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Amie Siegel: Villa Stuck, Munich / Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Germany



Amie Siegel, *Double Negative* (Installation view), 2015. Courtesy: the artist, Villa Stuck

More skin. That's what producer Joseph E. Levine demanded from Jean-Luc Godard after seeing the first cut of *Le mépris* (1963), Godard's film version of Alberto Moravia's novel *Il disprezzo* (1954). Whatever the commercial hopes invested in the project, they hung on Brigitte Bardot, whose sex appeal (according to Levine) was not sufficiently on show. Godard famously got his revenge by filming Bardot naked on the roof of the Villa Malaparte, her derriere covered by a book. The scene is both sensual and abstract: a comment on the function of nudity in 1960s cinema that incrementally broke down the taboos of what could be shown. This was not Godard's mission.

There is another 'skin' in *Le mépris*: the sun-baked stone of the Villa Malaparte, a house built by a writer (Curzio Malaparte) who wrote a bestseller entitled *La pelle* (*The Skin*, 1949). In Amie Siegel's exhibition *Part 2. Ricochet*, this skin, which recalls antiquity and the Mediterranean, is removed from Godard's film, leaving it naked in a different way. For one, it no longer trails a classical epoch – unlike director Fritz Lang in *Le mépris*, who plans to film *The Odyssey* – and instead dissects a classic of European auteur cinema within the grey boxes of Kunstmuseum Stuttgart. This approach is far more abstract than Godard's. In Siegel's show, the scene with a naked Bardot is replayed by an actress, detached from the 'magic' location of the house built on the cliffs above the sea and transferred into the cold, naked rooms of a modern museum.

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In *Black Moon* (2010, shown at Kunstmuseum Stuttgart in 2011), Siegel conducted a similar dissection on Louis Malle's *Black Moon* (1975). In *Le mépris*, she finds numerous aspects to process and reflect on. First, the text, which she treats as a picture: a series of panels are masked by Moravia's words, creating a shifting, reversible figure, half book page, half graphic (*Body Script*, 2016). Siegel then shifts *Le mépris* into the exhibition space, where the film breaks down into several components over four rooms: a sequence of slides with details of ('naked') old statues (*Surrogates*, 2016); a documentary called *Genealogies* (2016) about the genealogies of *Le mépris* (mainly concerning the Villa Malaparte, but also Italy's antiquities more generally); and then – centrally positioned – the film with the displaced naked woman standing in for Bardot, recreating scenes from the film. Finally, in the last room there is a two-channel installation: on a wall in the background the Villa Malaparte, and on a screen on the floor, foregrounding the scenes shot in Stuttgart (*The Noon Complex*, 2016). Through these connected methods, Siegel's work completes Godard's task of dismantling the form of the closed narrative film.

The comprehensiveness of Siegel's engagement with cinema becomes clear in *Double Negative* (2015), a commissioned work for Munich's Museum Villa Stuck. Siegel's exhibition of the same name, which includes six other works, centres on another iconic building: Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, a black replica of which exists on the other side of the world, in Canberra, Australia. Based on this relationship of original and copy, Siegel develops an interesting discussion of the material essence of cinema as a pre-digital medium: the centrepiece is an installation of two synchronized 16-mm films in which the two buildings overlap, and where they would actually cancel each other out if it were not for the two translucent projection screens placed between the projectors that can be viewed from either side. Even after walking around and between this set-up several times, an unsettling effect remains: the point of reference is lost between the mirrored positive and negative images. Whereas in the cinema the image emerges behind the audience and arrives on the screen, Siegel blocks this source by a technique of overlapping. Unlike the exhibition in Stuttgart, Siegel's work here is based not on a well-known film, but on previous footage of her own.

In the concluding film – in the last accessible room of the Villa Stuck – the works' various strands come together. An excerpt from an ethnographic film about indigenous Australians becomes the central reference. The presence in the film of an Aboriginal individual whose ritual body paint seems to literally reflect on the film stock is another facet of Siegel's play on the 'skins' of cinema. Here, however, she shifts it into the specificity of an archival practice that builds entire institutions around this tactile surface of fragile celluloid: temperature-controlled, sterile rooms where the difference between media and sui generis objects is obscured. In the film, this is highlighted by an aboriginal artefact that is elaborately photographed.

Part 2. Ricochet and *Double Negative* both reveal the art space and the archive as two vanishing points for a cinematic praxis that is oriented towards history. The projectors pointing at each other in *Double Negative* recall the famous closing shot of *Le mépris* in which Godard aimed the lens of a camera at the lens of a camera. Siegel makes it clear that the equation implied by this gesture does not amount to media essentialism. Rather than a simple positive, a double negative always makes broken multiples – ricochets, but never duds.

<https://www.frieze.com/article/amie-siegel-0>