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ARCHAEOLOGY, OBSOLESCENCE AND MEANING IN
PAUL SIETSEMA'S PROCESSES OF UNDOING

“I see making things as part of the continuum, I don’t think there needs to be anything serious about art.”

In 2018, conceptual artist Paul Sietsema discovered the language of the telephone. By completing a series of paintings of 1960s rotary telephones, he gave the viewer a deconstructed view of a historical telephone. It speaks as an object out of time. This language (and many of the object languages that he ‘creates’) is revealed to Sietsema through a lengthy process of uncoupling the object from its manufactured function, social association and material basis, towards a shift in language itself. We are not supposed to see it as a plastic telephone any longer but as a telephone in a symbolically plastic sense.

Sietsema’s process of dismantling and remaking telephones to understand how they *are* might be taken as a ritualised method of negation. And while he’s cautious not to fetishise this process, he is separating the assumed meaning of the object in order to create a separated thing, a disembodied telephone that only exists on the canvas as a single concept.

“The work itself for me is never quite in the object but hangs perhaps just outside it, a juncture of the energies that find their vectors elsewhere throughout the object.” (Sietsema in Butler 2019)

The process of dismantling the telephone and remaking it as an artistic work takes several weeks and involves gutting the phone, during which time he reduces the objects to a *surface*, conveying a limited meaning.

“I’m not interested in the rotary phones in any kind of retro or nostalgic way. I do remember them although when I touch them now I don’t have much of a tactile memory for them. I remember them as lines of communication – it seemed the cord itself reached to the other person – a slightly enhanced sense of physical connection and intimacy perhaps, compared to the iPhone.” (Butler 2019)

In the case of the telephone, Sietsema starts by gutting them, as “the loss of weight, shifts them closer to being an image, and their functionality is removed” (Butler 2019). He then wipes them with alcohol before matching the original colour of the phone in enamel paint with which he covers them. The paint cures over weeks, after which time the phones are shot in three-quarter lighting. An image is painted from the photograph, using the same enamel paint, which in turn cures for several weeks, attracting the same dust, lint and bubbles as the physical phones do.

Right: *Abstract Composition*, 2014

Process
Paul Sietsema

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“This for me has the effect of destabilizing what is real, and also detabilizing what is painted. It pulls both into a more ambiguous, floating space... I was thinking about objects losing their function after they’ve been coated. How this is like an image and also something that couldn’t exist outside of the record of it. I was photographing it to stabilize it.” (Butler 2019)

With much of Sietsema’s work, the output is often a play on the structural way we construct meaning from things, and how those meanings change over time. Degraded from where they are familiar (in the home) to where they are left (in a tip or a painting). The objects he uses are often ephemeral media which are worn through their contact with humans. They bear the marks of transient levels of interest, active and passive forms of use and obsolescence. The language of the telephone is in this way emblematic of Sietsema’s investigation into how things have meanings that speak beyond their function. And how, if “anything can become a language” (Sietsema 2022), things can exist outside of their human context. There is an aspect to Sietsema’s work where objects ‘wake up’, imagining themselves as independent beings and talking to other objects. His long production processes might be read as releasing inanimate beings from their corporeal prisons.

If Sietsema is describing things against or past their time, how does he choose when to start and with what impetus? In correspondence with *Trebuchet*, Sietsema discussed his process and how evolution leads to an uneasy relationship with the language of familiarity:

“Ha! I’m not a fan of starts. I started many, many years ago and it’s been a continuum since then. Even with this first question, I couldn’t start with it. I went ahead and came back to the beginning to answer it. Too much pressure. I do remember when I decided to devote most of my time to making things in the 1990s, I really wanted to get going. I played a game where I’d have to make three things each day. Regardless of how bad the idea, or how lame it looked, I had to finish three things. Could be a simple, nearly invisible public performance, a video, a sculpture, or a photograph, etc. I felt like I was starting an engine, it needed to run for a while to warm up. But I also, of course, wanted to find out what my relationship was to this mess of things.

I see making things as part of the continuum, I don’t think there needs to be anything serious about art. It’s not that I’m not a serious person, I just don’t give much weight to ‘good’ ideas. I do get a rush though if something is coming together in a way that emanates a quality I’m interested in. I would be



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so happy if something as finite as a click (indicating a ‘good’ idea) did happen, and that I could believe in that and trust it. But finding the right tone in relation to a world that markets aesthetics to us in so many ways, all the time, is what interests me most. And sometimes this means using the thing that doesn’t click.

For me, there is an exploration to clear and refresh generally, and then, I suppose, exploration as a search for a new form, gesture or moment. These two types of exploration are strongly linked, essential to each other. I used to search far and wide for inspiration and leads, but now I like the idea of these growing out of local situations. There is so much unknown about the things that are close to us, and of course, anything can become a language.

There certainly are stages (to my process), accompanied by moods. I was trying just now to untangle my thoughts to write down a sort of concrete list of what I do. But as I try to do this I realise there are endings, beginnings, middles, etc., all stacked up on one another.

In one given moment I am usually working on all (or almost all) stages of the process across multiple things. I may have started working this way to help keep me from letting my art fall into what I see as a design process; too much structure, too much order, too much intention would rid the process of what I find most interesting about it. I am most excited when I am starting something new, whether it is one piece or a show, the potential and unknown path ahead is at this point almost pure thought. It’s intoxicating, and in my case this transforms slowly into labour.

The movement of the hands is closely tied to the brain, and this helps the ‘thinking’ along in ways attention could never do. The thinking wrestling with form, and then the two becoming one at some point, inextricable and indistinguishable, is one of the nicest moments. Even more so because, by the time this moment arrives, the possibility of it happening or not happening is long forgotten. I used to think that the highest point one could reach would be to produce something that would be as natural in the world as a broom. As unexciting as this perhaps is, the idea of an unconscious construction (the broom) and a conscious one (art) having the same strength of existence in the world remains a goal.

I’ve come to believe that both ideas and planning are restrictions that are unproductive for what I do. The evaluation of ideas often involves judgement of a type that can reinforce a status quo. The same is true of plans. And while of course

Previous: Carriage Painting (Green Square), 2022
Left: Black Phone Painting, 2022

Process
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these two are somewhat important for the more mundane aspects of life, for me they are not to be valued as tools of creative engagement. I do think chance (or something like it) is important for wider, more open communication, and also to be led somewhere new you wouldn't have otherwise come up with.

Art has the luxury of existing in so many different forms, and along so many points of a process, and relating in so many ways to its maker that where the centre of gravity is along this continuum for a particular piece changes immensely. With abstract expressionism in the last century it was all about process; splashing paint around in allegiance to the subconscious, the primal, the existential, for the most part. But of course, the finished products now emanate a kind of extreme formalism and object quality that tries to make the colour and composition and material primary.

With the conceptual artists of the 1970s, for many it was all about the idea – the physical form of the piece was to be ignored. Like the abstract expressionist works, many of the conceptual artists' physical productions ended up also having quite a physical presence, becoming successful over time as a kind of formalism, valued for its object quality. I suppose the two are so closely linked that they can't really be separated, especially in light of all the other forces acting on an artwork.

I spent a lot of time early on (in the 1990s and 2000s) trying to force systems of chemical photography and other types of binary, concrete mechanical processes related to representation into the materiality of painting, sculpture, and filmmaking. This crossed-wires approach led me to many processes that I had not encountered before. The amount of time I spent with this material/physical experimentation, around a decade, changed the way I do things quite a bit. For instance, in the early 2000s I was studying pre-Photoshop photo-retouching books that I found online and at used bookstores, and using the processes of hand retouching in drawings using an airbrush to make a drawing from scratch. It was a way of repairing a drawing into being, tricking myself into starting at the end even if the end was a blank sheet of paper.

There's usually enough intuition (and its cousins, nephews, nieces) involved in a process that it certainly can't be reconstructed in the same form by backtracking. Making things relies so much on the feedback loop of perception, which has phenomenological and subconscious and, perhaps, purely nonsensical aspects as well. Moods change while making a piece. Perhaps the most important part of the process for one piece was a stomach ache. We're lucky that it's often the wide swings in the dark that pay off the most. Like air and space and light, process is nearly inescapable."

References:
Sietsema, Paul. 2022. Interview with Paul Sietsema for *Trebuchet*. Full transcript forthcoming at trebuchet-magazine.com
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Right: *Vertical coin game*, 2021
Paul Sietsema courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery
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