

The Highlights - Space and Place in Two Video Installations by Amie Siegel

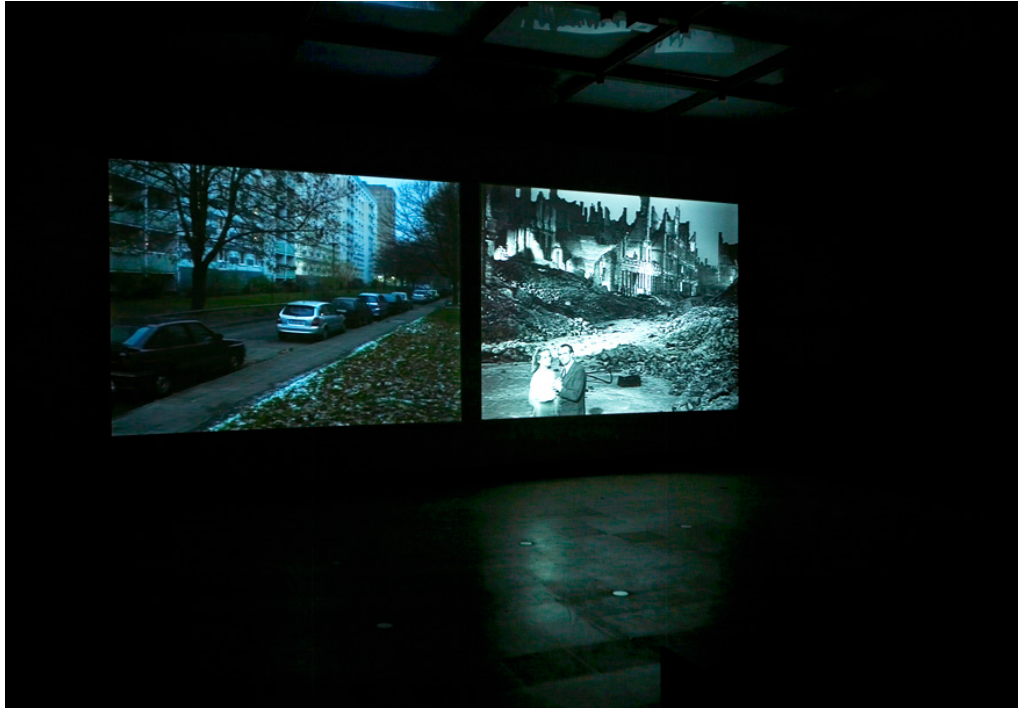
Why remake a film? The impulse to do it might not be different from wanting to hear a song many times, or performing the song oneself. Or wanting to hear another song. (Does anyone live in a world in which there is only one song? Living in such a world, who would be satisfied by one performance?) It might not be different from wanting to make a film. Which is to say that it might not be a special case, but just the impulse to make art.

Amie Siegel, who makes films and video installations, has thought a lot about remaking. Two of her recent videos, both entitled *My Way*, create montages of passages from amateur performances of songs. "Got to go my own way," a teenager sings to a camera in a bedroom (*My Way 1*, 2009). "Regrets, I've had a few," a man of a certain age sings to a camera in a basement (*My Way 2*, 2009). The declarations of isolation and uniqueness paradoxically connect the performers to an audience and to a community of similar singers - a chorus - of which they can neither be entirely aware (since, for one thing, they have no inkling of collaborating with Siegel on her piece) nor entirely ignorant (since they must have witnessed other performances of the song). The title *My Way 1* also has an autobiographical suggestion: this is Siegel's way, charting a course through many performances to outline the type of the singer, the shape of the song, and the formal sequence of the song's history. The unthinkable space of the work collects the entire artificial community of the performers of a song.

In two other works, Siegel puts herself in the position of the performers - as she puts it, "approaching a film, or a film scene, like a text or musical score." The first piece that I will discuss, which helpfully calls itself a remake, carefully separates the space of the frame from the place where the material was shot. The second, which does not identify itself as a remake, runs different locations together to create a fantastic space. This manipulation of spatial divisions leads to a confrontation with the most basic pleasures and dangers of making art.

1.

In Siegel's two-channel video installation *Berlin Remake* (2005), the projection on the right shows fragments of scenes, each lasting a minute or two, from films produced by the East German State Film Studio. The one on the left shows a painstaking, shot-by-shot restaging of the same camera movements in the same places, orchestrated by Siegel decades later. The juxtaposition invites you to make a comparison, and the first thing you are likely to notice is that the spaces are so different as to make the locations almost unrecognizable.



Amie Siegel, *Berlin Remake*, 2005. Installation view, The Hayward Gallery, London.

In one episode, the left projection shows a modern subway station, clean and spacious, with unobstructed views of gleaming white walls. Well-defined clusters of people wait to board, or scramble to catch the trains, or make their way up the stairs to rejoin the city streets. The clusters suggest relationships, but they may just as easily intimate the sorts of unplanned but repeated associations that occur in daily traffic patterns, such as commuters who regularly take the same train at the same time, and travelers who find themselves walking with strangers in groups that hang together as far as the top of the stairs, or even a block or two away from the station.

These patterns are hardly at all reflected in the scene in the right projection, which shows a subway station repurposed as a hospital and bomb shelter. (The footage in this projection is older, but the place has obviously been remade in wartime for uses for which it was not originally designed.) Encountered at key moments in the camera's doubled trajectory, certain architectural details - the stairs, the pillars, and the tracks - assert the identity of the place: we are on the same platform in the same subway system. But these details are hard to make out, because the frame is crowded with screens, medical equipment, radios, and torches. There are even cots set up on the tracks. The surfaces of the walls, when momentary gaps in the foreground allow such a deep view into the space, remain blocked by posters. And there are masses of people everywhere. Most of them seem to be camping out, sleeping, trying to sleep, closing their eyes while standing, leaning against pillars, or sprawled on the steps, with no coherence or evenness of spacing among the groups. The few people trying to navigate this space, mostly soldiers carrying bodies on stretchers and nurses with pitchers,

have to pick their way through this mass of sleepers. The camera, too, feels crowded, as though it had to adjust itself to keep from intruding on its neighbors - as though its purpose were not, rather, to inspect them.

Why would you remake this shot? I think the answer has to do with transportation. Everything in this scene is moving. Most of the people are standing still, but they are going somewhere. The people in the left projection are waiting for a train that will take them away, and their future destination is visible on their faces and in the way they hold themselves. The people on the right are more patient, but they are also waiting. No train will come for them, but they will eventually be released from underground. I know this to be the case because they aren't visible in the left projection, where the light reflected in the glossy white wall is a hole created by the long-ago movement of a person or piece of furniture.

There are two exceptions. In this sea of movement, one figure is curiously standing still. Well, not absolutely still, but moving in small circles rather than long lines. As the camera rounds a pillar, a woman appears leaning against the stair. When the camera halts, she detaches from the railing and follows an irregular path to meet it, stopping only when she is in the center of the frame and almost looking into the lens. (This abrupt shyness in front of the camera is actually the least stacy element in the scene; except in this moment, the people in both projections are obviously pretending not to notice a camera that must be staring into their faces.) Suddenly, as if frightened, she whips around, races up the stairs, finds her way blocked by a body on a stretcher, waits, turns again, goes back down the stairs, and exits.

Why do the camera and the woman, whose movements are more clearly defined than any other figure's, appear static? Partly it's because the doubling of the pattern turns it into an object. The ritual of the train commute is only implied, but the strange ritual of the woman finding and running away from the camera happens in full view. Mostly it's because the camera and the woman haven't gone anywhere. Everyone and everything else on the platform, including the furniture and the wall coverings, is there in order to find passage to another location, but the camera and the woman have reached their destination and have nowhere else to go. Years later, in 2005, they are still there, still fidgeting in place. Their job is to manage the movement of the other figures. The remake tracks movements on the subway platform, as well as the fact that the platform itself is moving. The same place defines two different spaces. This is the meaning of the title: the city remakes itself. Siegel follows an old scenario, but she has cast a different actor to play Berlin.

2.

Siegel's recent installation *Black Moon* (2010) is a remake of Louis Malle's 1975 film of the same title. The work has three parts: a 20-minute film projection, *Black Moon*, that explores a military scenario that Malle's film barely suggests; a two-channel video installation, *Black Moon ? Mirrored Malle*, showing interviews with Siegel and Malle; and a series of

photographs, *Black Moon ? Hole Punches*, based on the standard practice in motion picture laboratories of punching a hole in the first frame of a film negative.



Amie Siegel, *Black Moon*, 2010. Installation view, Krome Gallery, Berlin.

Malle's film, not very well known although not quite as obscure as the fragments from the archive of the East German State Film Studio, is a work of nonsense in the vein of Lewis Carroll, set in an impossible space. The main setting is a country house that functions as a refuge from a war fought between a men's army and a women's army. The deranged movements of the performers register some of the peculiarities of the spaces in the house. For example, Lily, the protagonist, is able to handle a glass of milk only from a special angle, and keeps having to contort her body and stretch it the long way across a table just to reach the glass, as opposed to simply walking around the table and standing next to it. Subtle and unsubtle discontinuities between interior and exterior shots of the house suggest the geographical and architectural impossibility of the space: day outside is night inside, in a sequence of shots linked by the same musical passage from Wagner's *Tristan*; sound fails to travel from outside to inside; and the garden scene viewed by Lily from a bedroom window changes by the time she has descended to enter it from the kitchen - the tableau remains in place only when she climbs through the window to confront it. There is also some suggestion that the interior of the house is larger than the exterior, as in a gothic story. For Malle, these discontinuities mark stages of psychological exploration, as Lily retreats further into her own mind.

For Siegel, the idea that inside and outside could be noncontiguous spaces is probably suggestive, since she has such a penchant for exterior shots of buildings that scenes in her

work where the camera and an actor are together in a room feel surprising and eventful. (There is exactly one such shot in her 1999 film *The Sleepers*.) The setting in her *Black Moon* runs together exterior shots taken at various locations to create a fantastic space. The common thread linking the shots is architectural: we are looking at images of unfinished and abandoned housing developments in the California desert and Florida with names like "Pleasant Valley." Instead of making the fantasy discontinuous, Siegel finesses the connections so that the different places appear to occupy the same space. A small group of soldiers - detached from a larger unit? lost? survivors of an ambush? - occupy the abandoned housing development. But they don't occupy the unfinished houses. Like Siegel, they prefer the exteriors of buildings; they enter the houses to do radio work or security checks, but they sleep and build fires in an empty swimming pool. They seem to be on the defensive. They never fire their weapons, but they are menaced by sounds of explosions and gunfire, and sometimes by the discovery of the corpses of their comrades.

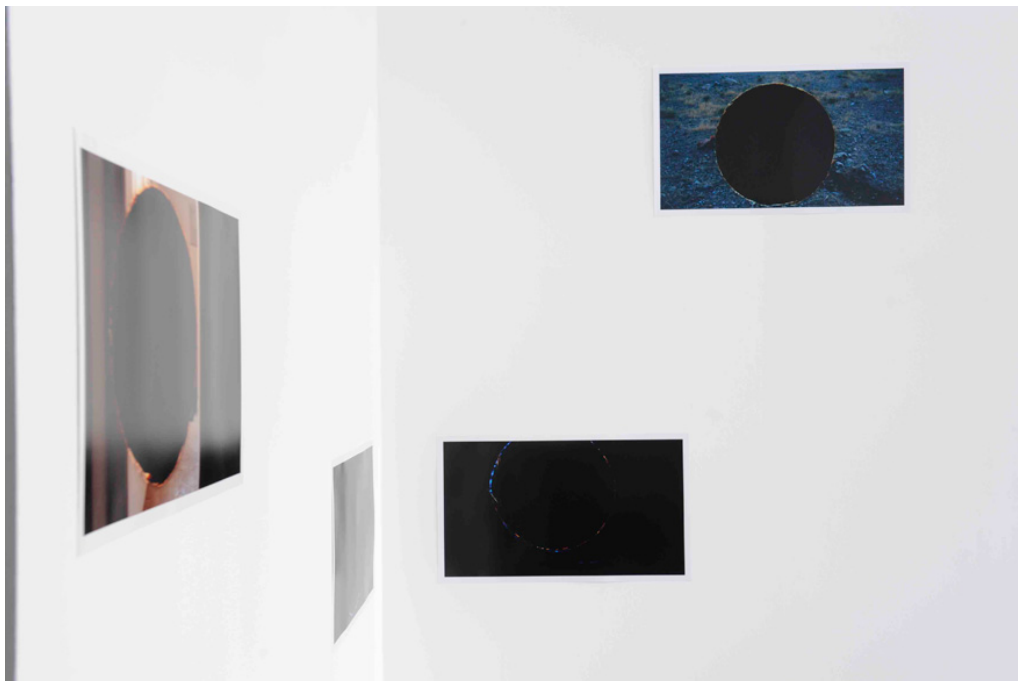


Amie Siegel, *Black Moon ? Mirrored Malle*, 2010. Installation view, Krome Gallery, Berlin.

How do we know that this is a war between men and women? What if this is a women-only unit in an army that also includes some men? Or what if this army represents a nation that conscripts only women? If not for the relationship to the older film, who the soldiers are fighting would be a mystery. Siegel's film inhabits part of the background of Malle's film, the "civil war" between women and men. Siegel brings the women's army out of the background, leaving the men's army entirely off screen.

The two-channel video installation, *Black Moon ? Mirrored Malle*, implies that the two

Black Moons, Malle's and Siegel's, are somehow the same work. The format is similar to *Berlin Remake*: a 1976 interview with Malle faces a recent restaging of the same interview in which Siegel substitutes for Malle, translating his words into English. However, although the camera setups in 2010 approximate those of 1976, the locations and the movements of the two directors do not. (Both hold cigarettes and gesture emphatically with them, but Siegel makes parallel gestures with her other hand, whereas Malle's movements are asymmetrical.) By inserting herself in Malle's position in the interview, Siegel gets to claim authorship of *Black Moon* as well as, incidentally, some of Malle's earlier works. This is also the implication of the general title of the installation. Unlike *Berlin Remake*, Siegel's *Black Moon* does not announce itself as a remake but as the same film. The implication of identity in the face of apparent huge differences resembles Kathy Acker's claim in *Empire of the Senseless* that her English translations of poems by Rimbaud are really plagiarisms.



Amie Siegel, *Black Moon ? Hole Punches*, 2010. Installation view, Krome Gallery, Berlin.

Two elements in the installation refer to the impossibility of this fantastic space. One of them is the display of photographs, *Black Moon ? Hole Punches*, each with a large hole punched in the center. The holes literalize the moon of the title, not as a satellite, but as a cut in reality, creating a window (through which, however, one cannot see) into something, perhaps another level of reality. The film obliquely acknowledges the discontinuous relationship between inside and outside in the odd rituals and protocols observed by the soldiers dwelling on the periphery of the houses, but these stills transpose that relationship onto frames of the film themselves. The black moon indicates that the frame, in an effort to contain some violent energy, has exploded, collapsing the outside and allowing the inside to

leak out.



Amie Siegel, *Black Moon ? Hole Punch No. 9*, 2010. C-Print, 13.5 × 24 in.

In the last sequence of the film, the soldier who appears to command the unit looks at pages from a fashion magazine. Abandoned in the desert, the magazine is practically the only artifact of human civilization in the world of the soldiers, if you except the structures and roads of the housing development itself. That may sound like a big concession, but not if you contrast the interiors of the country house in Malle's film; they are bulging with books, paintings, musical instruments, carpets, furniture, and other finely wrought things. If the soldiers in Siegel's piece had a civilization, either it has been destroyed, or it was a Spartan one. It does not include anything like art, until the magazine shows up.

The magazine has the curious effect of aestheticizing the soldiers's entire world. The pictures in the magazine show members of the unit posing in their uniforms. Thus the uniforms, weapons, and equipment become aesthetic decisions, objects to be played with, as fashion plays with the most serious subjects. The leader's response suggests that the aesthetic, unbounded, lacking a frame between it and the world, might be more terrifying than the unseen enemy. (The myth of Odysseus binding himself so that he can experience the song of the sirens speaks to a need for protections against the aesthetic, and the peril of losing oneself in it.) We see the disturbed face of the leader before we see the images that disturb her: a two-page spread of what appear to be the scattered corpses of the entire company. The magazine represents the fantasy of witnessing one's own death, and therefore standing outside it. It is also a *mise-en-abyme* locating the new *Black Moon* in the same space as the

old one, as though each were a corner of a complete and fully extensive world.