the effect is "very subtle."

Nonetheless, museum curators—a subtle bunch—love Sietsema's work. He's represented in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney in New York, the Tate in London and the Centre Pompidou in Paris. SFMoMA assistant curator Apsara DiQuinzio calls the upcoming show, which will include a 25-minute film and a group of related objects not in the film, "a much anticipated body of work."

"Paul is an example of an artist doing all the right things," says DiQuinzio. "The subject he's dealing with is the shifting nature of representation. It's a subject he's explored in all his projects: how imagery and material alter our understanding of culture."

Sietsema began drawing and making small sculptures as a youngster. At Berkeley, he studied liberal arts, and after graduation he did odd jobs in San Francisco while establishing himself on the local gallery scene. In 1996 he entered UCLA's graduate New Genres program, studying with Charles Ray, Chris Burden and Paul McCarthy.

Sietsema has been working on Figure 3 at least since his previous film, Empire, was shown at the Whitney in 2003. The anthropological inspiration for Figure 3, he says, grew directly out of Empire. For that piece, Sietsema constructed the living room of seminal art critic Clement Greenberg as it appeared in a 1964 photo shoot, the same year Andy Warhol made his experimental film Empire, which gave Sietsema his title.

Greenberg's living room contained various non-Western artworks from Asia and Africa—"the knickknacks of the intellectual"—and as Sietsema duplicated them in miniature, he began thinking about the influence of material on form. For Figure 3, Sietsema reproduced Oceanic artifacts using raw materials that were abundant in his studio—paint and The New York Times.

Given the pace of his work, Sietsema could surely use an extra set of hands to speed up production, but he insists on doing things himself, like a craftsman who is handy at everything but specializes in nothing. "Everybody in a village could all make the same things," Sietsema muses. "The idea of skill just didn't exist. Actually, the idea of artistic value didn't exist, which is an idea I really like."

West, Kevin. "Shape Shifter." *W Magazine,* April 2008.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

PAUL SIETSEMA:
DISCIPLINE

1. Do you create your own rules and limits?

PS: Seems to me a carefully worded question is much more valuable than an answer. Questions delineate open-ended areas of exploration and can lay the groundwork for extended thinking; they constitute a search. Much of the time devoted to my projects goes into creating a multi-dimensional area of inquiry. I attach to the outer layers of this formalized inquiry things that would not normally be expected to exist within the structure of a question. Certain cultures test and relocate the limits of their laws by constantly crossing over them. It could be said that the limits of these organic laws have a width that can be inhabited. Allowing for constant social change to redefine the laws' boundaries tests the existence and relevance of these laws and limits. Other cultures self-police and embody unquestioned law as handed down by powers etc. In the U.S., a country whose evolution parallels the evolution of advanced capitalism, rules play a more insidious role. The idea of the breaking of rules is built into the American identity but is increasingly contained within a homogenous economic and political system of oppression and control ministered by seemingly benign social pressures. Versions of the cowboy image live on as the west's vanguard; small rules are broken and the system of exchange supports, encourages, and accessorizes this stance, supplying its look. The containment of rule breaking within this system makes true and sustained dissent difficult and nearly invisible among the pre-packaged off-the-shelf versions. In this situation individuality is often purchased rather than performed. Indicative of this is what I have heard called the "protest-tainment" art of the past five or so years. This art takes on the appearance of political art while in fact using it merely as packaging for a conservative art product; it turns protest into a sales pitch and politics into a dead style. Living the look of radical social change seems to supplant the instigation of actual social change. In my art I prefer to test the limits and rules of a situation by bending, stretching, and twisting these rules

"Anne Collier & Paul Sietsema: Discipline." *The Wrong Times*, Tarzan-Jane Issue, 2006, pp. 3–4.

(organic and handed down) and seeing what is natural to the shape and what is due to the material make-up of the law, and perhaps what has become institutionalized and what has not. So I guess you could say I create rules and limits out of the scrap heap of laws and limits that has piled up. None of these laws is really much better or worse than any other for my purposes, the only value lies in their reconsideration through different types of re-use. Many of the guidelines I set up for a piece are flip appropriations, included because of the shaping randomness they insert into the overall structure of a piece. The actions I perform on these rules and limits rely on intuition and personal will, which I suppose are still the sharpest tools in the box for the kind of law I might be interested in.

2. Do you always follow the rules?

PS: I suppose that breaking a rule can have the effect of highlighting that rule even more, but I don't think that's why I find it important to do so. Rules allow a set of expectations to develop. It's one thing to disregard expectations in an artwork and another to manipulate them. I like the idea of expectations in constant flux while experiencing an artwork (film is especially well suited to this), and then after perhaps whatever the opposite of expectation is might prevail, a kind of perceptual openness. Set rules have a tendency to shape and create stable form. In the somewhat open-ended projects I pursue (a mixture of film, sculpture, etc.), I prefer to not ever have one shape or perimeter win out. So adherence to rules or limits as set up by me or anyone else is pretty much ruled out.

3. Do you have a guru? What is disciplined and what is religious?

PS: I have often wished someday I would find a fitting guru, but the only guiding light I can think of is the pastel dusk of Los Angeles. Seen through the windows of my Sunset Blvd studio, this cooling acidic array seems to embody LA's particular character of just unattainable dreams seemingly within reach, and brings to mind the bridges various culture industries here build to try to reach them. The light of a projector spreading

"Anne Collier & Paul Sietsema: Discipline." *The Wrong Times*, Tarzan-Jane Issue, 2006, pp. 3–4.

over the heads of viewers in a theater has replaced the stained-glass-tinted light once cast down on believers in church. Discipline must be found elsewhere. Without discipline (which I see as a sort of map for daily living, a way for people with deficient attention spans to get some things done even when it's not in the blood), many people would simply wander off the page. My projects are maps for three or four years of living, the design of which is such so as not to become hamstrung, but rather have doors open constantly in front of me. I just read somewhere that the powder on moth and butterfly wings evolved to keep them from getting caught in spider webs. Ideas must have this same quality. I like to think of religion as love without reason. I didn't grow up with religion, I've never been close enough to it to understand what it's all about, but my upbringing tries to tell me it is the depowdering of one's wings. I don't want to believe this; I think it might be the opposite. Isn't there a tremendous sense of freedom in unquestioning devotion to a set of consistent and unalterable rules? The limitations of painting always struck me as religious, the large fully developed infrastructure that supports it conceptually and practically, the small wiggle room within which to develop an individuated language (which some painters are able to expand into a seemingly infinite perceptual universe) all seem quite beautiful in their simplicity especially in relation to the messy undertaking of more multi-disciplinary work. Although all mediums now are pretty equalized as delivery devices; it's hard to think of a gesture that doesn't have some kind of history. Painting shares with film its status as an undead medium, and the most fruitful work in both seems to acknowledge and exploit the reverberations of the self-reflexive character that undead mediums embody.

"Anne Collier & Paul Sietsema: Discipline." *The Wrong Times*, Tarzan-Jane Issue, 2006, pp. 3–4.

bottom: Paul Sietsema, *Famous Last Words*, 2006.

4. Were you good at school?

PS: Early on I was placed in special advanced courses, involving field trips meant to get our little hands dirty and expand our as of yet unexpanded minds. I remember a trip to an oil field where under the oil company's large red, white, and blue logo, rocks were split open and prehistoric fossils found. I'm not sure how effective these forays were but they did get me out of class for a while. I barely made it out of the highly regarded liberal high school I went to but then did extremely well at the liberal college I later attended. I guess sometimes the experimentation I was interested in could take place in a school setting and sometimes not. In high school my education took place in a hardcore music scene centered around an upstairs/downstairs duo of clubs in San Francisco; the On Broadway and Mabuhay Gardens. I guess you could say MAXIMUMROCKNROLL, the scene's sometimes-embarrassing newsprint magazine, was my textbook. My high school had a hard time matching the learning curve. Later on in college (where I didn't study art), many of the courses I enrolled in focused on my developing and articulating my own ideas about things that seemed interesting to me. The new cultural anthropol-

ogy major there was exerting an influence on the rest of the school and redirecting critical attention to models of contemporary environments that I found particularly engaging. Then came UCLA where I did finally study art. The studios during the time I was there were like the wild wild West. Just about all aspects of one's education were left up to the individual. There were few if any rules, and limits were meant to be formed by the students and never as far as I saw prescribed. I heard it described as a finishing school for autodidacts.

5. Are rules a necessity or a choice?

PS: Seems to me there are rules and limits to be negotiated in all forms of language, action, form etc. The extent to which someone abides unquestioningly to any of these laws is, of course, not always a choice. To be unaware of the existence of these laws is to live without a certain amount of choice. I'm not talking about precedent here, which I think is a very tricky issue, but rather the importance of understanding how the rules of any language create limitations, many of which are imperceptible. In art it seems that work dealing most directly with rules is sometimes seen as work that abides by the rules most closely. I don't think this is always true. I am interested in work that collapses the rules of a language back into the language itself, creating a kind of feedback that reveals the limitations of that language, and perhaps by extension other languages. Bringing these previously invisible rules to light brings about the possibility of change. Maybe this is the new progress.

"Anne Collier & Paul Sietsema: Discipline." *The Wrong Times*, Tarzan-Jane Issue, 2006, pp. 3–4.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

Subj: **some notes on content**
Date: Thursday, March 27, 2003 12:09:15 AM
From: PaulSietsema
To: XXXXXXXXXXXX

Dear XXXXXX,

I'm back here in Los Angeles now and pleased to report that my travels have had the effect of expanding some of my thinking about Empire. I'd like to thank you for arranging the tour of XXXXXX's Spring Street residence. I realized half way through the visit that XXXXXX had talked at length about this building when I saw him speak shortly before his death in the mid-nineties. Now that I have a much deeper understanding of his work, the house makes so much sense. It is as if his entire oeuvre, his sensibility, is contained there. I see a little of my own way of working in his work, which surprised me. XXXXXX's fundamental interest in Berkeley and the empirical, not to mention immaterialism, mirror my own.

It makes sense to me that Clement Greenberg (the filming of his 1964 living room, depicted in orange in my film, was guided by XXXXXX's work's spatiality) famously did not get XXXXXX. Theirs was a generation gap that could not be crossed. As I understand it Greenberg was looking for formalism in XXXXXX's boxes, where as XXXXXX was interested in almost purely spatial ideas embodied by the immaterial. On my visit to Spring Street I was pleased to find that a series of XXXXXX's plywood box sculptures from the mid-seventies had been permanently installed there. Remember XXXXXX saying how she thought in its composition Empire shared something with this body of work? XXXXXX's works display a sort of extreme synthesis of form and structure, where what the object represents and how it represents is one and the same. Where structure for XXXXXX seems to be embedded in material, space, architecture, with Empire I suppose the structure could be said to consist of information, or more precisely, constructions of history and the images and aesthetics associated with them. Metaphorically speaking, the center of this structure could be seen as vacant, as it is in XXXXXX's boxes, and the information compacted to form a shell of sorts, a structure that is equal to its object. The object in my case is of course the film, which I think can be seen as another form of simplified crystalline geometric space alongside XXXXXX's a-formal sculpture, and which remember, XXXXXX described as an anti-documentary partially due to its spatial nature.

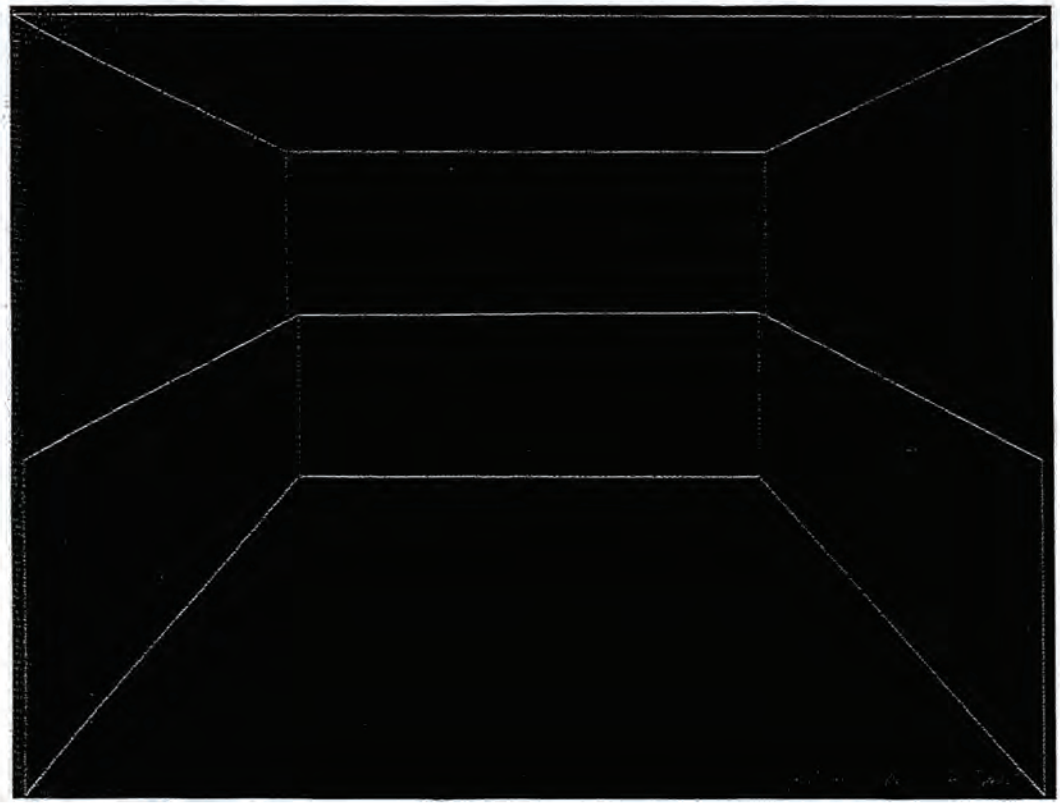
Also, if one considers the commonness of plywood as a material, I think the research for Empire (which consists of evolving notions of the avant garde as it was played out in philosophical, phenomenological, and physical conceptions of space and permeated, as it is, by the inevitable dissolution of its own novelty, force, and relevance) could be understood similarly. In the same way that a XXXXXX plywood box sculpture is not really fundamentally of or about plywood but nonetheless constructed from this common material, the information gathered and arranged while making Empire, which is highly specific in its composition, and certainly common in its own way, is a means to an end and not an end in itself.

"Some Notes on Content." *Uncertain States of America: America in the 3rd Millennium,* December 2006, pp. 102–05.

You might recall that XXXXXX brought up the idea of cliché while talking about Empire over lunch across from the museum. This came as no surprise to me. The word "cliché" originates in late eighteenth century France at the same time Berkeley was writing in Ireland and the Hotel Soubise was being transformed to take the high Rococo form represented in Empire. It is based on the sound made when the matrix, a mold of sorts, is dropped into molten metal to make a stereotype plate for printing, and hints at the eventual reverberating effects of such physical and mechanical processes on perceptual systems. These processes greatly increased the propagation (through methods of repetition and representation) of imagery and ideas that caused them to be spread thin and hollowed from overuse. I suppose what I am getting at is that it is not so much the original meaning of the information and images I use that interests me, but rather the vestiges of what remains of them over time, and the new perceptual contours these resultant forms describe. Film seems somehow to be well suited to this kind of investigation. Well, I think that's most of what I was thinking about, I hope it has been of some help and that the essay is coming along OK.

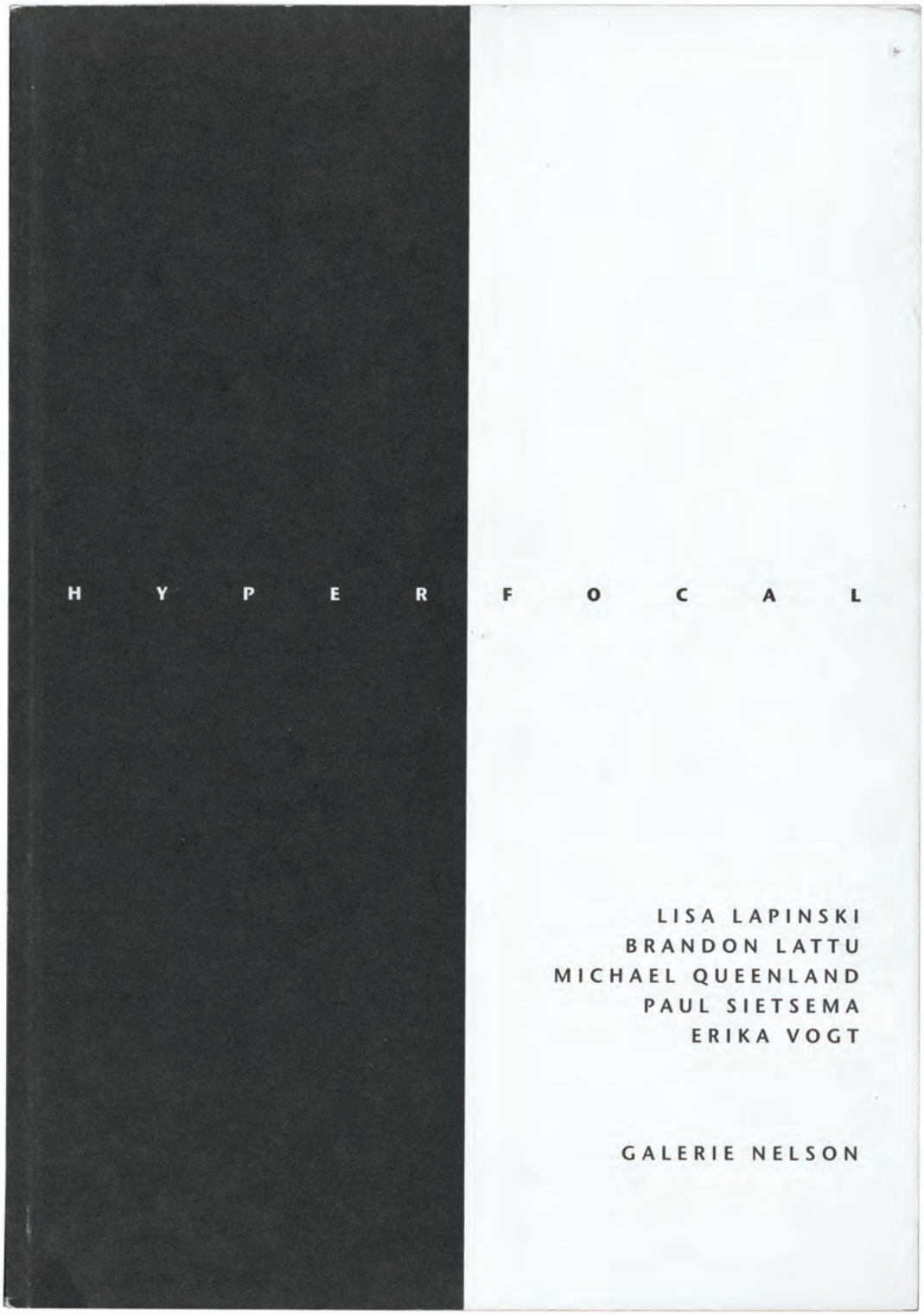
Talk soon,

Paul



"Some Notes on Content." *Uncertain States of America: America in the 3rd Millennium*, December 2006, pp. 102–05.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047



Cueff, Alain, and Paul Sietsema. "Interview with Paul Sietsema." *Hyperfocal - Five from LA*, 2005, pp. 66–68.

A.C.: You reconstruct from a to z the objects or forms which will eventually be filmed and projected onto the screen: a grasshopper, a Louise Bourgeois like sculpture, the apartment of Clement Greenberg, the "Salon de la Princess" in the Hotel Soubise. What is the part played by reconstruction in the activity of seeing? Are these reconstructions a way of analysis, of appropriation, or the very condition of the gaze?

P.S.: The process is less one of simple reconstruction and more of a sort of sculptural investigation through which I attempt to enter worlds that exist within the space of photographic representation. In the extent of this kind of gazing there is an exchange: Over the sometimes fairly long stretch of time it takes me to make the things, while I am studying various images and time periods and the writings, histories, cultural aspects of them, the subject becomes embedded in me, digested in a way that only looking and studying something daily can do, and I am likewise embedded in the subject, meaning the choices I make while making the things that alter the way it looks, as well as how it is represented on film, etc. I suppose some of what this does is to make what might be a purer media space, one that is more inhabitable and which hopefully makes the act of looking more tangible. This compulsion to make a specific type of space carries over into the structure of the film as well: Much of the repetition in Empire is meant to embed the experience of this constructed space into the memory of the person watching the film, where it sits along-side but is a very different animal than other types of experience or memories one has. In the end I suppose the making is an important aspect of the projection of my gaze and it's reception by a viewer.

A.C.: Just as its title, the structure of your film *Empire* (composed of six distinct sequences) is deliberately opened to a number of references and interpretations, none of them succeeding to prevail over another. The network of associations seem to be infinite and labyrinthine. Do you conceive the "empire of vision" as an endless circle from which we cannot escape?

P.S.: When making Empire I had a strong interest in the anachronistic nature of mediated histories. So I suppose I was interested in creating a sort of patchwork of various aspects of different time periods and fitting them together in a way that specifically did not create any sort of logical structure which would allow the viewer to "leave" the space I was attempting to create. Part of what I was trying to get at in the film is how we perceive, how we construct structures out of present visual and past background information (information we have in our heads from our experience up to the point of encountering something to be perceived) to reconcile the infinite and make digestible spaces for the brain, inhabitable spaces. The idea was to confound this natural process of the construction of meaning, which occurs where the conscious and unconscious meet, to create spaces for the mind which appear inhabitable but which one is constantly being kicked out, or rather spaces that are made inhabitable in unfamiliar ways, in which one can find no firm footing in terms of the breed of experience they are accustomed to. All of this hopefully leading to the inability to reconcile the infinite nature of history and its various containers.

A.C.: Among the references in the film, the sitting room of Greenberg in 1964 (shot in orange negative film stock) seems to occupy a central position. How did you happen on this particular image and is it indicative of your relation to modernism or, in a larger sense, of your relation to history?

Cueff, Alain, and Paul Sietsema. "Interview with Paul Sietsema." *Hyperfocal - Five from LA*, 2005, pp. 66–68.

P.S.: For this project I studied (in a state of reverie really, nothing resembling the academic variety) the avant-garde, its conception and the way it has played out over the last century, its various forms, philosophies, stylistic tropes, etc. This led me to be interested in cultural turning points, and while choosing imagery that might relate to these historical moments, I found I was most interested in what might not be considered the "correct" examples. In 1964 in New York the kind of formalist art Greenberg championed had lost its central position in art and was being replaced with Pop oriented work. I decided to use an image of Greenberg's apartment during this period as a sort of wedge with which to enter some of the ideas of visuality I was interested in working with.

Modernism is certainly the extension of the tropes and aesthetics of the avant-garde from the turn of the century onward. Much of the aesthetics of the avant-garde and modernism in particular centered around the machine, the effects of advancing industrialization on visuality. The idea of form born in function seems to find its conception here, but it is late modernism and Greenberg in particular that turned this idea inward and applied it to the structure of abstract art. Instead of the form of a building being dictated by its structural needs and newly available materials as in Mies Van der Rohe's buildings, we now have this somewhat new idea, a philosophy of form-generation, abstracted from true function and applied to the disembodied notions of abstract art. According to Greenberg, painting in particular is most meaningful when it excavates its own constituent parts. Painting retrenches itself by adhering strictly to its inherent nature.

I became interested in the idea of applying the sort of self-reflexivity Greenberg proposed for painting to film. And since film ingests and produces history, history itself would be tied up in this "truth to materials" kind of argument. This seemed natural considering that the movie camera is a machine whose history is synchronous with that of the avant-garde, not to mention that the interaction between the two has always been an important one. Also, since all of the material in the piece is appropriated and so by definition not new, part of the idea was that lacking a contemporary meaning history could be made purely formal (and by doing so portray a specific kind of loss of meaning) the way painting and sculpture had mid-century and twist it into a new shape, one which might reflect the effect of the carriers of history and aesthetics (film, books, photography, etc.)

Cueff, Alain, and Paul Sietsema. "Interview with Paul Sietsema." *Hyperfocal - Five from LA*, 2005, pp. 66–68.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

ARTFORUM

PAUL SIETSEMA

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK

SAUL ANTON

You might think that an artist based in Los Angeles would be concerned, at least minimally, with entertainment value. Not so with Paul Sietsema, whose 16 mm film *Empire*, 2002, currently on view as part of the Whitney's Contemporary Series, is blissfully content to fly in the face of not only Hollywood's categorical imperative but also the *gesamtkunst* hydraulics of Matthew Barney, the social allegories of Steve McQueen and William Kentridge, and the psychological noir of Eija-Liisa Ahtila. But if the thirty-four-year-old artist's oblique homage to Warhol's far longer film of the same name turns away from the narrative or quasi-narrative basis of most contemporary film and video art, where does it turn to?

At first blush, *Empire*, a straightforward, arguably antiseptic presentation of various types of space—two-dimensional and three-dimensional, biomorphic and geometric, formalist and baroque—appears to raise the deadpan ghost of structuralist film. Sietsema begins with a long "sequence" of black on which a grainy image comes up in the way a photograph magically appears in developer. Once visible, however, the image makes us question less what it is and what it means than where the hell we are. For we could be anywhere and, more disconcerting still, *at any scale*—macro or micro, staring at a distant nebula or into a molecule. (In a few moments we see that this is an image of a grasshopper.) By obliterating our sense of scale, Sietsema deprives us of the idea that film records the real space of objects, as André Bazin proposed. Our point of reference here is not the human body and the stable theatrical space of, say, Jean Renoir's *Rules of the Game* but rather a dematerialized, pure spatiality.

Sietsema's effort certainly recalls iconic works of the '60s and '70s, such as Michael Snow's *Wavelength*, 1967. The resemblance, however, is one of style, not substance. *Empire* isn't a phenomenological exploration of the medium of film; nor does it set out to critique visual pleasure, the seductions of narrative, the scopic drive, or any other bogeys of film art (in this respect, Sietsema stays true to Warhol). Instead, *Empire* seems to be interested in what empires are built on: the occupation of space. Yet it isn't a political proposition, an attempt to overthrow one notion of space and replace it with another. Sietsema is content, perhaps at the expense of his audience—whom he cues to expect a beginning, middle, and end by placing the movie projector prominently in the exhibition room—to blithely run through his series of increasingly complex visualizations of space without offering the slightest inkling of "dramatic conflict."

The centrality of spatiality is confirmed by the appearance of negative images of two very different spaces: Clement

Anton, Saul. "Paul Sietsema." *Artforum,* Summer 2003, p. 183.

Above and bottom: **Paul Sietsema, *Empire*, 2002,** stills from a black-and-white and color film in 16 mm, 24 minutes.

EMPIRE ISN'T AN EXPLORATION OF THE MEDIUM OF FILM. IT SEEMS TO BE INTERESTED IN WHAT EMPIRES ARE BUILT ON: THE OCCUPATION OF SPACE.

Greenberg's Upper West Side living room as it looked in a 1964 *Vogue* spread, though here tinted red, and an ornate, gilded and mirrored, eighteenth-century octagonal royal salon. Sietsema built scale models, James Casebere style, as the sets for his movie, and these are on view on another floor of the museum, along with related drawings and collages. A Barnett Newman "zip" painting hangs on the far wall of Greenberg's place and repeatedly appears as a full frame in the film. This zip is literally double (a pair of zips runs down the center of the canvas) and also has a dual role. First, it marks the segue between Greenberg's living room and the sequence showing the salon, suggesting that line, not color—or color seen as line rather than as phenomenon—is what ultimately differentiates space per se. Secondly, the zip also evokes Eisenstein's theory of montage, which rooted cinematic expression in the notion of the cut, the filmic "interval" that exists both within and between frames. Yet here the interval is reduced to its zero degree, which is why *Empire* feels more like flipping through a book of photographs—looking at moving pictures—than watching a film.

It's not difficult to see how the opposition between formalist space, epitomized by Greenberg's midcentury bourgeois room of (art) objects, and baroque space, in which the eye loses itself in an infinitely self-reflecting *mise-en-abyme*, defines a slew of critical antitheses: modern and postmodern, symbol and allegory, flatness and objecthood. But for Sietsema, it's not a matter of choosing the "correct" model of space and, by extension, of art. For this would cast us back to the notion of progress that was so precious to Greenberg, who conceived his formalism in the service of a historical model of art. Instead, each model of space is simply an expressive form, and the intervals between them do not dictate or develop but simply separate. The structure of *Empire* is circular rather than linear; it recalls Heidegger's hermeneutic circle and his effort to extricate Western art from subject-object aesthetics. Transcending narrative resolution, *Empire* simply unfolds.

While difficult, *Empire* nevertheless has a peculiar, haunting power; I found myself recalling it days later and asking, Despite the many and various deaths of formalism, to what extent does Greenberg still haunt contemporary art? Even if we're no longer haunted by his particular tastes, does our art continue to inhabit a model of space that conforms to his formalism? If replacing one model of space with another doesn't get us out of Greenberg's living room, *Empire* does leave us to decide who's haunting what, or what's haunting whom. Whether the haunting will ever end is another story. □

Saul Anton is a frequent contributor to *Artforum*.

Anton, Saul. "Paul Sietsema." *Artforum,* Summer 2003, p. 183.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

The New York Times
Art in Review

Paul Sietsema -- 'Empire'

By ROBERTA SMITH
Published: May 23, 2003

Whitney Museum of American Art

945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street

Through June 8

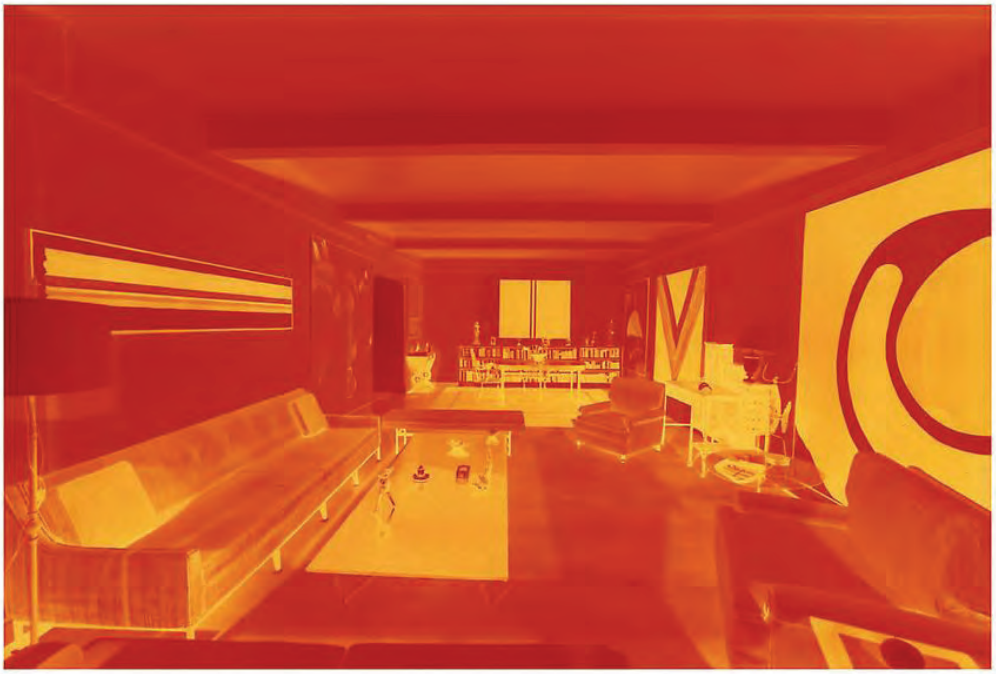
If you like your Conceptual Art appealingly funky yet obscure, you may be attracted to the promising if frustrating New York debut of Paul Sietsema, a sculptor and filmmaker whose work arrives from Los Angeles festooned with buzz.

It helps if you are nearly as versed as Mr. Sietsema in the theories and influence of Clement Greenberg, the most powerful American art critic of the 20th century, or immersed in experimental film. Many people are. Everyone else will have to get by on the artist's dollhouselike model rooms and his outsiderish, language-crazed drawings. The models and drawings are essential road maps to the final destination: "Empire," a scratchy, blurry, brainiac film centering on the models, shot in black-and-white or red-and-white negative. When the equipment is working, the 24-minute film is screened continuously in a separate gallery.

As the title suggests, "Empire" is about power, specifically its systems, inner sanctums and visual styles. One of the model rooms is an 18th-century Rococo salon in Paris whose walls are dense with murals, plaster putti and gilt foliage. The promiscuous ancien régime artifice mixes painting, sculpture and relief.

The other model is Greenberg's West Side apartment, full of paintings by artists like Barnett Newman, Jules Olitski and Kenneth Noland. Purged of representation and illusionistic space, these big abstractions confirmed Greenberg's theories about progress, truth to materials, purity of mediums and the rule of flatness. Mr. Sietsema based his model on photographs that appeared in Vogue in 1964, when Greenberg's own ancien régime, out of step with Pop and Minimalism, was beginning to crumble.

Smith, Roberta. "Paul Sietsema - Empire." *The New York Times*, May 23, 2003, p. E36.



The other model is Greenberg's West Side apartment, full of paintings by artists like Barnett Newman, Jules Olitski and Kenneth Noland. Purged of representation and illusionistic space, these big abstractions confirmed Greenberg's theories about progress, truth to materials, purity of mediums and the rule of flatness. Mr. Sietsema based his model on photographs that appeared in Vogue in 1964, when Greenberg's own ancien régime, out of step with Pop and Minimalism, was beginning to crumble.

The film reveals Mr. Sietsema's formalist involvement with the medium's materiality, history and visual illusion. For example, when the camera zooms in on the parallel vertical lines of a Barnett Newman on a wall of Greenberg's apartment, the experimental films of Stan Brakhage, Paul Sharits and Michael Snow come to mind. The prevailing artifice is interrupted by nature in the form of a grasshopper (the fickle art critic?) and a tunneled, unruly space that could be an underwater cave or an insect's nest. Throughout, there is the mysterious fogginess and creakiness of early film.

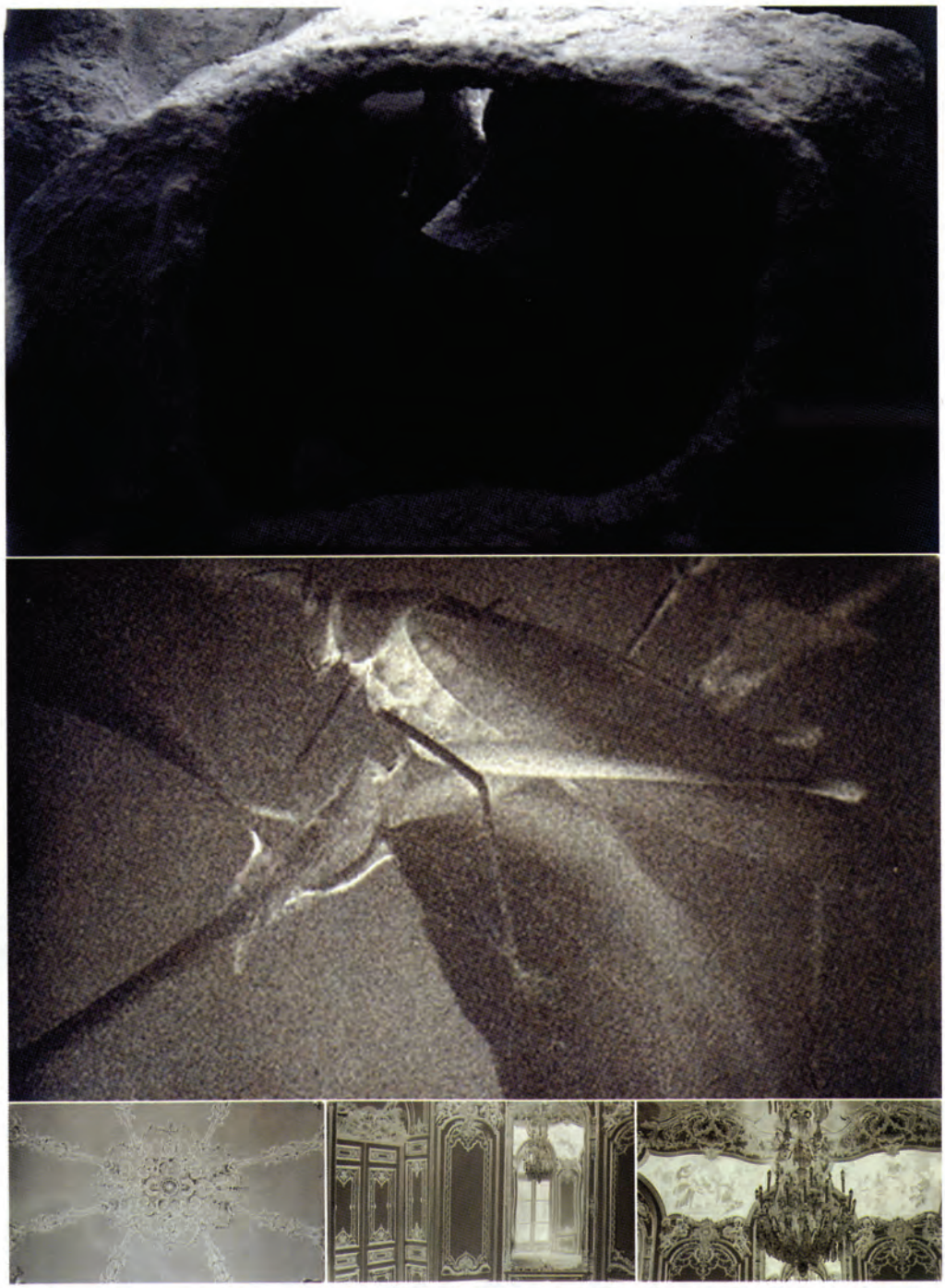
Mr. Sietsema's work needs to be more accessible, but it rewards intense study, starting with his impacted collage-drawings. Their skeins of language, colorful spatial diagrams, deliberate splicings and spiraling mutterings about space reveal the trippy dimension of Mr. Sietsema's obsession with Greenberg obsessions -- and possessions -- while taking it to an altogether different realm. Maybe this sense of liberation and wildness will contaminate his film work more thoroughly. If it does, Mr. Sietsema may find himself in the company of other promising, less adamantly cerebral young artists, including Jim Lambie, Anthony Burdin, Eli Sudbrack, Aida Ruilova and John Bock, which is not a bad place to be. ROBERTA SMITH

Photo: "C. G. Room" (2000) by Paul Sietsema. C. G. is the art critic Clement Greenberg, and the exhibition is "Empire" at the Whitney Museum. (David Allison/Whitney Museum of American Art)

Smith, Roberta. "Paul Sietsema - Empire." *The New York Times*, May 23, 2003, p. E36.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

Flash Art



Intra, Giovanni. "Paul Sietsema: Empire." *Flash Art,* January/February 2003, pp. 82–83.

PAUL SIETSEMA

EMPIRE

Giovanni Intra

GIOVANNI INTRA: *Your new 16 mm film,* Empire *(2002), is an involved and complex production. This is partly to do with the construction of sculptures that were then filmed — for example, versions of Clement Greenberg's apartment from a 1964 photograph in* Vogue, *and of an 18th-century French rococo interior — but more especially with how you have made these images reverberate with one another. It strikes me that* Empire *is the opposite of a documentary and more like a time machine. Can you briefly comment on how the project originated?*

Paul Sietsema: The piece really evolved over a four-year period in which I created and lived in a sort of landscape of books, images, histories, etc. I suppose part of the idea was to use this landscape as the material of the piece. I had been interested in the idea that the purpose of an artwork is not to transmit information or meaning, but is rather to mediate or pattern information or meaning in a way that matches its cultural and temporal context. Creating a world out of images, books, ideas, histories allowed me to sort of mainline this, to construct a sort of boiled-down version or model, based on the sort of pre-packaged information different types of media provide. I ended up combining many patterns of information or meaning relating to specific histories, images, and bodies of knowledge to create a new structure based on the nature of their combination. In doing so I think an environment was created in which linear time was unimportant.

GI: Empire, *which is around 24 minutes long, presents filmed sequences that philosophize about how iconic images are produced and consumed. Magazines, paintings, sculptures, films, and architectural spaces are all implicated. You are using film, in the way a historian uses words, to reflect upon the spaces occupied by visual media. Is* Empire *a kind of theory of visuality as you see it?*

PS: There was no intentional premise; it was more a body of investigation that combined many theories and histories. The images and aesthetics that accompanied the texts in the books, magazines, etc., I was looking at seemed inseparable from the thoughts and ideas surrounding them. Although I ended up filling three bookcases with my research for this project, my relationship to the information and images was pretty objective, one of seeing it all as the extended and hopefully activated subject matter of the piece. There was an attempt to lift the mechanics of the different ways these images, etc., were represented and to allow these mechanics to overcome the subject in specific ways defined partially by the relationship of the particular subject to its own microclimate of representation. Greenberg and his apartment provided not only an entry into this endeavor but also provided a sort of extended and extendable somewhat pre-packaged framework, which in a sense is merely utilized and perhaps somewhat emptied out.

GI: *Other sequences in* Empire *include a grasshopper and some fractal/crystalline patterning that move across the screen. Can you elaborate on their presence and their juxtaposition with the architectural spaces?*

PS: One of the main strains running through the film is a sort of encyclopedia of physical, visual, and intellectual manifestations of space. Greenberg's living room is a somewhat standard box, a New York apartment filled with his belongings, a series of objects in a room. The rococo room (in actuality the Princess salon of the Hotel de Soubise in Paris), rather than collections of objects reflecting an individual, has an importance imbedded in the walls, shape and structure of the room itself; it is more of an object. The room itself has not changed since it was built in the early 18th century. The actual room itself is an image of a time period, a sort of physical snapshot of a somewhat momentary aesthetic. Greenberg's room is a more ephemeral historical view, its aesthetics are pinpointed at 1964 and existed in this form for a very short period of time. It no longer has a physical manifestation, only the photograph taken in 1964. The model of the room in this case is the snapshot. The crystalline structure was not pre-existing as a specific subject the way the rooms were. It is superimposed upon itself an increasing number of times as the film progresses, visually creating a new three-dimensional perimeter with each revolution and new superimposition; its particular existence is only within the framework of film, its location on film is its snapshot. The surface quality, a standard component of image building, is linked to the mirrors of the rococo room which immediately follows this sequence, as a minor investigation of the mirror and doubled or layered space as portal to the fourth dimension, as seen in pre-modernist incarnations of the avant garde, the geometric forms of which supposedly influenced early reductivist modernist sculpture and painting as well as cubism, futurism, etc. This strain of geometric abstraction found its latest manifestation in the types of paintings seen on the walls of Greenberg's apartment, which could also be seen as portals of a kind.

GI: *In an interview with Raymond Pettibon you commented that the sculptures you built — the sets — are constructed to exceed the amount of detail that can be rendered on film, their final destination. This seems to be the effect of the work in general: to make a kind of essay on excess and detail. In many ways an excessive piece, is* Empire *designed to overcome the viewer with the sheer density of its repertoire?*

PS: The project is not meant to highlight excess or detail. Perhaps part of it was creating a kind of mental space reinforced by my own immersion in the production of the project that could then hopefully be transferred onto the viewer; sort of an attempt to manifest instantaneous mental connections based on background knowledge, visual cues, which film gives elaborate versions of, and give all of this to the viewer pre-chewed. To speed a certain type of reception and pull the viewer deeper into parts of the film to locate the meat of the piece at the spot in the mind of taking in and producing images (likewise my intention was to locate much of the aesthetics of the film, as did many of the avant gardes, at the spot in the film apparatus of taking in and producing images.) I guess the depth of work and ideas, etc., in the project is meant to tug at the back of the screen and also the back of the viewer's head to pull him/her deeper into the endeavor. An attempt at a kind of realism that the construction of the models is meant to key off, a realism determined by a certain kind of mental immersion, a chasm that deepens the deeper one looks. ■

Giovanni Intra is director of China Arts Objects in L.A.

Paul Sietsema was born in 1968 in Los Angeles, where he lives and works.

Selected solo shows: 2003: Whitney Museum, New York; 2002: Regen Projects, Los Angeles; 1998: Brent Petersen Gallery, Los Angeles.

Selected group shows: 2001: "The Americans. New Art," Barbican, London; "Sonsbeek 9: Locus/Focus," Arnhem, The Netherlands; The 1st Auckland Triennial, New Zealand; 2000: "00," Barbara Gladstone, New York; "L.A.," Monika Spruth & Philomene Magers, Cologne/Ileana Tounta Contemporary Art Center, Athens; "Mise en Scene: New Los Angeles Sculpture," Santa Monica Museum of Art/CCAC Institute; 1999: "The Perfect Life; Artifice in L.A.," Duke University Museum of Art, Durham (North Carolina).

Empire, 2002. 16mm film in B&W and color without sound. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Intra, Giovanni. "Paul Sietsema: Empire." *Flash Art,* January/February 2003, pp. 82–83.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

frieze

• **Untitled (Beautiful Place)** 1998 16mm film still

• **Untitled (Beautiful Place)** 1998 16mm film still

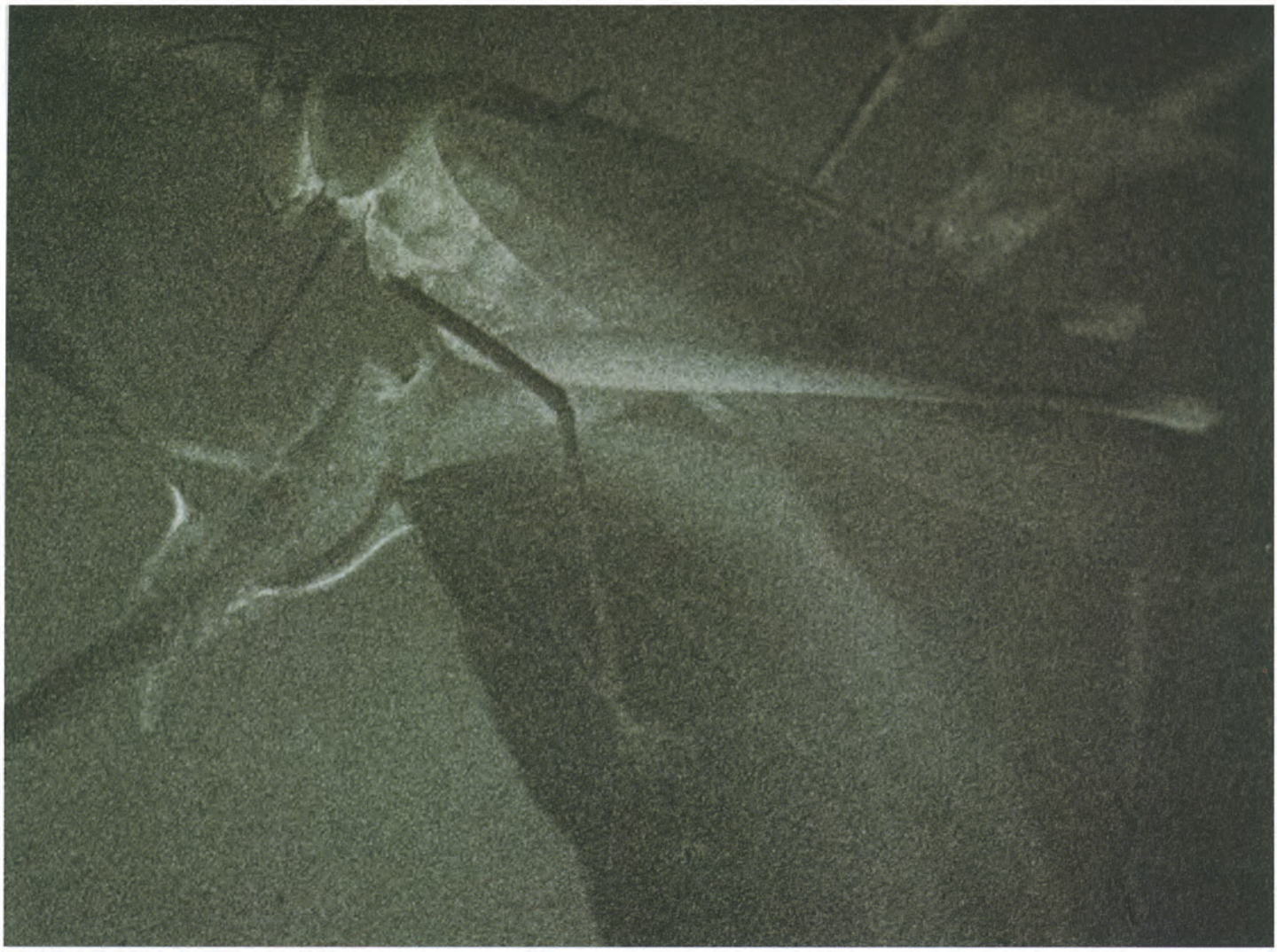
Bruce Hainley
on Paul Sietsema

Model theory

'The identification of immediate with past experience, the recurrence of past action or reaction in the present, amounts to a participation between the ideal and the real, imagination and direct apprehension, symbol and substance.'

Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (1931)

Hainley, Bruce. "Model Theory." *Frieze,* November/December 2002, pp. 90–93.



• **Empire** 2002 16mm film still

Paul Sietsema's first film, *Untitled (Beautiful Place)* (1998), explored the natural anti-naturalism of the imagination's *beau lieu* in a manner worthy of J.-K. Huysmans' Des Esseintes, a filmic negotiation forsaking the real flower for, in the author's words, 'its replica, faithfully imitated thanks to the miracles of gums and threads, percalines and taffetas, papers and velvets'. Appearing to be flowers, Sietsema's filmed plants blossom into a study of how appearances appear and are perceived – the various histories, referents and interior and exterior structures that govern and make up perception. The 'beautiful place' of the title is that of art, of the imaginary confronting memory as the representative of the actual; a translation of the name of the make of camera with which he shot the film (a Beaulieu), it is also the site of making, both handmade and technologized (filmed), and the non-site of the unmade, since film dematerializes what it shows.

A grasshopper; a strange cave-like plaster sculpture recalling Louise Bourgeois' *Fée Couturière* (Fairy Dressmaker) (1963), as well as some of the rare, late sculptures of Jackson Pollock; a gracefully wavering wire construction suggesting Buckminster-Fuller-like geometries, blurring in and out of focus; the decorated living-room of a corner apartment on the 17th floor of 275 Central Park West during a period (c. 1964) when it was inhabited by Clement Greenberg; a rotating crystalline, chandelier-like construction of gels; the Princess's Salon in the Hôtel de Soubise in Paris, designed by Gabriel-Germain Boffrand and completed c. 1739–40, which an old art textbook of mine describes as seeming 'to have been conjured up rather than constructed, so insubstantial are the walls, so effervescent the decorations, which hover above': with the addition of a few hypnotic segues of colour, these are the elements (all constructed) of Sietsema's *Empire* (2002). However one describes it – serious, inspiringly unironic, ambitious, well made, simple (which is not to say uncomplex), gorgeously paced, haunting, intense – Sietsema's new film grows out of his earlier one, broadening its concerns, deepening its significance and methods by exploring even further the constitutive properties of the medium (film), while providing an even more searching meditation on materiality – how matter and its representations, through vision and what is taken as its antithesis, are constructed.

Opening with a projection of grainy grey, the glowing frame, window-like, suggests the wide horizontality of Cinemascope and the geometric shape of painting, the way a Barnett Newman might appear in black-and-white reproduction, for example. Not long after the clicking purr of the projector is heard and the grey rectangle on the wall seen, you begin to wonder, 'Is that all there is, or am I just not getting something?' (Two basic worries when encountering contemporary art.) Seconds later the grain of the film stock swarms to fade gradually into focus a grasshopper on a leafy branch, a creature in its habitat, projected in glowing negative. This sequence from grey to grasshopper is then repeated, and it's only as this happens that the weird object begins to be something other than an enigma or disturbance, that it

Hainley, Bruce. "Model Theory." *Frieze,* November/December 2002, pp. 90–93.

• **Empire** 2002 16 mm film still

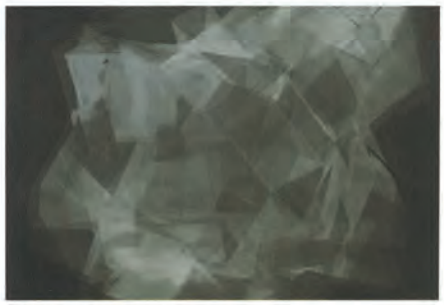
becomes a grasshopper rather than remaining an alien abstraction. Over and over again Sietsema repeats sequences to demonstrate repetition as that which determines seeing as recognition, what allows sight to become thought. The grasshopper is the only creature shown inhabiting a space; all the rest of the spaces represented are depopulated. The insect links the empire of Sietsema's second film with the themes of his first, since the sculpted grasshopper could live peacefully among the constructed flowers; but here it embodies the Asian-moderne elegance and architectonic linearity of nature's forms as well as art passing for something as natural as nature itself.

In *Empire*, as in his first film, everything that we see is constructed by Sietsema (of course, the film is itself a constructed thing). What we see is sculpture. How differently sculpture can appear and be, and how it constructs the space it is in and is constructed by that space (the relation of positive to negative space, insisted on by the use of colour and black-and-white negative processing) are two of *Empire*'s basic concerns. Where the first film naturalized (floralized) a suspension of disbelief that it then slowly suspended, in *Empire* Sietsema quickly abandons nature (the grasshopper) to consider art and the artificial and architectural constructions – constructions that nevertheless delight in the representation of nature. The white plaster sculpture filmed, as much as alluding to Bourgeois or Pollock, becomes a cave-like thing for spelunking, but, whatever the negotiation of the organic and inorganic, it returns to Lascaux (art); the crystalline forms (teased out in wire, animated by gels) and jewel-like colours suggest mineralogy but also the windowed layers of vision itself, the prismatic refraction of light and camera lensing; the exquisite tendrillation of the décor of the Baroque salon schematizes representation of vines, vegetable branchings.

The grasshopper, glowing negatively, doesn't look like a filmed sculpture, but then what does sculpture look like on film? The plaster cave sequence answers this question drily: sculpture has a surface (bumpy); and it can be looked at but also moved around; the camera (as stand-in) turns looking into moving around, a topographical vision, and then burrows inside.Yet if this sequence explores sculpture (its dimensionality, its potential abstraction and non-representationality) – if it, in fact, looks like sculpture filmed – what is to be made of the other parts of the film (the apartment; the spinning crystal; the salon), which don't so easily conform to these notions? Where do outside and inside reside, and, as with something inverted or made negative, are oppositions any longer seen as being opposed? How *Empire* projects materiality – the materiality of film but also the materials filmed (plaster, gels, wire, wood, fabrics) – is reiterated, allegorically, in its own textures (film stocks, development processes, pans, cuts, dissolves), but whatever materiality is projected depends on the absence, and the memory, of its semblance and space as a contrast. Sietsema uses the science of Hollywood special effects to achieve an effect, not to comment on effects. The effects that create the verisimilar affect of spatiality in the spaces of an apartment or Baroque salon are just as much a tool as black-and-white film stock or a dissolve or solarization; they help produce meaning but they aren't themselves what is meant.

As much as the word 'empire' describes a political unit having vast territories ruled by a single authority, it also connotes a period of time, an era, with a beginning and ending. While named after one of the first cinemas (London's Empire Theatre) and sharing its title with Warhol's most infamous film – shot facing into sunlight so that, as the sun sets, the Empire State Building and the rest of the city seem to dissolve into solidity and as night falls lights in windows flick on – Sietsema's *Empire* constructs an idiosyncratic evolution of how styles change and evolve. This evolution isn't exactly Darwinian, since in the film he questions how stylistic periods and modes of thought are *not* outmoded, not even concretized, as much as concertized harmonically. There are still many questions of the Baroque unanswered, still many ways to investigate the vitality of Modernism and the

Sietsema proposes something home-made, non-narrative and anti-mythic. Part of the beauty of *Empire* is that it ends with no conclusion, only possibilities and potentialities.



• **Empire** 2002 16 mm film still

Hainley, Bruce. "Model Theory." *Frieze,* November/December 2002, pp. 90–93.

• **Empire** 2002. 16mm film still

modern, new theories of sculptural space and filmic structure to be explored.

With *Empire* Sietsema proposes something homemade, generously non-narrative and, despite its title, anti-mythic. He attempts intensely to get somewhere, and part of the beauty is that *Empire* ends with no conclusion, no myth, only possibilities and potentialities. After watching it you realize that the gallery is empty except for a few folding chairs; the light and space (actual and remembered) are a quiet reminder that crying out for interpretation probably isn't the point of art – which isn't to say that there isn't plenty to think about.

Periodicity, for example, or colour. Or the relation of still photography to moving pictures, of static objects to architectural space, of various media to flatness. *Empire* is concerned with ideas and the forms of thinking but isn't drearily conceptual. It isn't a film about Greenberg's apartment. (Although one part of it could be understood to be about a photograph of Greenberg's apartment – in other words, about a representation of space – of course, the entire film is an investigation of how space gets represented.) Nor is it a film about the Hôtel de Soubise. Sietsema does want to consider many of the constitutive concerns of painting and sculpture – surfaces, materiality, flatness, space, temporality – and refers quite specifically to spaces and works of art paradigmatically associated with these concerns and the structures (mental, economic, social) and visibilities that contribute to those concerns: this is the film's project and what it projects. His references refer: a Newman painting isn't shown, and the model taken for a Newman shouldn't only be seen to reiterate the fact that Newman gave *The Promise* (1949) to Greenberg as a wedding gift in 1960, but also to document powerfully line as a mark of temporality and flatness, painting as a sublimation of limitlessness, all, as Newman said, to declare space. Sietsema's work, in fact, invites a rethinking of the principles of appropriation and a consideration of how it differs from and depends on repetition. While the Greenberg sequence could be read through the work of Louise Lawler, Sietsema's entire project – how he deploys objects and repetition to provide contrafactual immanence – proposes a Sturtevant-like thinking, along the lines of: content no longer refers to the visible but points to the invisible, which it pushes to deeper layers: an interior and silent space. It is this drastic misplacement of image to concept that moves the dynamics from visible to invisible.

Empire's empiricism depends on imagination; Sietsema provides an empirical survey of the imaginary's spatiality. A demonstration, even a documentary, of varieties of flatness, the film is, and is about, a projection of light through space – transparency, translucency, opacity; light passing through a dark void, through the projector, through the lens of the camera, through celluloid, through the eye – and about how that projection relates to and differs from the way things are seen in the world and in the mind. The wire sculpture shimmering in and out of focus transforms into the gel crystal scintillating flatly, clockwise and anti-clockwise, to become the chandelier in the Hôtel de Soubise. The chandelier – seen most often in reflection, mirrored – looks modelled, dead, not prismatic: it represents the illumination of thought (a sublimation of the cartoon light bulb), light ideated, the silent Baroque. Filled with such thought, the entire salon glows. It may only be through the prism of mind, whirled without end, that the world isn't flat.

Hainley, Bruce. "Model Theory." *Frieze*, November/December 2002, pp. 90–93.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

PAUL SIETSEMA *By* RAYMOND PETTIBON

Raymond Pettibon has paid a visit to Paul Sietsema in his Los Angeles studio to discuss Paul's new project in progress. They stand in front of a large reconstruction of Clement Greenberg's living room that is part of Paul's upcoming 16mm film, Empire.

RP So [the models] you are making for this film are "once removed" images—actually "several times removed" — between the original interior of Greenberg's living room, and the photograph, and then the model, and then the film version of it. Are they going to be like set pieces that disappear into the back lot, maybe to be broken down and reassembled later? Do they have any personal or sentimental value? One of the things about making something with your hands is you get this attachment from that.

PS Yeah, I guess I would say that, partially because of the time it has taken me. Making these models was another way to understand the spaces, because when you look at a photograph you don't necessarily see everything. I like to think of the photograph in the magazine, which is also a representation, as a little window onto the apartment, which I can't go to — I can't go to 1964 and look at Greenberg's apartment. When I was making this model, after six months of working on it, I would still see new things in the photograph. I would be working on something and not be able to figure it out, and realize that I had been seeing the photograph wrong. In that sense it opened up the space of his apartment and I had to fill in a lot of blanks, so there is probably some of me in it too. Actually physically working on it, I think, makes me a bit less attached to it — I don't know why. I think of the model as sort of stationed between his apartment and the final film. Some of the things in front are a little bit too big. I was building it to match what a lens could do, so this isn't even architecturally correct — the floor plan doesn't really match his room at all.

RP It's very detailed, though.

PS Yeah, it is, but, in a way, it only exists for the camera. It's not a true architectural space.

RP For some directors their attention to detail and "reality" almost becomes metaphysical. For example, in directing a western they want every little stitch in the cowboy or the Indian's clothing to be the exact same cloth and handmade. I asked you the other day whether your work is the films, the props. This model will never be shown, right?

PS Yeah, no . . . One thing I realized about what I was trying to do in film, and why I use 16mm film instead of something else, is that the grain is big enough that it obscures a certain amount of detail. What I usually do is exceed the amount of detail that the film can render so your mind is never pushed back by a lack of detail or information. There is always more information than you're getting access to. The films are supposed to be a little bit about becoming immersed in something — partially me doing it, and then somebody watching it.

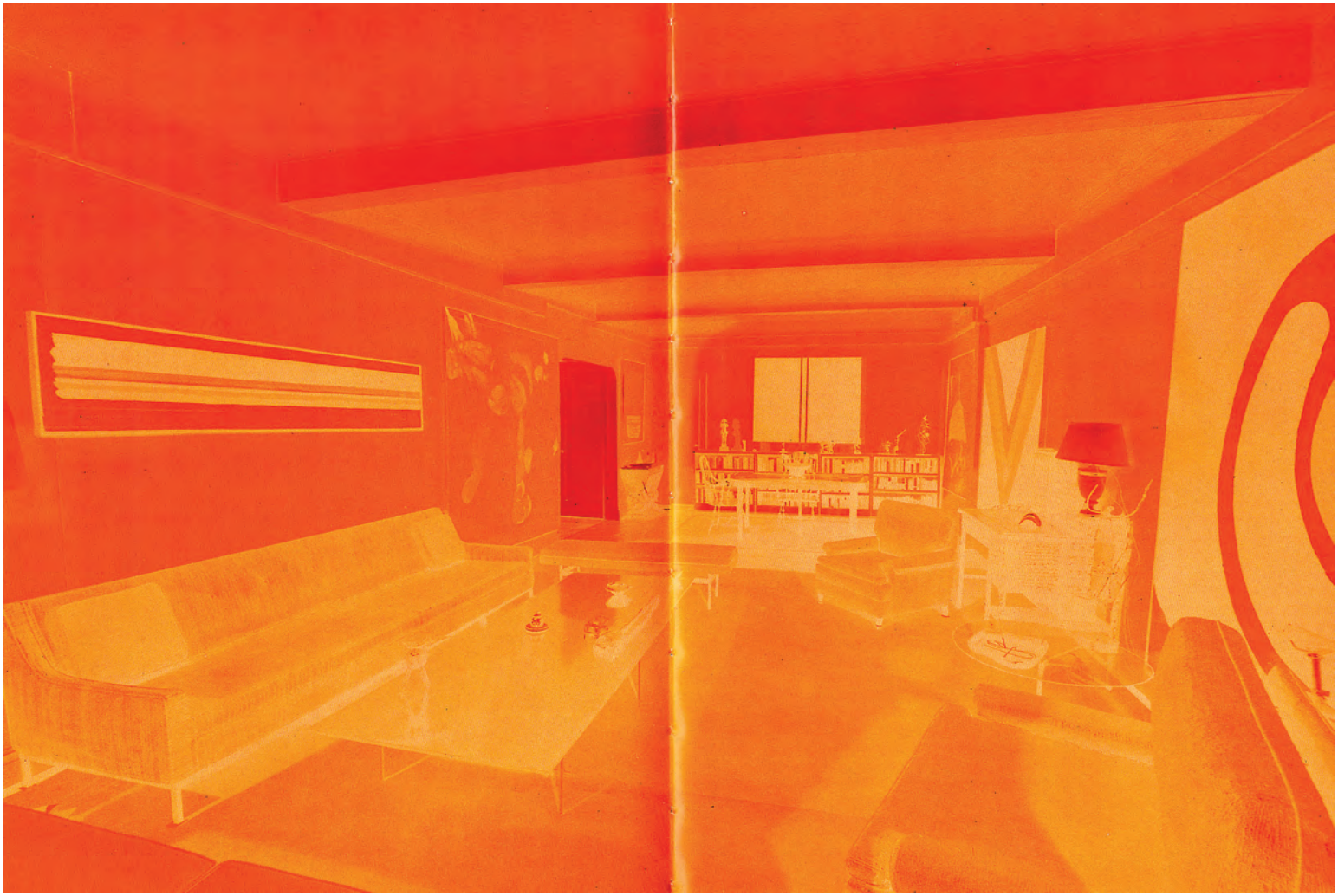
RP I don't know if it's going to come across how much detail there really is. I'm also wondering how much, if any, detective work is involved in building models like these. This is to the people who aren't going to be seeing this: the verisimilitude is really impressive.

PS A lot of it is filling in. This painting was cut in half. I guessed it was an Olitski, and the sculptures in the back were very small and difficult to make out, but you get a feel for this aesthetic. I finally saw another view of the room that showed this painting and I got it almost exactly right in the model.

RP Why Greenberg's apartment? He's one of the major figures of art criticism, but why him? I imagine it's not just because you were turning the page in a magazine and the image appealed to you.

PS A lot of it was that I thought the room looked really nice, and the paintings and the furniture were integrated in a way that struck me as being fairly . . . I don't know . . . acute. I don't know what you call it, but the room was completely integrated. There are other reasons, like formally the image really pulled together. The main reason for using him and this particular time period is that there was a lot of cultural change, you know, the Beatles in music, and the changeover from geometric abstraction to Pop. There was this sort of letting go of the

Pettibon, Raymond. "Paul Sietsema by Raymond Pettibon." *Issue 4,* 2000, pp. 146–51.



Pettibon, Raymond. "Paul Sietsema by Raymond Pettibon." *Issue 4*, 2000, pp. 146–51.

idea of a utopian society Le Corbusier and others had been designing for. I think in abstract art, there's also a bit of a social agenda. I was thinking about how Greenberg championed all these artists and ideas. He really seemed to make a lot of things happen, rather than just recording the moment. That was very interesting to me, to think of him sitting at his desk, thinking, writing, and convincing other people — that's the true utopian moment of the time period, one of the last ones. In his head maybe he was living it for quite a while. I thought about it in terms of somebody considering abstract art as a utopian moment. But I guess I'm interested in thinking about him in his apartment surrounded by his personal decisions about the objects in his apartment and the art that he admired — turning the view back on that and making it biographical. In criticism I think there was a big change from the time that he was writing to a more anthropological view of things — cultural anthropology. I began thinking about his apartment, physically, in terms of culture. He was on the cusp of that change in criticism, so I like the idea of turning the anthropological view on him as a way of thinking about it.

RP So looking at the photograph, there was a clear integrated aesthetic. You could discern the message of his writing from his own home?

PS Yeah. He also writes in the article that accompanied this image [*Vogue*, January 1964] about how the paintings affected the space of the living room. So he believed that they had a certain perceptual effect on him when he was in the room. He wasn't just like, "Hey, check out my Ken Noland . . ."

RP I think with most collectors, when you walk in the door, what's on their walls and tables and floors is supposed to say something about themselves, whether it's personal taste or the equivalent of having the latest model car in their garage. It's like when the O. J. Simpson jury visited his home and his lawyers had rearranged all the pictures on the walls. They took down the photographs of him with rich white celebrities and put up that Norman Rockwell picture of the girl going into the desegregated school for the first time with the National Guard surrounding her. I imagine with magazines like *Architectural Digest*, or even the art magazines that feature collectors, there is a fair amount of rearranging — buying, borrowing, stealing, that goes on. Greenberg would probably be happier with this as a portrait than a photograph of himself at this period. Is this in effect a portrait of him like that?

PS I think it certainly is. I believe somebody's environment and their house and the objects that they surround themselves with reflects, or is equal to the choices they would make in other situations. I don't think there's any way you could say that his writing was a totally separate activity from his choosing a chair. They're both aesthetic decisions, but at some point, especially for him, it becomes very intuitive. In this film there's also a grasshopper that sits on a branch among leaves. It relates to sumi ink drawings and Chinese screens and that sort of thing, but the reason I put it in the film is that Greenberg's room is sort of the opposite, formally, of the grasshopper on the branch. I'm interested in applying Darwinist ideas to cultural evolution. Greenberg's environment is a reflection of him, and the grasshopper evolved to match the leaves so the birds wouldn't come along and eat it. It's a reflection of its environment. The direction of aesthetic flow is the opposite.

RP Greenberg also wasn't a passive collector. I imagine his interior was duplicated among people who read his work, and the art was in many respects was "critic driven" as much as it was the other way around. If you took him out of the equation, I think there would be more gaping holes in some individual pieces.

I saw you had slides of different types of abstract and architectural spaces? Are these all going to be in the same film?

PS Yeah, so it's basically going to be many different spatial experiences. And also this thing here that turns [points to an abstract geometric frame structure]. I film it as it turns, close enough so that you can't quite put the shape together. Your brain really struggles to put it together. When you talk about space, or architecture, or I guess now computers, it's the point-line-plane thing that everyone operates off of in perception. If you put three lines together on a plane, then you have the side of something or a two-dimensional form. Then do that again and pretty soon you have a three-dimensional form. As I was making it, I was filming it and I was trying to make a shape that would be illusive enough that you could never actually put it together, but coherent enough that your brain would really try. The film explores how the way things are represented can be representative of

Paul Sietsema, 16mm film still from *Empire*, 2000

the ways that different types of space throughout art history function. So, like this one with the colors changing on the wall, it's very flat. It's just this color projection on the wall. Whereas with the projection of his apartment, the perspective leads you into the projection. You see it as spatial, while this one flattens out and colors everything in the room. So people sitting in the room are tinted by the colors that are changing. There is another section where these single-frame shots of color just blink. It's sort of annoying as hell, but what it does is push the space forward from the wall, pushes you back. So for me, there are different ways of entering into the space of the projection.

RP There's no soundtrack . . .

PS No, no sound. One thing I like, and the more I read about film I realize this is sort of a cliché, is the sound that the projectors make when you put them in a gallery. I don't like the projector as like a sculptural object at all, but I do like the way the sound meters out what you're looking at. This sound just telegraphs the images so you have this constant meter that relates to all of these different types of movements throughout the film. It makes you think about the machinery a little bit, which I like.

RP Does it bring you back to grade school . . .

PS In grade school we watched films when it rained. I don't know. If it does, that must be a subconscious thing. The only time I saw films at school was in auditoriums and the soundtrack masked the sound of the projector. Film has this really juicy aesthetic and it also has this sort of retro aesthetic, which I don't like, but for me the film is really like making the model. It's like drawing, sculpture, collage. For me, it's this hands-on thing that you can manipulate so many different ways. Video's good quality is that you point and shoot — it's like a snapshot. But I like the number of decisions that you are forced to make whenever you're editing something together, how that leads your perception of something over time. I like the complexity of having to think about formal and structural qualities over a certain period of time.

COURTESY REGEN PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES

Pettibon, Raymond. "Paul Sietsema by Raymond Pettibon." *Issue 4*, 2000, pp. 146–51.