

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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Art in America

In the Studio: Amie Siegel



Portrait by Grant Delin

Best known for her cinematic video *Provenance* (2015)—which traces the ownership history of chairs designed by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret from their current well-heeled owners back to the government buildings in Chandigarh, India, for which they were made—Amie Siegel is a midcareer artist whose oeuvre includes film, video, photography and installation. Since 1999, she has created more than a dozen major works, including two theatrically released feature-length films and a series of large-scale projects with multiple interrelated parts. Of the latter, surely the most complex is *Winter* (2013), an installation in which a 33-minute film, set in a possibly post-nuclear-holocaust

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New Zealand, is repeated at different times with different soundtracks, each composed specifically for that exhibition venue and performed live by musicians, voice-over actors and foley artists.

Focusing on diverse topics—including voyeurism, psychoanalysis, East German history, America's post-2008 housing crisis, digital reproduction and the global trade in cultural artifacts—Siegel's increasingly elegant and astute works dive deep into her subjects but never explain them. Instead, the artist seeks out metonymic locations (an Australian copy of a Le Corbusier-designed building houses a museum archive's digital copying facility) and structures her work like poetry, finding coincidences in seemingly unrelated entities (the Stasi, American Indian culture and group therapy). A preoccupation with power in its many guises—political, economic, institutional, psychological—runs through all her work, along with a penchant for repetitive and self-contextualizing formal gestures. Indeed her work's most abiding subject may be its own nature as an apparatus of cameras, microphones, cinematic tropes and art history—and thus as itself a manifestation of power. Siegel's commitment to rendering cinematic control transparent has succeeded at the same time in illuminating myriad connections between spheres of real-world power in which we are all in one way or another implicated.

Siegel was born in 1974 and grew up in Chicago, where her mother owned a retail business and her father was a psychoanalyst. She earned a BA from Bard College in 1996 and an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1999. Except for 2003-08, when she was based in Berlin—initially on a DAAD Berliner-Künstlerprogramm residency, later as a Guggenheim Fellow—she has lived in New York ever since. Her works have been screened in major film festivals all over the world and in the 2008 Whitney Biennial. In 2014, she had a solo exhibition at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, and she has been included in group shows at the Hayward Gallery, London (2009), the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2010), and the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco (2013). This fall she will be in "Wohnungsfrage (The Housing Question)," a group show at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin. In early 2016, she will have three solo shows: at the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, at the Temple Bar Gallery + Studios, Dublin, and at the Museum Villa Stuck, Munich, which commissioned her new work *Double Savoye*. We spoke over the course of two scorching days last summer in her studio in Williamsburg, with an air conditioner humming in the background.



Left: View of Amie Siegel's installation *Winter*, 2013, 16mm film, performance and objects; at Ratio 3, San Francisco, 2014; Right: *Winter*, 2013, 16mm film transferred to video. Courtesy Simon Preston Gallery, New York.

STEEL STILLMAN How did your interest in film begin?

AMIE SIEGEL As a small child I was preoccupied with the visual, in particular with the theatricality of display. My mother owned a high-end women's boutique, and, from an early age, I worked on the mannequins and windows; sometimes they were entirely my doing. When the store moved in the mid-'80s to River North, which was then Chicago's gallery district, its design included a curved elevated runway for fashion shows. So matters of stillness and movement—and the importance of images—are deeply ingrained. At the same time, my father was a prodigious shutterbug. He would shoot vacations and birthdays with his Super 8 camera and spend hours in the evening piecing the results together on a small editing viewer. At each birthday party there would be a screening of the prior year's scenes—evidence of a passion for repetition that I seem to have inherited.

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I began using his Super 8 equipment as a teenager. When I was 16, I went through a summer film program, and it occurred to me that film language, as it was commonly used and discussed, consists mainly of culturally encoded practices, systems that are endlessly reiterated. I was so disappointed that I went looking for other approaches. These emerged at Bard, where I studied poetry and 16mm film and video, and developed further in graduate school, where I began to connect avant-garde cinema to contemporary art practices. In the late '90s, I was focused on people like Chantal Akerman, Valie Export, Harun Farocki and Jean-Luc Godard, who were making works—in film, sculpture and performance—that questioned their particular apparatuses.



The Sleepers, 1999, 16mm film, 45 minutes.

STILLMAN *The Sleepers* [1999], your first fully developed film work, was made while you were still in graduate school. It was shot at night in Chicago, Peeping Tom-style, looking into the brightly lit high-rise apartments of strangers across the street. Occasionally we are able to make out bits of conversation or television dialogue, including Grace Kelly's classic line from *Rear Window*: "Tell me exactly what you saw and what you think it means."

SIEGEL Despite that reference, *The Sleepers* is perhaps more connected to *Vertigo*, in which Jimmy Stewart's character—and the film's audience—quietly observes Kim Novak for the first third of the movie without understanding what she's doing; but both Hitchcock films link cinema to the interpretive impulse of imagination. Growing up, I was fascinated by voyeurism. Whether at home, in a '70s-designed house with large internal windows—including one with the aspect ratio of a cinemscope that looked into my father's study—or visiting friends' high-rise apartments and looking into other buildings, I was already aware of the combination of proximity and distance that connects the watcher and the watched.

The Sleepers starts out in a seemingly distanced observational mode, accumulating views of apartments across the way. Its montage is both sequential and simultaneous: shots of individual apartments, seen one after the other, are mixed with wider shots of two or more apartments at a time. But gradually clues emerge to contradict the film's seeming objectivity. You realize you are hearing conversations that would be impossible to make out from across the street. Then, late in the film, it suddenly becomes clear that the camera has entered one of the apartments, and you understand you are in the realm of fiction. With *The Sleepers* I became interested in making works that first show you how to view them, and then violate their internal rules.

STILLMAN Voyeurism is also central to your first feature-length film, *Empathy* [2003], which juxtaposes interviews with actual psychoanalysts and a fictional account of a psychoanalyst/patient relationship, in which the patient is a woman who works as a voice-over actress. These are intercut with audition footage of actresses vying for the patient role and a faux documentary comparing psychoanalysis and modernist architecture.

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SIEGEL *Empathy* explores voyeurism and possible misuses of power in the analyst-patient dynamic and in two other dyadic relationships: interviewer-subject and director-performer. I was interested in the fact that all three require a degree of transgression, of boundary crossing, to achieve their desired outcomes. *Empathy* enacts these boundary crossings by violating borders between fiction and nonfiction, and by upending formal expectations. At the beginning, the analyst interviews and screen tests are shot on digital video; the analyst-patient fiction is on 16mm film; and various director-performer production scenes are feeds from the video monitor, which provides a kind of surveillance of the production itself. But these distinctions blur as the film proceeds, unfolding to the point of near collapse. Fictional and real characters cross into each other's spaces: the psychoanalytic gaze is turned on the analyst, the interviewee becomes the interviewer, and the director becomes the performer.

STILLMAN You often refer to *The Sleepers* and *Empathy*—and a third work *DDR/DDR* [2008]—as “cine-constellations,” distinguishing them from documentary or essay films. What do you mean by that term?

SIEGEL For each of the cine-constellations, I shot a range of material—staged and un-staged footage that others might have considered wildly disparate—and then “found” the film in the editing, where associations that were intuitive when researching or shooting became more pronounced. It was a bit like writing poetry, with accumulating juxtapositions of discontinuous elements leading to implicit outcomes. The three cine-constellations reprise an internal script. In each, the same concerns—voyeurism, memory, public and private space, power and authority—are pushed through different filters. And scenes recur from one to the next, sometimes recognizably so: the apartment entered by the camera in *The Sleepers*, for instance, is visited by the fictional patient in *Empathy*.

STILLMAN The third work in that series, *DDR/DDR*, was informed by the years you spent in Berlin in the early 2000s. As its title and production date suggest, it's a kind of belated mirror image of the former East Germany (GDR). In addition to its obvious link to *Empathy*—psychoanalysts appear throughout the film—*DDR/DDR* grew out of your research in the archives of the Stasi and of the former East German film industry.

SIEGEL Often my work reproduces the behavior of the system it describes. *DDR/DDR* examines the Stasi as an entirely analog enterprise, one that collapsed before the advent of digital technology. It may have been an organized apparatus of the state, but the Stasi also comprised individuals whose aesthetic choices and aspirations are visible in the surveillance images and training scenes they shot. In addition to Stasi films and videos and interviews with psychoanalysts, *DDR/DDR* interweaves multiple elements: sequences from East German “Westerns” (or “Easterns”) in which land-loving “Red” Indians triumph over imperialist Cowboys; segments with former East Germans who have remained Indian hobbyists; scripted scenes with a former East German film star; and footage of myself, with cameras and microphones, performing my own acts of interviewing and surveillance, as part of the production apparatus.

STILLMAN You moved back to the U.S. in 2008 and soon began work on a 20-minute video projection, shot on film, called *Black Moon* [2010], which is a loose remake of a 1975 Louis Malle movie of that name, a surrealistic tale set amid a civil war between the sexes. Where did the idea for this piece come from, and why does it end with one member of its all-female cast finding a magazine with a fashion spread that features herself and her fellow characters as they have appeared in the film?

SIEGEL I returned to New York just as the financial crisis hit. New or nearly new homes and housing developments all around the country were vacant and fast becoming ruins. After doing research in Florida and California, I began filming foreclosed areas between Los Angeles and Palm Springs. There, empty developments were often set behind haphazard barriers and fences, sandbag walls even, as if those would-be neighborhoods, not far from U.S. military training grounds, were war zones. So I decided to insert a post-apocalyptic science fiction within my already composed tracking shots and other material, and thought of Malle's *Black Moon*, a DVD of which I'd found earlier that year in the Centre Pompidou bookstore in Paris.

My *Black Moon* is not so much a remake as a condensation of gestures and moments from Malle's original. I returned to the desert with a cast of five women, dressed in battle fatigues and carrying weapons, and filmed them on patrol in those domestic ruins. The final sequence you mention is a *mise en abyme*. The magazine photographs reframe our understanding of the women's performances to that point and refer to Western culture's images of women and war.

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I've long believed that supermodels are the silent film stars of our time, and *Black Moon* engages that lineage of stillness and gendered narrativity.

STILLMAN *Black Moon* is shown in exhibition spaces accompanied by a two-channel video piece, *Black Moon/Mirrored Malle* [2010], and a series of 15 photographs, "Black Moon/Hole Punches" [2010], which derive from a step in the film laboratory's processing of the *Black Moon* film. From this point on, your work generally eschews regular cinema presentations in favor of contexts where its several parts can be viewed together. What led to your making *Black Moon/Mirrored Malle*?

SIEGEL The only extra material on the original *Black Moon* DVD was a 4-minute interview with Malle, in French, in which he discusses his film. It's a tour de force performance of the '70s male auteur. I decided to re-perform the interview in English, using myself as interviewee, reproducing the original shot structures and Malle's gestures and words. In *Black Moon/Mirrored Malle*, the two versions play simultaneously on adjacent monitors that mirror one another. Besides the feminist *détournement* of Malle's original, I love the fact that a viewer must decide whether my re-performance refers to Malle's film or to my own. As you know, I've always made works for exhibitions. What the *Black Moon* project signals is a shift—not from a cinema context to an exhibition one—but from the discursive mode towards a more implicit and visual one. In *Black Moon* and the pieces I've made since, there are no voice-overs; instead I insist on the deadpan of the artworks themselves, on the physical and spatial montage of objects and projections in a room.



Black Moon/Mirrored Malle, 2010, two-channel video installation, 4 minutes; at the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, 2011

STILLMAN *Provenance*, your next project, which was on view for nearly six months last year at the Metropolitan Museum, took the template of a provenance document as its script.

SIEGEL *Provenance* is an explosion of a sequence in *DDR/DDR* that followed an East German-designed modernist chair from its native Berlin to an upscale Tribeca furniture store. Flipping through an auction catalogue in 2011, I spotted an example of the GDR chair and then landed on a spread of Chandigarh chairs a few pages later. I knew immediately I wanted to make a film work featuring the Chandigarh furniture that would perform the movement of objects through the global marketplace, highlighting differences between cultural, monetary and use values. A few weeks later, reflecting on my own role as an artist in the economy of objects, I decided to auction *Provenance* and

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make a second film, *Lot 248* [2013], depicting the sale of the first. Thereafter, the two films would be exhibited together.

STILLMAN Your work's cinematography has become increasingly elegant over time. In *Provenance* you seduce viewers with leisurely, low-angle tracking shots that anthropomorphize their chair-subjects.

SIEGEL *Provenance* was the first work of mine shot entirely in high definition, which can have the stillness and clarity of cut glass. The film is really a succession of tracking shots whose effect is to put viewers in a mode of heightened consideration, looking carefully at every detail, anticipating what will enter the frame next. At times, the lighting and framing self-consciously reproduce tropes from high-end shelter magazines. In a sense, the work preys on viewers' desires but aims to render them complicit in their viewing as well.

STILLMAN Right now, you are finishing *Double Savoye*, a multi-part work for your upcoming solo exhibition at the Villa Stuck. Its inspiration was a replica of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye that was built, in Canberra in 2001, as part of the postmodern Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

SIEGEL The Australian Villa Savoye [designed by Howard Raggatt] is black, a negative copy, or shadow version of the white French original. It houses an archive of ethnographic material relating to indigenous Australians, past and present, and a sophisticated copying laboratory geared toward the preservation and digitization of its collections. My piece will have two parts. The first will be a pair of 16mm black-and-white films, projected on opposite walls of one room, showing the exteriors of the two buildings in matching shot choreographies. The two films will be printed in negative, so the white building will appear black and vice versa.

The second part, playing in an adjacent room, will be an HD color projection that will lead viewers through a sequence of shots, from exterior to interior, of first the white building and then the black. Once inside the black building, you will encounter what is, in effect, a massive post-production imaging facility. Ethnographic objects and analog images and audio—collected over the last century under the rubric of “salvage ethnography,” a purported race against time to document “other” cultures before their “disappearance”—are being systematically digitized at the Institute. In the black Savoye, salvage ethnography becomes salvage media, duplicating and transferring information from disappearing formats to more contemporary ones.

STILLMAN The last time we talked you referred to the black Savoye building as a kind of pseudomorph, recalling the phenomenon where one mineral takes on the outward form of another. It seems to me that there are pseudomorphic features in many of your works—in the reprises that thread through the early feature films, in the Malle remakings, in your documentation of the *Provenance* auction.

SIEGEL Absolutely. Repetition and remaking are regular preoccupations of mine, forging links that tie my works together or feed them back into themselves. At the end of the HD projection of *Double Savoye*, viewers will see the 16mm positive print of the white Savoye wind its way through the digital transfer machine in the black Savoye. It will be the first time that footage is seen in positive. And then the projection loop begins again . . .

Work by Amie Siegel in “Wohnungsfrage (The Housing Question),” at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Oct. 23–Dec. 14.

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