

Wandering Through Time

The Sculpture of Steven Siegel

The most obvious and the most obscure thing in the world, this walking that wanders so readily into religion, philosophy, landscape, urban policy, anatomy, allegory, and heartbreak...

Walking itself is the intentional act closest to the unwilling rhythms of the body, to breathing and the beating of the heart. It strikes a delicate balance between working and idling, being and doing. It is a bodily labor that produces nothing but thoughts, experiences, arrivals.¹

—Rebecca Solnit

by Patricia C. Phillips

Walking is important to Steven Siegel: a succession of many small steps, one foot in front of the other, consecutive movements inscribing deeply felt, embodied experiences of space and time. There are many ways to approach Siegel's deceptively dimensional, nuanced work. Walking is one fruitful metaphor. The work never explicitly references walking, yet it invokes the physicality and psychology of this common activity. Small, sequential movements, each like the one before, create an impressive cumulative effect. Just as thousands of steps constitute a long hike, the repetitious tasks required to make Siegel's work transport many diminutive pieces of materials into simple, yet impressive forms. Walking is generally linear; there is a destination. But walking is not always expeditionary, it can be aimless. And most of us have walked in place, with all of the attendant focus and frustration of stationery movement. It is an activity without distance or destination. These different ways of walking offer insights into Siegel's process.

Some Cans, 2002. Aluminum cans, rubber hose, and poultry netting, 12 x 12 x 12 ft.

Typically, Siegel makes great accumulations from small elements of a single material elaborately layered and stacked into monolithic forms that often look like boulders or vessels, geological formations or immense artifacts. The forms are androgynously natural and artificial, found and constructed. A painstaking process of fabrication requires the artist and other willing participants to engage in long periods of repetitive, yet thoughtful activity. The physical work may be habitual and reiterative, but it is never random or mindless.

Siegel uses recycled materials—the overwhelming evidence of voracious cycles of production and consumption. In fact, there is a perverse fecundity to the endless production, proliferation, and displacement of material. The beverage disappears, but the container remains awkwardly and obstinately present. The news of the day is momentary, but the paper itself is surprisingly stubborn. After being acquired, spent, and discarded, these ubiquitous cast-offs experience a haphazard and desperate reincarnation. In Siegel's work, materials are not only reprocessed, they are also reconstituted as the form and con-

tent of art. These reiterative structures, like walking, summon the subject of time. What is natural and artificial about time? What is ephemeral or enduring, intelligible or incomprehensible, about time?

There is a dutiful, yet delightful dimension to Siegel's work. A great task produces a very simple thing. Yet this may be the only clear and dependable equation. Other connections and conclusions are variable and elusive. Generically characterized as big, spare forms of recycled newspapers, plastic bottles, aluminum cans, shredded rubber, or other jetsam, there is a serious content to this seemingly unaffected work. Remarkable and robust physical evidence and material accumulations convey a tension of imminent vulnerability and gradual dissolution. There is a puzzling experience of dissonant beauty in these ungainly objects made of disposable, if not unsightly materials. Often mimicking natural forms and processes, the conspicuously artificial work "fits" its environment in a plain, natural manner.

Siegel accumulates a significant quantity of a single material in selected



Holocene New Paltz (detail), 1992. Paper and discarded construction materials, work now destroyed.

as a vector leading toward colder climates and more complex life, and fueled by occasional catastrophes, against Lyell's vision of a world in constant motion, but always the same in substance and state, changing bit by bit in a stately dance toward nowhere."³

Speculating why an English major would choose to write about rocks, McPhee puzzled over his insatiable obsession with the geological.⁴ In 1978, smitten by the peculiar eloquence of geological terminology, he began a series of trips across the U.S. These pilgrimages offered direct opportunities to study the nation's cacophony of landscapes, examine geology's seductive hold on his own imagination, and witness the inner lives and intellectual preoccupations of geologists.

And why might an artist have an interest in rocks—among other subjects? Solnit writes: "In Yosemite, water and rock became Muybridge's principal subjects. The water spoke of change, of the passing moment, and the rock of what endures, of geological eons."⁵ Just as rocks and water represent different concepts of time, Gould also wrote compellingly about "time's arrow, time's cycle."

Siegel's own preoccupation with geology has developed and deepened. It began 20 years ago when he traveled to Siccar Point in Scotland. In 1780, geologist James Hutton first observed an unconformity—the evidence of a vivid geological pattern of development and decay, of renewal and desiccation—at this site. This unconformity suggested a new, but virtually incomprehensible concept of time. Gould describes an unconformity as "a fossil surface of erosion, a gap in time separating two episodes in the formation of rocks. Unconformities are direct evidence that the history of our earth includes several cycles of deposition and uplift."⁶

Hutton's 1795 publication, *Theory of the Earth* introduced the idea of deep time, citing the earth's emergence more than 4.6 billion years ago. Siegel's pilgrimage to Siccar Point has served as a lasting source of inquiry, imagination, and inspiration. Unquestionably, arrival

sites. He then layers and stacks the material, often against large wooden armatures, to create densely striated forms. Constructed of so many pieces of the same thing, the work has a modular or molecular quality. The layers reflect Siegel's fascination with geological configurations. Like contemporary environmental geologists who increasingly study the restive relationship between the earth's systems and human-induced changes, Siegel offers opportunities for speculation about patterns of development and decay evident in the "deep time" of geological history, as well as the aggressive temporality of contemporary culture.

John McPhee, Rebecca Solnit, Stephen Jay Gould, and others have written poetically and persuasively on the field of geology. In a recent book, Solnit

explores Muybridge's often overlooked photographs of Yosemite's spectacular geological profusion. Muybridge's attraction to sites in the western United States undoubtedly was nurtured by Victorian culture's mania for geology. The 1830 publication of the first volume of Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* heightened debate about the history, character, and age of the earth.

In the 19th century, two polarized camps of geologists emerged. Catastrophists "argued for a comparatively young earth in which forces far more violent than those presently at work had wrenched and welded its topography." In contrast, Lyell advocated gradual transitions with episodes of abrupt change.² Gould writes: "Lyell and the catastrophists were locked in a...struggle [that] pitted a directional view of history

Bale, 2001. Crushed plastic bottles, 10 x 10 x 10 ft.

at the historical site had particular significance, but many of the artist's ideas began to emerge through observations and reflections graciously accommodated by long walks. It is generally acknowledged that the process of pilgrimage is as much about the journey, passage of time, and growing anticipation as the arrival at an intended destination.

Siegel's process of making the work bears a connection to the act of walking and prolonged pilgrimages. Clearly, there is "doing" in ample evidence. The work requires intensive, concentrated, and recapitulative activity. But there also is a resonant quality of "being," which engages multiple concepts and experiences of time: the visceral time of the body, the unfathomable "deep time" of the earth, and the temporal transformations and inevitable vulnerabilities of materials.

Although his large-scale outdoor work may be most well known, Siegel continues to make small, intimate, and meticulous pieces that share a similar palette of materials. I first encountered his intricately detailed, thickly constructed collages of newspapers and other materials in 1992. This same year, Siegel was invited to create a project on the campus of the State University of New York at New Paltz. Selecting a quiet, sloping field situated between the college's academic and residential center and distant playing fields to the south, the artist arranged to have the recyclables and residuals of daily academic and administrative routines—skeins of used office paper, old memoranda, newspapers, as well as discarded construction materials—deposited and collected at the site.

A meandering wedge was cut into the gentle slope of hill. With a group of art students, Siegel constructed a densely layered, serpentine wall of the university's detritus. The work was doubly site-specific. The wandering form tactfully responded to the local topography and other physical characteristics of the site. The materials were raw and restive evidence of academic bureaucracy—the endless production of information, procedures, and poli-

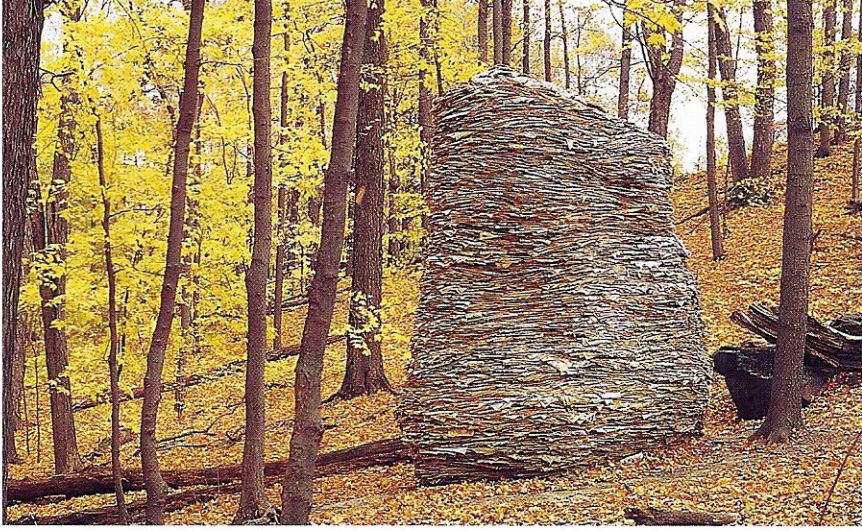


cies, as well as the maintenance and renewal of its physical plant. The slow, undulating form of uncomely and rejected materials mediated the forces of naturalism and systemization characteristic of many college campuses.

Holocene New Paltz (1992) lasted roughly six years. At first, the wall of campus "garbage" contrasted aggressively with the serene, meadow-like site. The work was accepted skeptically. Some people liked the contrast of its graceful form and rough edges, but others questioned the aesthetic intent of arranging and presenting the college's discarded materials in a bucolic site. Over time, the work's abrasive character softened and diminished. The newspapers condensed and darkened into a stunning, shale-like formation. Grass grew in abundance, and the work was

slowly embraced by the site. Several years ago, as a consequence of campus planning and not a sudden geological incident, the site was violently disturbed and the work abruptly dismantled. Earthmovers reconfigured the site and excavated the foundation for a new residence hall. Two hundred students now live, study, sleep, and party over Siegel's scattered and entombed work.

Almost 10 years later, I was reminded afresh of *Holocene New Paltz's* sinuous shape when I encountered Siegel's work at another SUNY campus. Invited to participate in the Neuberger Museum of Art's 2001 Biennial of Public Art in Purchase, New York, Siegel selected a long stretch of the college's vast promenade as the site for his temporary work. On a wandering and winding plywood armature, he created a 200-



Left: *A fox lives here too*, 2001. Paper, 14 x 11 x 7 ft. Below: *Collage #2*, 1999. Mixed media, 24 x 19 x 8 in.

foot-long snake-like form of shredded rubber tires. Playfully animated and decidedly anomalous, *Carbon String's* (2001) meandering path of cast-off industrial materials invoked a mysterious, incongruous organic occurrence in this managed, austere architectural setting. Siegel's witty, yet serious intervention disturbed the boundaries between natural and artificial, element and artifice.

In many respects, *Holocene New Paltz* and *Carbon String* engendered ideas of walking. The forms of these wandering digressions suggested the individual orchestrations of passage,

diversion, and pause that constitute a walk. There is the feeling that natural forces and confluences have determined a capillary-like pattern of channels and routes, like streams that agilely dodge and weave through wooded sites. But the materials have an entirely contrasting character of circulation. They were both the cause and consequence of more constructed, rational, and linear systems.

The spliced rubber comes from discarded tires, their treads worn by thousands of miles on the roads and highways of the nation's arterial network. Generic construction materials presage a proliferating uniformity of the built world. Given Siegel's frequent deployment of discarded newspapers, it is difficult to ignore how his massive structures, in both disturbing and prescient ways, convey more ominous messages about the alarmingly generic quality of printed media. Purveyors of information, print is almost instantly obsolete, replaced by the next daily or weekly issue. Yet the paper itself is surprisingly tenacious. (Nineteenth-century newspapers stuffed into the walls for insulation in our 170-year-old house remain intact, if not serviceable.)

Siegel's work is engaging and often surprising, but there are multiple critical dimensions. The work can be easily, if not obviously, engaged as an indictment of an alarming escalation of consumption and waste, a "geological" process of development and decay that has metastasized into a threatening condition. There is practicality and frugality in art that deploys large quantities of stuff that people have used, rejected, abandoned, or overlooked. Materials are a rhetorical device. Their physical properties always say something. Even if they seem expeditious

and eminently pragmatic, materials are evocative.

Siegel has staged linear installations, but his bulky, concentrated forms may be more commonly characteristic of his practice. At the University of Virginia, Siegel constructed a 10-foot cube of crushed plastic bottles. *Bale* (2001) is a large minimalistic object of many similar elements strapped torturously together. Sharing genetic and geological characteristics, *Can Can* (2002), at Western Carolina University, is a 12-foot misshapen sphere of aluminum cans held in place by poultry netting and lengths of rubber hose. Both pieces also invoke the large-scale sculptures that pepper cities and communities across the United States. Tethered into manageable, moveable forms, they mimic the systems developed to collect, organize, and redistribute, if not eliminate, our waste problem.

This summer, I once again visited one of Siegel's recent constructions (I had first seen it more than a year ago during a leisurely morning walk with the artist and his dog). I experienced a more integrated understanding of the work. Poet's Walk is sited on the east side of the Hudson River south of Bard College. Its trails wander through woods and open meadows, offering thrilling views of the river and the Catskill Mountains to the northwest. Its name suggests the historical and contemporary connections between the region's natural landscape and its cultural heritage. For most visitors, it is a quiet place to walk and reflect. As Solnit observes about walking, it offers an opportunity to be both idle and intensely active.

Invited to create a sculpture for this open park with its spectacular, open vistas, Siegel instead selected a wooded, modest, and secluded site on a steep decline. The shaded space is occasionally dappled with sunlight, but its conditions are chronically cool and damp. To create this project, the artist worked with high school and college students from the area. Enormous piles of extra, presumably unread, newspapers were delivered to the quiet, unassuming site.



Squeeze, 1997. Newspaper, earth, and grass, 7 x 15 x 10 ft.

After constructing a wooden armature, Siegel and his collaborators built a large, hive-like form of layered and stacked paper. Like many of his projects, *A fox lives here too* (2001) looks absolutely natural and utterly incongruous. Surrounded by a calligraphic circle of trees and saplings, the voluminous form is shockingly alien: out of time and place. But during the past two years, the newspapers, now darkened, discolored, and softened by the seasons, weather, and humidity, sensitively match their surroundings. With the passage of time and exposure to the elements, the work has developed a co-dependent, inextricable relationship with its site.

With their mimetic, metaphoric quality, Siegel's works bear witness to—and also exploit—the enormous accumulation and deposition of often absent-mindedly and hurriedly used materials. In many ways, Siegel has always been what curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud would describe as a “postproduction” artist. The postproduction artist uses pre-existing things to make new cultural products. Basically, artists insert themselves into the “innumerable flows of production.”⁷

Siegel's work inserts itself into the “flows of production,” as well as into the processes of the natural world. Speculative and searching, the work assiduously avoids didacticism. Its propositions never entirely confirm dependable or defensible answers. Siegel plays with often incompatible systems, values, and expectations, blurring their distinctions. With an elegantly simple and numbingly repetitious process, he invites viewers to analyze and accept the ambiguous relationship of technology and nature, and the comparable cycles of consumerism and geological depositions. He challenges a staunch partisanship that creates an unbreachable gulf between consumption and the environment, development and decay, the artificial and natural worlds.

Siegel introduces his own notion of “unconformity” through skillful and subtle juxtapositions of industrially produced and natural materials. In



significantly different ways, Siegel questions, proposes, and represents the multiple characters of time and our varied experiences of the temporal realm. He achieves this, paradoxically, with remarkable restraint and thrilling abundance, and with the sensitive articulation of banal materials. Walking is often a way to puzzle over questions and uncertainties. When I accompanied Siegel at Poet's Walk, we strolled and talked quietly about life and art. As we passed through sun-drenched meadows and descended to the prosaic site where

he had chosen to construct *A fox lives here too*, I understood vividly that this deceptively simple, singled-minded work defies obvious conclusions. The work is focused and digressive, intelligent and errant. It may seem easy to get, but it is hard to know. Somehow that walk—getting there one step after another—clarified the meaning and appreciation of arrival.

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Notes

¹ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Viking, 2000), pp. 3 and 5.

² Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York: Viking, 2003), p. 13.

³ Stephen Jay Gould, *Time's Arrow Time's Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 132.

⁴ John McPhee, *Annals of the Former World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), p. 31–32.

⁵ Solnit, *River of Shadows*, op. cit., p. 84.

⁶ Gould, op. cit., p. 62.

⁷ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2000), p. 11.