

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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# ARTFORUM

## Amie Siegel: 1000 Words



Still from Amie Siegel's *Provenance*, 2013, HD video, color, sound, 40 minutes 30 seconds.

**AT A TIME** when restitution debates rage, it would be easy to suppose that Amie Siegel's film *Provenance*, 2013, is simply a denunciation of a trade that has seen the furnishings designed for the Punjabi city of Chandigarh by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret wrested from their original setting and sold by unscrupulous dealers into the luxury designer-furniture market in Western Europe and the United States. But Siegel's work does not really push this agenda; rather, it concerns the vagaries of value as objects move across the world.

Adopting the structure of the provenance list, the film moves backward, starting in the slick and austere residences of the collectors who acquired the furnishings, with smooth tracking shots slowly bringing each chair and table into view. We see various auctions and their attendant showrooms, then furniture restorers, who rip the decrepit original upholstery off the wooden frames. Finally, we arrive in Chandigarh. But rather than denuded buildings, Siegel shows us mountains of discarded chairs and desks on roofs, a parliament chamber brimming with original furniture, and an office in which workers choose new ergonomic swivel chairs over lowly, immobile Corb stools. The 1950s furnishings, we recall, were not some kind of ancient cultural property anyway, but produced in Punjab at the behest of European architects.

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And so a different picture emerges from the one we might have expected of greedy Westerners and robbed Indians. And where previous artists engaging the idea of provenance have sought to undermine the cultural respectability of the last owners (for instance, Hans Haacke with *Manet-PROJEKT '74*, which revealed the Nazi links of the last private owner of the French artist's asparagus painting), Siegel's work shows how different ideas of value coexist in a world marked by vast cultural disparities. The film, pointedly produced in an edition of five, addresses the circulation of capital at large, as well as, implicitly, the art world and its ideas of value predicated on scarcity, even when the scarcity is a fiction created by the market. To underline this, having exhibited the film in New York this past September, Siegel placed one of the editions on sale at Christie's in their October Post-War and Contemporary day auction in London, inserting her work into the very market it aims to represent. *Provenance* sold for \$84,788.

—Mark Godfrey

**IN 2008** I made a feature film, *DDR/DDR*. In one sequence, we follow an East German molded-plastic chair from its home in a former socialist *Plattenbau*, or prefab apartment block, to a flea market, then to a hipster shop, where it is bought before being packed on a cargo vessel and shipped across the ocean, eventually landing in a high-end Tribeca store. *Provenance* was conceived while I was checking up on the chair and found it for sale at auction. A bit farther along in the same catalogue, I came upon a spread of Le Corbusier and Jeanneret chairs from Chandigarh. I remembered photographs of Chandigarh that a friend had shown me: furniture piled up in odd places, on a roof, in a paper-filled office, and so on. I began to put it together; further research revealed the immense trafficking under way.

I knew almost instantly that *Provenance* would flow backward, beginning in the homes—in Antwerp, Paris, London, New York—of people who had ultimately bought the furniture and then moving to the auctions, the furniture's restoration, the cargo shipping, and finally to Chandigarh. This reverse trajectory mimics a provenance, the document that begins with an artwork's current possessor and moves to each successive earlier owner. The film is one long reveal. In a certain sense it's the most Hollywood film I've ever made, in its use of establishing shots, in the timed acts of disclosure, but also in the production of desire.

I'm continually preoccupied by cinematic tropes—establishing shots, mimesis, remakes, tracking shots; the estranged use of film language. *Provenance* is essentially one parallel tracking shot, unfolding like a ribbon in time, but backward. When you physically lay track in production, it feels like you're laying out the film, like you're already editing. So there's a structural parallel between the film's unfolding and the track itself (as a parallel tracking shot is predictive, anticipating everything beyond the frame). Also, the tracking shot suggests surveillance. Tracking laterally doesn't involve one psychologically in quite the same way as when the camera tracks in on an object or person. For me, staying parallel has always been a maintaining of the image as an act of representation rather than as an act of involvement. I'm often working with a repetition of tableaux so that you have a kind of associative pattern recognition as you move through *Provenance*.

In the filming of the collectors' homes, there's a collusion with a certain aesthetic, a caliber of image familiar to the shelter magazine—the lighting, the framing, the sense of the absent owners through their things: The lights are on, the fireplace is lit, but no one's home. The film is deliberately rendered as an object of beauty. The *Architectural Digest*-like presentation of the homes becomes the locus of a projective desire, the allure of unattainable spaces. *Provenance* was filmed in a supremely high-end HD, and everything is supercrystalline and arranged. It's one of the mirroring gestures the film performs. The piece itself is part of the circulation of objects it depicts.

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The furniture's origin is Chandigarh, but at the same time, it's not. Two Swiss architects, Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, built Nehru's dream of a post-Partition "modern city." The sale of Chandigarh furniture is a marketing back to the West of its own midcentury design, layered with the patina of the Orient. But I'm not particularly interested in Le Corbusier, or even in a critique of him, for that matter. It's the objects and their genealogies and the various overlays they gain—modernism, the colonial—that fascinates.

When the Chandigarh sequence commences, you have the hilltops and the mountains, and birds fly across. It's kind of like Genesis. It signals the idea of origins (of the furniture), but it speaks also to the mythic qualities of the concept of origins and to the value emphasis projected onto the origination point of any object, further contextualizing it within a safe cushion of historical or cultural narrative, one that bestows value.

The shot revealing the pile of furniture on the High Court roof reminded me of the old adage that you're never supposed to see a dealer's stock. My mother owned a clothing store, and I learned quite young that a clever proprietor puts out only one of each item at a time: Too many items at once is unappealing; it renders the item common. The rooftop shot also generates a kind of speculative complicity, as it suggests those pieces are still there for the taking.

There is a scene in Chandigarh—at Le Corbusier's Secretariat Building—in which the camera tracks along an office full of workers at computers; new bright green office furniture lines the new cubicles. One lone chair by the architects remains. In the beginning of the film, the placement of Chandigarh chairs in owners' houses and in auction-preview exhibitions is so rarefied, so mannered and staged; in the India section, it is quite improvisatory. The furniture is used, maintained, disused, discarded. In one office, derelict chairs are piled up in a corner; in the Palace of Assembly, the furniture is in good condition. In the office scene, the new is clearly more valuable than the old. In fact, it's so valuable that the plastic wrap is left on the ergonomic chairs until it peels off from use.

**EARLY ON**, I decided that as well as making the film *Provenance*, I would put one edition up for auction and film the auction of my film. I contacted Christie's and arranged for one from the edition of five to be sold in the Post-War and Contemporary sale in October, just over a week after the closing of my show at Simon Preston Gallery in New York, in which *Provenance* "debuted." This gesture repeated, or completed, the flow of objects and capital that lends the film its subject. I didn't actually know what would happen in the auction—it was a speculative, reflexive act—but it turned out that the room was packed; there was tremendous activity around *Provenance*, multiple bids for the lot,

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and the film sold for an unexpected figure, coincidentally approximating the hammer price for several items of Chandigarh furniture seen auctioned off in *Provenance*. This project in fact comprises three pieces—the film *Provenance*, a wall-mounted component with the *Provenance* page from the Christie's catalogue embedded in Lucite, and the film of the auction of the film, titled *Lot 248*. In future installations, one would walk in and see *Provenance*. You experience it and think you've got it. And then you walk around the corner, and there—perhaps on the other side of the wall on which it was projected—you encounter the film of the auction of the film you just saw, *Lot 248*, and the Lucite piece, *Proof* (*Christie's, 19 October 2013*), just beyond.

**IT WOULD HAVE BEEN** a bit simplistic to make a condemnation of the furniture's trafficking and commodification in the West. I'm interested in the connections between such questions and artworks themselves, setting up ideas that get undone, or revised, that feel at times guilty of their own critique, that might be deceptively calm or pleasurable. I think of the film as having its own implicit ideas.

I can see why *Provenance* might be called allegorical. It engages a very particular story but refuses to tell it explicitly, instead revealing—and enacting—a disturbing flow of objects and capital. It's unsettling to some for the specifics portrayed in the piece: We see, for instance, that what's a tremendously valuable commodity to one person is merely a functional item to another, undercutting the myth of inherent value. But it's also estranging in that it performs the precarious and culturally subjective assignation of value and speculation that fuel the Western circuit of objects.

There's a latent sense of the uncanny in *Provenance*, which arises from the lack of focus on humans, who are at times even cut off as they walk by the furniture—they're ephemeral. The objects persist beyond us. Though I shot the piece with a high-end aesthetic in mind, I also undercut that by pitching the camera low, at "eye level" with the furniture, thus promoting a kind of identification with it. There are strange aspects of anthropomorphism, as the chairs take on aspects of people and become like characters. There's something both obviously and ineffably diasporic about it. If you see one chair alone, it's like an orphan, it's synecdochic, a part that speaks to a larger whole that's absent, from which it has been removed. But when the furniture is grouped together in a collector's home, it's like a menagerie. Not a zoological collection but an eighteenth-century monarchic menagerie, wherein the connoisseur class privately accumulated things as an illustration of wealth, an exhibition of class and taste.

***Provenance* is on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York through January 4, 2015.**

<https://www.artforum.com/print/201401/1000-words-amie-siegel-44374>