

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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# *BOMB*

Amie Siegel

## Amie Siegel by Lynn Hershman Leeson



Amie Siegel, still from *Provenance*, 2013, HD video, color, sound, 40 minutes, 30 seconds.  
Images courtesy of the artist and Simon Preston Gallery, New York, unless otherwise noted.

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by Lynn Hershman Leeson



*Black Moon*. There she was, mostly hidden beneath a setting black moon, nearly punched out of photographic visibility. Yet, like the Cheshire cat, she was still there in an unsettling way, staring into infinity with the kind of wisdom and perceptual grace that usually accompanies the passage of time.

When I spotted Amie Siegel again, this time in a seamless projection, she was costumed in the style of a 1950s musical, flaunting an invisible wink that rekindled the uncanny spirit of old Berlin.

All of her works turn the architecture of relationships, the structure of fiction and its edges, inside out. In Siegel’s *Black Moon/Mirrored Malle*, a companion piece to her *Black Moon*, she remakes Louis Malle’s *Black Moon* (1975), inverting time and gender. Is she over-writing or over-righting? There I found Siegel yet again behind a fourth wall, defying any presumption of a limit. She has a rare ability to rack focus on itinerant nomadic drifts that are powerful in their collateral implications, and extend the space and time of their conceptual boundaries.

And that brings us to her latest piece, *Provenance*. Impeccably crafted, it simultaneously tracks the evolution, history, and future of furniture designed by Le

Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret for Chandigarh, India. The film meticulously exposes the architects’ and the furniture’s lonely diaspora as well as the legacy of value in a global financial market.

The use of tracking shots, with the camera suspended on a dolly that moves with precision, is predictive as it moves beyond the cinematic screen and is brought to a splendid final act, a radical piercing of the fourth wall: On October 19, 2013 the completed film itself was auctioned at Christie’s, the site of consumptive pleasures, where at one time the furniture itself fetched substantial prices. The auctioning of *Provenance* was filmed and will result in yet another concentric chapter, where capital is embedded in the literal architecture of time and the fluctuations of assessed worth—as both a permanent relic of, and an assault on, economic privilege.

Like the furniture itself, the film is made starker through its bold limitations. There are no tropes. No interviews, voice-overs, or actors. Only perpetual tracking. Form follows function follows form.

So naturally, when I met someone named Amie Siegel, I thought she was a decoy. Perhaps she is. I prefer, in fact, to think so.

— LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON

**LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON** There is a relationship in all of your work—from *The Sleepers* to *Black Moon/Mirrored Malle*, to *Provenance*—in the way it extends beyond the viewer’s first presumption. Can you talk about where your pieces actually end, if they are ever complete, or if they are designed to be perpetually incomplete?

**AMIE SIEGEL** The way I’ve been working recently is to create projects that have a constellation of works within them. They are distinct but interconnected works, shown together or separately to varied extents, depending on the piece. That’s true of *Black Moon* and *Black Moon/Mirrored Malle* as well as the new work, *Provenance*. The new film traces the furniture of Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret backward from collectors’ homes to exhibitions to auctions to “restoration”—and finally to Chandigarh, India, where they originated, so to speak. Then, just this past Saturday, I filmed the Post-War and Contemporary sale at Christie’s in London where the first in the edition of *Provenance* was auctioned. The film of the auction, *Lot 248*, is now a second element of the work—to be exhibited with the first. The third element predates the auction: the auction-catalog spread proof, embedded in Lucite. There are multiple objects, temporalities, and gestures and they can mirror and complicate one another.

**LHL** What happened at the auction? Does

the person who bought it also own the furniture?

**AS** There were multiple people bidding—in the room and on the phones. People had also left written bids for the piece. Naturally, my aspiration was to let it get up into higher figures not for monetary purposes but for screen time. (*laughter*) An auction lot can go by quite fast. I could have ended up with a 12-second film. The multiple bids became an extended volley. I wouldn’t be at all surprised, given the wide dispersal of the furniture and the overlaps between design and art collecting, if the person who bought the film also owned some of the furniture.

**LHL** Was the final bidder ever revealed?

**AS** No, it’s Christie’s policy not to disclose a client’s information unless, of course, it’s the client’s wish. But I imagine the buyer will feel compelled to let me know because that is part of the certificate of authenticity, an agreement of ownership. People mention the bravery of bringing *Provenance* to auction as part of the gesture of the piece, and that is true. But it also feels strange not to know who the buyer is. There’s a feeling of vulnerability to let the work go into unknown hands.

**LHL** Working with multiple elements is such a fascinating concept. If you pour water onto the idea, it becomes a novel. It just keeps floating out further into the

ripples of an unending universe.

**AS** I am really interested in things that have this concatenated quality of ripple effects moving outward as they circulate. It’s not just the trajectory of circulation, but the layers of circulation.

**LHL** And the circulation is not a loop, it’s concentric.

**AS** That is exactly right.

**LHL** I was wondering about the spectators of your work. Who becomes an accomplice? Do you think about that in either the Duchampian or the Hitchcockian sense? *Rear Window* or *Étant donnés*? Or both?

**AS** I’m often preoccupied with issues of complicity in spectatorship. The kind of films that I make, the kind of films that you make, solicit an active engagement but also provoke a certain amount of discomfort derived from the act of looking. *The Sleepers* was the first piece of mine to provoke such discomfort. Looking into windows at night is very Hitchcockian, in the sense that there is only so much information you have to go on. It’s more like *Vertigo* than *Rear Window*, as one spends the first third of *Vertigo* abstractly watching someone watch someone else, although I do think of that wonderful line Grace Kelly says to Jimmy Stewart in *Rear Window*: “Tell me exactly what you saw and what you think it means.”

The distance between those two things—what you see and what it means—that’s where the act of complicity operates, with interpretation.

In *Provenance* there is a layered sense of complicity—we are tasked with figuring out where we are, what these objects are, and how they are connected. But there is also a surface work at play that commences with the high-end, mannered arrangements of the spaces in the owners’ homes in which we see the furniture and how their aesthetic is mirrored by the film itself. In mimicking the glossy spreads of shelter magazines, the film introduces a subtle complicity—one that is transferred to the viewer—in the production of desire. The tracking shots enact a kind of unnamable subterfuge in the realm of the uncanny. They reveal things and point us toward a synecdochic absence: an absence of place of origin, which these objects were once part of, an absence of the owners, an absence of narrative information. Tracking shots are always moving away from an unseen, off-screen place toward an implied meaning to come. They are fascinatingly in-between, in transit. The project makes demands on the viewers’ complicity on multiple levels—and on my own complicity as an artist, as with the auctioning of the work itself.

**LHL** Why do you emphasize what is left out? What attracts you to the invisible? What appeals to you about piercing the wall that separates the viewer from the theatrical space?

**AS** When you say, “what’s left out,” what moments are you thinking of?

**LHL** What’s left out is often the space seen by another means. It could be surveillance, or simply the understanding that something lies beyond the visible. When you become aware that something is missing, it activates the option to either write or rewrite the essence of the original work. That pertains to *Mirrored Malle*, where you overwrote the original, revising and also reversing gender.

**AS** Whenever I am engaged in a conversation about the history of cinema, or reading an article or one of those horrible “100 Best” lists, it is obvious to me how the history of cinema is a deeply obsessed male-auteur genealogy. In the interview that Louis Malle gave about his film *Black Moon*, he says some things that I actually agree with, that I found ironically true of my own work—like

about the boundary between fiction and documentary, for example. But at the same time I didn’t have to overwrite his words in the interview—I reperformed them—they both do and don’t apply to me. What was so astonishing was the swagger of his performance of himself, the male intellectual in the ’70s, cigarette in hand. The idea that he’s made a *Black Moon*, that I’ve made a *Black Moon*—I’m just going to repeat everything he says in the piece, and run them simultaneously, and throw off the sense of authorship, or auteurship. History doesn’t just look back, it moves forward as well. I can be contaminated by Malle, but he can also be contaminated by me.

**LHL** Extracting images or performances or words, and exchanging them for revised images, performances, or words, functions as a corrective technique. I feel that there is transference in your work that occurs for the viewer, almost as if you’re striving toward a utopian recognition, perhaps a meta-cognition?

**AS** It’s interesting to think of it as an act of transference. It is transference on a psychological level for the viewer—but it’s also transference on a literal, visual level in terms of the piece being an inverted mirror with the two video screens acting as a double. That’s true of *Berlin Remake* as well. What comes across is *difference*; what makes it active as transference is the difference or exchange between the protagonists and the screens.

**LHL** When the locations and the images are remapped and sandwiched together, they don’t quite fit.

**AS** *Almost* fitting is what makes it disturbing. You want it to fit but there is a disjunction—and the disjunction can be time, as in *Berlin Remake*, or it can be gender and time, as in *Black Moon/Mirrored Malle*.

It’s funny because I was thinking about the image of Tilda Swinton’s character in *Teknolust*. It’s her; she’s three characters.

**LHL** Four.

**AS** Well, that’s true. She’s three characters who look very similar, except that they have distinct hair and dress colors which are also their names. So I am thinking of this triad. But of course she is the scientist as well.

**LHL** Rosetta Stone.

**AS** Talk about writing and overwriting! I was looking at a still of *Teknolust* and at your Roberta Breitmore multiples, and it was uncanny to see that repetition between the two works made years apart. It made me think of the very thing that we are talking about. What happens when something is almost the same but doesn’t quite fit, and that visual, ontological disturbance it produces. I love that in the Roberta Breitmore documentation everyone is a different size and height, so it’s really quite clear they are not the same. And yet they look the same and you register them as the same.

**LHL** It is precisely that misperception and the inability to be perfectly remapped that also interests me. In artificial intelligence, it’s the things that do not work, the frailties or lost logic, that make a robot seem human.

**AS** Yes, but I think of it as deviance. When I say “deviant” I mean it in a very positive way—like deviant sexuality or sexual practices, things that deviate from the norm, whether formal or visual.

**LHL** When deviance escapes and contaminates everything outside of its context, does it change from being deviant to being incorporated into a broader frame?

**AS** That goes back to spectatorship or meets it halfway. One would hope that the deviance takes over in some colonizing way and produces a thought exchange—not a bodily exchange—a thought exchange, as far as a shift in thinking.

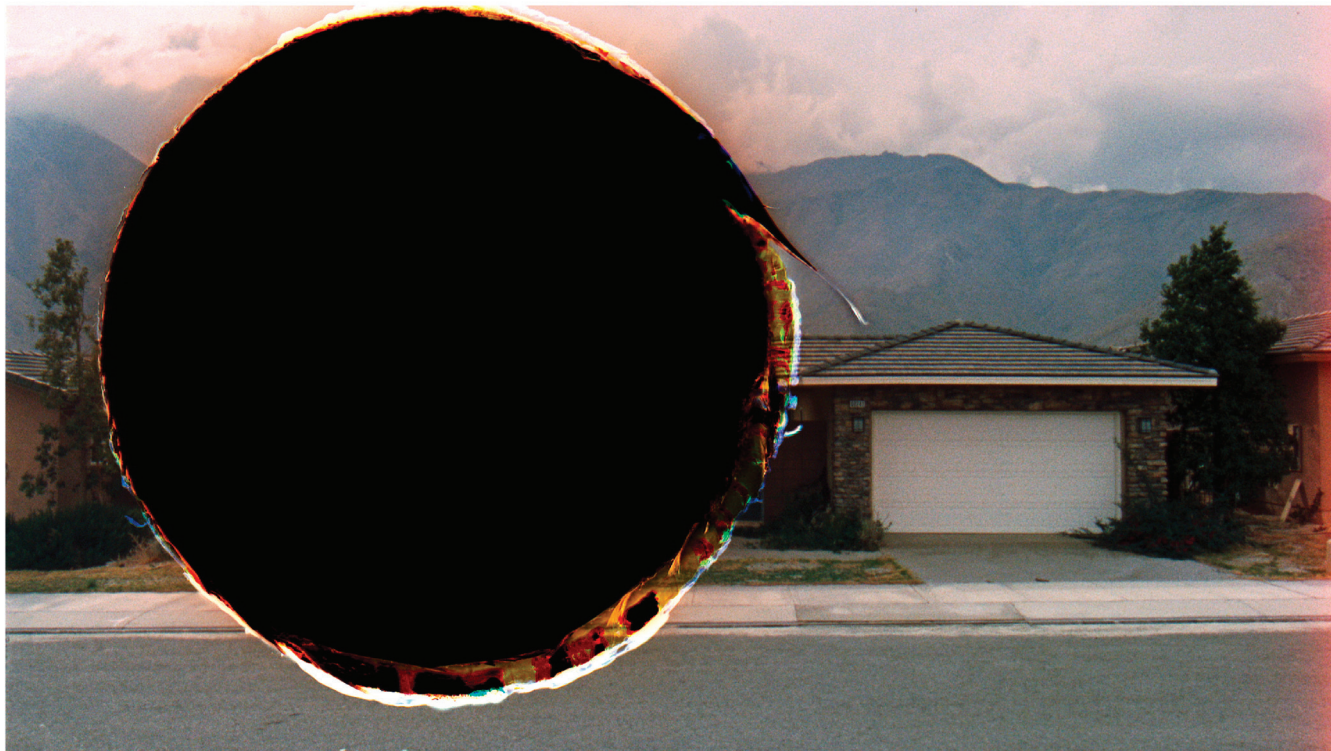
**LHL** So the deviance becomes central?

**AS** Yes, absolutely. For me it’s a formal deviance. It’s so easy for film to be normative and there are all these workshops and labs to teach normative cinematic practices like “storytelling.” The ability to resist that is something I think about. Maybe you have to learn the norm first in order to defy it, but then, we all know film language pretty subconsciously at this point. It’s so habitual to produce what’s already there, the given structures. Breaking the fourth wall, even though it’s a well-known concept, can still be very estranging.

**LHL** Did you go to film school?

**AS** I didn’t. I went to Bard. It was great, very womb-like and yet exploratory at the same time. I went to an alternative





*Black Moon / Hole Punch Number 6, 2010, Cibachrome print, 19 1/3 x 29 7/8 inches. Courtesy of the artist.*

school in Chicago from age 4 to 18, no textbooks, etcetera, so Bard felt like an extension of that. Then between undergrad and grad, I tooled around on my own in New Mexico, Europe, and Southeast Asia—doing odd jobs, reading, writing poetry, shooting video, and keeping up intense written correspondences. Then I went to The Art Institute of Chicago for my MFA in the film department. Film was the thing that really captivated me—and writing.

**LHL** What about psychology? Did you study it?

**AS** I didn't, but I grew up around it. I had been a patient quite often by the time I reached a certain age. So I had cycled through a lot of psychoanalysis through reading and discussion with analysts and also in my own life. I was pretty conversant by the time I hit graduate school and then I made *Empathy* right after that. It's funny, the film department at The School of The Art Institute is literally just a few doors down from the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis on Michigan Avenue. I knew where to find the "doctors" at lunch if needed.

**LHL** I didn't go to film school either. I studied biology. When I was making "Roberta Breitmores," a performed portrait of an archetypal woman of the mid-1970s, I studied for three years toward a doctorate in abnormal psychology just to find out more about how that character would react, although I had a lot of experience, like you, with seeing psychiatrists. All that became integrated into the work.

**AS** It is so uncanny that Roberta Breitmores, this constructed identity, actually is evaluated and gets a psychiatric report.

**LHL** I think of Roberta as a virus that spreads, mutates, or replicates through all of her encounters, particularly with people she contaminates over time. She has, in fact, been reperformed by others twice this year.

**AS** It's funny to think that Roberta has become institutionalized, literally. It's great to see her at MoMA.

**LHL** Last week, Meg Stuart danced as her in Boris Charmatz's project at MoMA—she was wearing her wig and dress. Forty-two years ago people thought that Roberta was a manifestation of schizophrenia and now "she" is

showing at MoMA. Museums used to refuse her as a gift. They said it wasn't art. I have that in writing.

**AS** So much of the project is documentation of a performance of an identity, then the documentation of its nascent life as an artwork—

**LHL** It's about where things end, which can be the beginning of an archive, where the "real" truth is buried, and that significantly extends the piece itself. You touch on that in your *My Way* pieces from YouTube.

**AS** I think of YouTube as this really important archive, in part because people perform to it. It's responsive. I hate the term *mash-up*, as if editing were just an act of mashing vegetables in a mush, or checker-boarding two things. It is very careful work, picking out things that normally go unseen from an archive—that special practice of pulling out the odd element or the passed-over or ignored. Creating meaning through assembling things from the archive that then becomes in and of itself a selection, or serves a different idea, a deviance.

**LHL** I think that becomes obvious, especially in *Circuit* and in *Provenance*, with your recoding of contexts, or your use of tracking shots, or what is established in *Establishing Shots*. These works are designed to continue, to have multiple parts like genetic mutations, and to be reshaped through their performance and reperformance.

**AS** What is the difference for you between genetic mutation and deviance as we discussed before?

**LHL** Whether it is natural or imposed, you mean?

**AS** Yes, I guess that is a good definition. Maybe if there is a further definition, or if that definition is varied in any way?

**LHL** I think that deviance is generally something that isn't expected or doesn't fit into the mapping of what has been seen up to that time. For instance, the Telomere, the aging gene, was never seen before, simply because the microscopes that would allow their visibility hadn't yet existed. So the Telomere seemed deviant. You did a piece where people could perform and use microphones to remix the work, so the process of the work could be seen in real time.

**AS** Do you mean *Winter*, with the live soundtrack?

**LHL** Yes. Like with so much of your work, many elements are in flux and constantly changing.

**AS** With *Winter* nothing is actually fixed except for the image. It's a 33-minute film I shot in New Zealand, initially for the Auckland Triennial, where much of the soundtrack unfolds live, but differently each day. So the image is this sort of fixed thing, even though the piece itself is a science fiction set in a future where the most recently inhabited land on earth—New Zealand—becomes the last one to survive. It also points backward and forward simultaneously, through the architecture and costumes, and through the varied temporalities. There is an infinite mutability to the sound because it is live in the exhibition and is entirely different each iteration, different musicians, texts, voice-overs.... There's the space of the sound and the space of the image, which in film are traditionally recorded separately and then synchronized—a separation reintroduced here. But I also had in mind how the Holy Grail of science fiction is the trope of multiple worlds existing simultaneously. There is a future space unfolding on the screen and there is a different space unfolding in the exhibition, but they interact. That's the latest version of my continued interest in the fourth wall, pushed through this filter of science fiction.

**LHL** Sound seems to interest you. How it's recorded and techniques of recording.


**AS** I am interested in how the artwork, whatever it is, is subject to the questions that it's asking. Often in my own work the piece ends up adopting the behaviors of the thing it describes, in order to agitate questions about the problems or the issues that the very act of depicting that subject evokes. With *DDR/DDR*, the long film about former East Germany, one question was, How do you make a film about a country that is defined by microphones and surveillance, when filmmaking is defined by microphones and surveillance? It involves some cruelty to sit people down in front of a camera, particularly people who have been subjected to various forms of interrogation, or pressured confession. But the interview-like situation can also be pleasurable and can become a real moment of exchange, whether it is acted or is a first-person interview. I think about that



*Installation view of Black Moon / Mirrored Malle, 2010, at Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Germany. Photo by Frank Kleinbach. Courtesy of the artist.*





CHRISTIE'S		LOT 248	
		GBP	42,000
		USD	67,830
		EUR	49,560
		CHF	61,026
		RUB	2,139,438
CONVERSIONS APPROXIMATE			



a lot, though—the sadism, the control over representation. I can’t help but consider the conditions of filmmaking that are ethically problematic, and yet I’m interested in them and I enact them. I can’t get away from making a piece that doesn’t unfold its own transgressions—like with *Provenance*: the piece is complicit in the marketplace it describes. It’s not the design market as seen in the film, but the art market and design market are quite enmeshed, hence the work—the film itself—is being auctioned.

**LHL** It’s like a vegetable that is only satisfied when it’s eaten. It feels left out if it is rejected and not picked by the farmer.

**AS** Which goes back to your question: When is a work over, when does it end? I don’t have the answer to that. Sometimes I have fantasies about the next layer but I would have to be clear with myself about why I would continue.

**LHL** There is also a reiteration of things that occur. Some elements of the work are not understood until later, when they evolve into a more sustained sensibility.

**AS** Yes, I’m very interested in a structure of associative accumulation, both within and between works. But there is also a formal interest in reprise and remaking and even cloning to some degree. Though cloning somehow seems very immediate. Most theatrical works that have relevance in terms of canon in whichever culture they are performed, get reperformed and reinterpreted over and over in repertoire. Cinema itself is repertory but it’s only the individual film that gets recycled again and again. The image is fixed. It’s not necessarily a reinterpretation of a text, though things get remade to serve exploitative, financial motivations.

**LHL** The context causes reinterpretation of time, history, and environment.

**AS** Yes, but I am really interested in the deviance we talked about before, being performed by a very formal reprise, and one which purposefully, fitfully, leaves things out—like a neurotics of history, suffering relapses, with entire psychic breaks or collapses.

**LHL** When you talked about the technique of sound and the effect on the person who encounters the work, you mentioned cruelty. But you left the director out of the conversation. The director has a lot to say even if the technology

allows the piece to be set up so the director becomes apparently or physically invisible.

**AS** Absolutely. That is the kind of sadism I was talking about. It’s not Fassbinder’s directorial sadism in terms of, “I’m going to wear you down,” or, “I’m going to give you this drug or this drink so you will do whatever I want performance-wise.” It’s a construction of what one wants, or an emotional reproduction to get what happened.

**LHL** Or allowing yourself to enter into a situation, presuming to know what the outcome will be.

**AS** I don’t know about you but I still get butterflies in my stomach the night before any shoot.

**LHL** Creating anything is an act of faith. It springs from optimism, from believing in something with such an intense passion that it defies defeat.

**AS** The auction was really intense in the lead up because there would be no retakes; there would be no “take two.” That was it.

**LHL** Did you have the idea of the auction at the initiation of the project or did it occur to you during the process?

**AS** It came to me a couple of weeks after I started filming *Provenance*. That will often happen: I have an idea and, as I am moving forward, researching it and living with it, there comes a second layer or level. Sometimes an idea becomes available while shooting that is so important, it’s not just an element or a gesture in the work; you make it the dominant part or an entire formal act.

**LHL** These ideas are the deviant streams that come back to haunt you unless you pay attention to them.

**AS** It’s not that I want there to be multiple publics that can enjoy multiple things. I don’t have idealistic, populist aspirations for the work. It’s more that I prefer the piece to seem like it’s one thing, and then shed itself and become something else. Maybe it is not a shedding, but an accumulation, depending on the work. That in and of itself is a moment where you have to adjust to what happens to you as a viewer. I really love being thrown off the path in a formal way, like a shake-down of all my prior presumptions.

**LHL** It is like having a slow reveal of an identity that was covered and then defrocked. Viewers become active participants in the recreation and yet the levels of reveal surprise them.

**AS** The nervousness before the shoot reflects the investment in the live-wire quality of the work teaching you something, or the situation teaching you something. You have to be aware in that way that we were talking about before—slightly distanced but vigilant.

**LHL** In that sense it becomes an improvisation. Like jazz. Being able to see things in the moment rather than rely on what one has storyboarded in advance. That’s what makes it vital and brings an unexpected reality to its structure.

**AS** Yes, all the live-performance sequences of *Winter* were like that. I had difficulty extracting myself from the exhibition during the opening of the Auckland Triennial, because the piece kept suggesting further shifts and alterations, and it was delicious to be able to do things spontaneously. But I also do weird things in the production of my work that completely contradict that. I make these highly choreographed shots with infinite takes to get the perfect tracking movement that is coincident with the light, and the unexpected. Two things operate in an oddly dialectical way—there is a chance operation that we came upon and we are filming it, but we are filming it 20 times until we get the perfect take or until we are kicked out of a location—all of which is really an act of composure in the moment.

**LHL** Well, it’s composure and compulsion.

**AS** (*laughter*) That’s very true.



*Proof (Christie's, 19 October, 2013), 2013, ink-jet print, Lucite, 25 1/2 x 18 1/2 inches.*



*Installation view of Berlin Remake, 2005, at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2-channel video installation, color/sound, 14 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.*