

INTERVIEW

Gintaras Didžiapetris talks with Paul Sietsema

GINTARAS DIDŽIAPETRIS

Should we start from the past? Or are there other ways to relate to what is around us or to the way we speak?

PAUL SIETSEMA

All photographs and movies of me as a child were stolen along with my father's movie camera when our house was broken into many many years ago. I often wonder if I have fewer memories of this time because there is no media to produce them. There is only the present and whatever accumulates around you in the present makes up your present conception of the world.

The gap between distances in time and space is filled with media, which is anachronistic by nature, removed from the string of linear time our existence and perception is governed by. Working against the anachronistic quality of media are fingerprints left by the ghosts in the machine, the imprint of the shaping elements of cultural and mechanistic constructions. Communication (our common goal?) finds its basis in agreed upon, mutually understood sets of experiences, definitions, etc.

I have been intrigued by the idea that a game can be played where these vehicles of comprehension find surrogates in distances of time and space instead of present

cultural factors or contexts (i.e., education, age, experience, etc.).

This media game allows for the entry and activation of elements of language(s) that usually remain out of view; they can become present and begin to direct information, enhancing experience through resonance between the container and the contained. An activated container whose culturally unpacked quality (visible rather than invisible mechanics) casts the contained in a wider lexical array than would otherwise be the case. This could be seen as media's attempt at quantum mechanics, at catalyzing ambiguity. So the past, in this case the activated past lives of a medium, which accrue historical and cultural information as they move through time, can be used to create an experience that reinforces even more the expanded possibilities of language in the present.

Of course a very key aspect of this is that perception exists entirely in the present, which creates a phenomenological field upon which the past can exist no more than the future. In this zone the reliability of either becomes unimportant, even if the tools and objects of the past are used, their specific recognition (or lack of) is no more important than a new experience of a new aspect of the absolute present (if

such a thing exists), just a landscape for the mind to traverse.

GD

One thing I keep coming back to, maybe you could give an example of something you describe here:

“I have been intrigued by the idea that a game can be played where these vehicles of comprehension find surrogates in distances of time and space instead of present cultural factors or contexts (i.e., education, age, experience, etc.).”

I have a friend who describes the iPhone as a ‘black box’—a world without inside, where to know exactly the way it works is almost impossible. I then wonder if such abstract machines are human self-portraits or a much more complex set of problems that are being dully used as a phone?

PS

In the sentence you mention above I was talking about something that is at work in things I am working on now and also of course things I see out there in the world. It has to do with media forms that by nature de-prioritize the importance of systems of linear time and Cartesian space, etc., in the presentation of information.

For example if I were developing a project which used a conception of my daily existence as a projective form and I planned to set the depiction in another time, all symbols or representative elements of my life would need to be translated into related elements of that time period and its cultural context. Since I would be the one doing the translating my conception of that time would be what structures, defines and constructs the aesthetic array which constitutes the context. In that sense the make-up of the context will have resonance with my depiction of my life because the context has mixed or couched frames; the historical (time period), how I

see and choose to depict that time period, etc. These contextual elements become descriptive devices and themselves gain potential to tint and organize information. It is a way of pushing syntax into semantics.

As for the iPhone, it does seem to be a kind of self-portrait, although an anonymous one, because it relies on depictions of cause and effect, rather than actual cause and effect. There is now an evolved layer of non-tactile technology between action and reaction. It feels as if this evolution of user interface has cut the umbilical cord to the industrial age. The subtleties and importance of skill as it relates to the hand’s manipulation of actual physical objects, tools, etc., the importance of pressure, timing, touch, seems to be leaving us. For a long time user interface was partially based on conceptions of, and experience with, mechanical call and response, traced back to the operation of manufacturing machines, guided entirely by the hands of skilled labor. As these conceptions of the hand become less important to our understanding of the world the importance of using them as the operative layer for devices disappears also. Apple had to reconstruct a language of interplay based on postindustrial tactility. The interface is an exercise in extreme ambiguity, a purely abstract construct that could take any form since with the representation-based touch screen there is an infinite number of ways to describe and implement an action. It is the distance between this layer of code, which relies entirely on ambiguous subjective representations, and a user without access to the code that creates the ‘black box’. The form of the black box privileges manufacturers over consumers in economics, and governing bodies over citizens in politics. I suppose this is part of the reason I am interested in representation, I like the idea of reformulating ambiguous syntactical distances as generative semantic

devices, or at least describing the form of where true meaning might or might not exist now.

GD

It seems to me, that what you are describing comes to a kind of Medievalism, when an object you are trying to define already exists, but does not have a form yet, and I wonder if this is something that can overcome a representation (a design of a chair could be an example not of the way people sit, but a subjective imagination of a sitting-form) and if it can itself become something?

With 'form' I don't necessarily mean materials. It is an image of time and style, beliefs and economy and social organisation. I'm intrigued with what you say about iPhones and their "ambiguous subjective representations" and that, in a way, I call abstraction in my previous question.

PS

I'm hoping it's not just a case of not being able to see the forest for the trees, but I do think that there has been a shift in the immanence of form that Apple has so masterfully taken the reigns of. With a medieval chair (I don't have so much experience with the medieval, in California and the US in general History as we know it starts in the 1700-1800s) I suppose you could say you have a simple function (to hold upright without standing, and earlier in furniture evolution simply to recline away from the ground, which of course is a way of separating us physically from 'lower' life forms while conceptually/culturally doing the same) that itself obtains a form based on aspects of utility, available materials, technology (joining methods, carving tools, joining components, etc.) and also since the thing is being made and the momentum of culture seems to be to fill all blank spaces with intentionality, the eventual addition of external ornament

and interior (structural?) formal/cultural play. It's incredible how little the chair changes throughout history, the design of early Egyptian chairs varies only slightly from chairs being made today. And chairs are of course one of those things that changes while staying the same across cultures and time. They are a cultural node of sorts, sometimes it seems as if their biggest secondary function is to display cultural difference as discreetly as possible. And of course they are a prime example of how history is made up not only of things being described but also things describing themselves, as you say, at a certain point (very very early on in the evolution of the chair) a chair became not just a chair but a chair that was representing itself as a chair, a chair is also a projection of a chair. This of course is a product of consciousness.

The chair relates very directly to the body, and for a very long time to the scale of the hand and handiwork. It seems that what separates new technologies from old, changes in interactivity and the uprooted feeling many of the aesthetics associated with new media and related objects have, is that the scale of the hand, and presence of the hand becomes close to irrelevant. It makes you wonder where we are headed when we take steps in the direction of artificial intelligence and de-locate the hand. The limitations of the hand and mind that existed and that have shaped our environment for so long have undergone major shifts with automated manufacturing and computers to process expanded problems quickly.

And while sometimes it feels like at some point in the near future chairs will be left behind, I think that is still pretty unlikely. My guess is we won't turn into bodiless digital plasma and enter the machine anytime soon. We are stuck with our bodies and simple minds which poses the issue

of how these new technologies that no longer rely on them will continue to relate to them.

I think one of the reasons I like art is that for the most part the mind, hand, body problem still exists all the way across the board, and like the explicitly cultural chair it has a way of representing changes in form without them being lost in the execution of the thing.

I don't see representation as historical but rather perceptual, the historical aspect exists only as a mix of experiences (personal and media based) that is one of many things building our perception, and of course our ability to project. I do think the threshold of something gaining a representation is the threshold of understanding. Once this is crossed the thing is a representation of a kind.

GD

Tomma Abts describes the moment when a painting of hers feels complete comparing it to a birth of a character that becomes alive. It comes back, in my mind, to what you have previously said about visible mechanics and that could be also seen on a larger scale. I've read you saying that your film *Figure 3* was partly meant to be dealing with contemporary art paradigm—could you say few more words here?

PS

Figure 3 came out of my first experience showing in a museum. The curator was working on a big travelling Robert Smithson show while putting together my show and I was astonished at how Smithson's work and mine seemed to be treated so similarly. There seemed to me to be an attempt to present my work in a historical light, to display the work in a museological style as a sort of anthropological view of what I had done. I of course saw my work

(a film, *Empire*, and some related things) as an activated current artwork that should exist entirely on its own, to activate a present-space and face forward only, not drag me into the space or attempt to place me within the museum. The slow unavoidable transformation of my work into a series of artifacts led to my interest in exploring the phenomenon directly, almost dumbly, through a sort of short circuiting of the scenario; if my work is going to be turned into an artifact I might as well make artifacts and show it in a museum and see what kind of resonance this redundancy can create. It also allowed to me to treat the surface aesthetics of the objects a little like pawns, or red herrings, and do my work behind the surface of the object, while allowing the redundancy to structure the ideas behind.

For the last fifteen years or so my work has revolved around what I think it means to make something now, to be an artist now. I feel the pitfall of this is that people sometimes think it's postmodern, or intellectual, but really it's simply something I could not help doing from before even when I was aware of postmodern art, etc. I think there are just ways of communicating that stratify themselves to create a fuller gesture. Rather than just say something, you construct a mechanism that models the things and then maybe says it, or something like it. I like the idea of a strong mechanism that gives a weak statement, to push the perceptual activity deeper into something, and ask the viewer for a bit more. Or perhaps they just miss everything, which of course can be a little thrilling since this parallels how we come across, pass by, pay attention or not pay attention to all other things we come across in our lives. Not all objects need to scream for our attention and understanding.

When I started *Figure 3* I was interested

in making a working method that itself symbolized what I thought it meant to make something now (or then, that was 2005-2008). I noticed that I, and others of course, would use images and information without respect for the authority they previously seemed to have, they could become simply material, almost rootless. It wasn't appropriation, but what the extreme democratization of imagery and ideas across time that a new and easy access to information made possible. In formulating *Figure 3* I likened this change in space from iconic top down information control to equalized information distribution to certain early island cultures in the South Pacific in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, just before colonialization changed the economic and object producing nature of these places.

I had completed my previous film project *Empire* in 2002. In that project Clement Greenberg was the iconic center. The power structure of his position as a critic in New York during a phase of muscular painting, and the western intellectual whiteness he personified seemed to me to weave in and out of ideas of late capitalist ideas of information, power and capital. With *Figure 3* I wanted to make something that was anti-iconic. I was moving from a study of modernism to a study of post-minimalism, or rather the post-minimalist gesture as it relates to the beginning of the loss of the phenomenological relation between the human body and manufacturing. The hand based manipulation of quasi industrial materials by such artists as Richard Serra, Robert Morris, Eva Hesse, etc., seemed to me to be a farewell of sorts, an attempt to reclaim a bodily connection to materials before it was lost forever to the growing autonomization of industrial production. Economically speaking, post-minimalisms aesthetic core, its ephemerality, transmutability, the de-skilled quality of its making,

etc., seemed to me to be a backlash against the compact transportability (saleability) of the modernist object.

When considering the South Pacific cultures I was looking at for *Figure 3*, I became fascinated with the point at which a cultural production that had not changed much (or at all) over long periods of time (partially due to the limits of sea travel, available materials, and the geographically reinforced isolationism of islands) came in contact with western trade/value systems. I liked the idea that on the islands, bowls, bags, etc. were made not by specialists, but rather with shared skills by most or all the members of a tribe. When colonial 'explorers' landed on the islands they qualified the utilitarian objects these islanders were making and using as art, a concept alien to the makers. They began to trade western items such as metal buttons, hats, and eventually guns for the curiosities they would bring back to London and other cities to sell or simply collect. Not only transforming former simple utilitarian objects into objects of exchange, but also whetting the islanders appetite and desire for objects outside their manufacturing skill level. When the European private collections of the islanders artifacts went public the form of the modern museum was established.

I wanted the collapsing together of my consumption of images and information and my eventual output as an artist (which I saw as a kind of metaphorical parallel to the new aura of image/information culture, where distinctions between production and consumption begin to break down) to be symbolized structurally within the work, and so I set out to create a certain kind of stasis in my methods of making the piece. I decided I wanted my materials (the conceptually loaded stand-ins for the islanders materials) to reflect the condition

of the importance of the image and replication in general in my cultural milieu. To extend the quality of this stasis I also wanted to place myself in the ambiguous position of both maker and collector in the piece, to inhabit both sides of the original islander producer/colonial collector dichotomy. I wanted to find a way to produce and consume an image at the same time, and to display artworks I made while at the same time displaying the objects I 'collected'. It was important to me that the perimeter of these objects, the found and the made, be coterminous.

I basically extended the range of materials I would use to make the artifacts to those of replication. Sculptural casting techniques, photographic and printing materials, materials common to acts of recording and replicating in the pre-digital anthropological record, gum Arabic and aluminum powder, hydrocal, etc. Similar to my use of pre-digital retouching techniques in drawings to make up the entirety of an image several years prior, I wanted the objects I was making to be made up of materials of the reconstitution, recording, and dissemination of anthropological information. As a sort of game I misused many of these materials, such as mixing printing ink into hydrocal, or mixing aluminum powder and gum Arabic to make casts. This conceptualized material play, a replacement of the material activation of post-minimalism with a self-consciously photographic/replicating array of materials, was extended to the processes in which these materials were used. I made forms for vessels out of the hydrocal (used to replicate objects and imprints in the field in anthropological study) and then mixed printing ink into more hydrocal and covered the form. I hammered the shell of cured material off and put the parts of the vessels back together, which made for a vessel that looked like the historical ones I had seen, made

of reconstituted shards, but whose process had been formative rather than one of recovery. Two paths to the same formal end. There were other symbolic processes involved, such as making 'carrying straps' out of paper and covering them with a white fire retardant paint. I used a blow torch to burn the paper on the inside away so I was left with the paint shell, which I then filmed. Part of the idea here was that a process similar to chemical photographic developing was used to make the type of highly photographable object I was after, and it was just the vestiges of the object that was left over to be pulled into the next step on the path to the viewer, the 16mm film frame. I liked the idea that all these binary physical processes would create a sort of concrete chain to the viewer, and each link in the line could be loaded with some kind of information.

I ended up filming the objects I made very simply, a simple display, itself like an exhibition or a slideshow, of my collection of objects that could be at once both the self-made utilitarian objects of an anachronistic pan-geographic individual, and at the same time simply a display of the prized objects of a collector of artifacts. 16mm film was well suited to this for the concrete binary aspect of it, and how it establishes a kind of perfectly ambiguous space for the contemplation of objects, where something can be two or more things at once without dissonance.

GD

I try to imagine your studio throughout time. From the very first project you were working on, to something you are doing now, it seems like it had to become parts of the places, problems and images we find in your work. Did you change studios over time? And how does it feel to start something new, when something is finished? I remember that in one of the last

images of your *Anticultural Positions* film a fragment of your studio table changes, in a kind of animated zoom-out, from a fragment to a table seen in a room, as though you become aware of the place for the first time!

PS

So far I have changed studios for every larger project I've made. My first film, made in 1997-1998, I worked on while I was at UCLA in a very small studio given to me by the school. The program was not very academic and it felt more like a residency with lots of freedom and very little or no direction provided by the professors, which I liked very much. I used parts of my home and local environment to develop the piece. My small backyard was for a while a parallel workspace that informed what happened in the studio. I guess this is common for me, a pendant space to whichever one I'm working in that informs the otherwise somewhat sterile space of the studio.

With *Empire*, my next film-based project, which took me from 1998 through 2002, I was working in the large living room of my Hollywood apartment, a large half-timber triplex. The building was originally built as costume ateliers in the 1920s for Paramount pictures, and was strange for how large the main room was with very high ceilings and nice large south facing windows. Next door to me was a Chinese photographer in his 80s who had known Moholy-Nagy and would tell me about his color multiple exposures which sat unseen under old newspapers and magazines in his apartment. He was slowly going blind but still took pictures, he just got a camera with auto focus and auto exposure. He was proud that Bela Lugosi had once lived in his apartment and would occasionally bring out an interior design magazine it had been featured in at that time, along

with the Moholy-Nagy books with his name and photographs in them. In 1998, after my previous film, and since I never studied film or photography, I became interested in exploring the photographic material structuralism of the early avant-gardes as a way of further articulating a layered armature for my work, a way to insert information in the container. I suppose eventually looking through the old prints and negatives of my neighbor and hearing stories about Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy may have been an influence, if not a bit of strange coincidence. The entombed quality of my neighbors work also led me to be very aware of my interest in using the matrix of aesthetics associated with the photographic avant-garde as a sort dead language, calcified building blocks to be put in new positions and given new meanings. *Empire* was partially meant to be 'in memorium' of all the avant-garde aesthetics I was using. I was trying to point towards the complexity, position, and form of new mediums using the lexicon of these clichés that become so empty they can be reloaded and contain their original meaning plus whichever new one their repositioning makes possible. Living and working next to someone who had been a part of this early photo-based avant-garde made very clear the impossibility of its dumb repeatability in the present and also fed my interest in the dusty patina of irreverence.

With *Figure 3*, which I worked on roughly from 2003-2008, I again moved my studio, this time to an upstairs space further east in Los Angeles. It was a smallish office with many small rooms in it. I took out the walls and had to put large beams in the floor and ceiling. From the street my space is one flight of stairs up, but when I had an engineer look at the structure of the building I found out it was 5 stories tall, lower in the back (it is on a small hill) and two levels below ground. The building is quite

old by LA standards and was not very well built, most of the columns down below were shifting out of place and so had extra constructions attached, jerry-rigged, the old wood and exposed structures made the whole thing feel like a ship. Putting in the very long beams (30-40 feet?) also made me think of ships, and I began to think of my studio not only a site of production and display, but as a cargo ship's hull as well. This was a nice fit with my thinking about *Figure 3* and the early colonialist explorers in the South Pacific. I installed evenly spaced fluorescent lights on the low ceilings and blocked the windows out, put together special tripods that would hold my cameras horizontally, parallel to the floor of the studio. My studio felt a little bit like a scanner, or the inside of a camera, and I liked the idea of scanning/recording the objects here, in this big apparatus. The low ceilings and even lighting, the lack of daylight to let me know the hour, together created a kind of flattened timelessness that I enjoyed, as if I was taking myself out of space and time to make the piece.

When it comes to my projects, for better or worse, I don't feel like I am ever starting anything new. Ideas slowly take workable form over years and by the time I'm actually starting something it has so many roots going back 2, 4, and sometimes 10 or more years that I always feel like I'm just finally getting around to working on something. Of course there is always the aspect of the work when it is finally being made of being dropped into a specific environment (whatever the current one is) with different ways it can synthesize itself, embed itself, react, etc. I think part of the reason I have taken certain amounts of time with my work is to create drift in the temporal context of the things making. Rather than my methods taking a long time and so the piece taking a long time, I think it's more a meeting in the middle kind of situation; I think my

methods are partially to keep my hands and head busy while the right temporality is laid out, the right amount of attachment and abandonment achieved, and the right amount of time to let the piece settle a bit more, packing down the sediment, creating a harder surface for the ideas, and producing maybe a bit more invisibility.

Spaces contain the remnants of ideas and actions, memories infest a place. *Anticultural Positions* was my way of taking the work tables (and all the marks, all the material accretions) I had been making work on for over ten years (all my major projects!) and hand them over to an alternative history, to finally get rid of those memories. I still use the tables, but I can't see them anymore.

