

CRISTIN TIERNEY

***Experimental Film***

*John Haber  
in New York City*



**Janet Biggs, Paul Sharits, and Sara Ludy**

Janet Biggs will go a long way to find herself. Her four-channel video unfolds only a continent away, but do not be fooled: with *Can't Find My Way Home*, the real journey has still to begin.

As artist, she becomes both the experimenter and the subject of experiment. She delves deep into earth itself. She may even find her way home, but with a few shocks along the way. Decades earlier, too, Paul Sharits took video as the source of controlled shocks, this time for the viewer. Last, Sara Ludy makes video her "subsurface hell," but not in a mine shaft. Together, they give new meaning to experimental film. Janet Biggs's *Can't Find My Way Home* (Cristin Tierney Gallery, 2015)

*Shock treatments*

This review is embargoed pending appearance in *Artillery* magazine.

*Strip naked*

For Paul Sharits, nothing is more visceral than the experience of a film strip—and nothing more difficult to preserve. He held its image in Plexiglas, like a biological specimen, for his *Frozen Film Frames* starting in the early 1970s. He projected it again and again on the wall.

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Watching *Dream Displacement* from 1976, on the occasion of its entering the Anthology Film Archive, one becomes conscious of every frame, every sprocket, and every corner of the room. One becomes aware, too, of the projectors, the speakers, his anxieties, and oneself. Sharits might be baring the medium naked, giving new meaning to the word *strip*.

The film's plot is simple enough. Colored rectangles pass steadily by, their black borders and sprocket holes intact. This was still a time of Minimalism, and these are geometric elements exposed to the light. Sharits had studied with Stan Brakhage in Denver and associated with others for whom the one subject of film was film, including Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton in Buffalo. He had made his first avant-garde film in 1962, before he turned twenty. He had filmed the Sears catalog, and now he was ready to catalog film itself.

And visceral it is. A reviewer, Kristin M. Jones, compared his *Shutter Interface* from the year before to "an endlessly prolonged execution of cinematic illusion by firing squad." There the rectangles stay put, blinking in a potentially endless loop, their pulse amplified in torturous quadraphonic sound. For *Dream Displacement*, the sound becomes the shattering of glass. It keeps time, like the sprocket holes, while removing narrative time. It approaches William Blake in *his* apocalypse—"the ruin of all space, shattered glass and toppling masonry."

Post-Minimalism often involves tactile imagery, as for Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse, and of course *strip* has a bodily sense as well. A side room has two of those Plexiglas slides, and the back room has body parts on paper and canvas, like German Expressionism as graphic novel. Sharits approached "degenerate art" in his life, too. His output had already tapered off when he was shot in the stomach in a bar, and he withdrew further before his death in 1993. The attacker, he insisted, must have mistaken him for someone else. Regardless, his works often translate felt experience into physical terms, with titles like *Bad Burns*, *Razor Blades*, and *Epileptic Seizure Comparison*.

*Apparent Motion*, from 1975, blows up the grain of film in black and white, like cells in a petri dish. *3rd Degree*, from 1982, could pass for entire organisms. At the same time, Sharits enforces a certain distance—that dream displacement. As with Sigmund Freud, a dream takes shape only in the retelling. He reshot film as it played in a projector, both forward and backward, starting with his earlier *SPECIMEN II*. The results play out from four separate projectors, in each via a double mirror, the work's only actual glass.

Downstairs, in the gallery's space off in an alley, Trisha Baga takes her dreams literally indeed. She reproduces shoes, souvenirs, and junk food in lumpy ceramics, as if rescued from an attic and much the worse for wear. Meanwhile, she insists, Orlando has had to relocate to New York—not just the city, after climate change has flooded Florida, but also a peacock of that name. In 3D video, an actual peacock nibbles away at portraits of afternoon TV hosts, whose popularity has somehow survived decades and disaster. Other human beings are on hand in a second video more or less to explain it all. Like Sharits and Biggs, Baga sees the body in question as a product at once of technology and culture, fancies and fears.

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## *The e-Ching*

One need not enter "Subsurface Hell," video and still images by Sara Ludy, to feel its dangers, because the very first work is coming right at you. A partition separating the gallery from the street holds a bat-like image in white against gray, gleaming in its soft shadows, smooth surface, and reflected light. It could represent a UFO at warp speed or the life within it, and the title, *Alien*, accommodates both. Further inside, a more ghastly creature might be growing or folding inward, in pale green on a white table. As *Cabbage Head (Energy Sponge)*, it should be as plain as still-life but pulsing with life. Still, an energy sponge could, by the sound of it, be sucking the life from you.

Sara Ludy's *Alien (Wall Mount) (Bitforms, 2015)* The artist says that she is in search of digital feng shui—presumably from the *e-Ching*, or book of digital changes. The ancient Chinese pursuit, though, seeks to channel psychic energy by aligning buildings and people with the cosmos. Ludy has a fondness for symmetry, but also for unsettling alignments. Her *Cloud Reliefs*, tall paired videos like abstract painting in motion, drift like clouds but with colors in interpenetrating layers like a rock face. The earth itself might be shifting beneath one's feet. Elsewhere a human face is melting into a fright mask.

This subsurface hell dwells on surfaces, with no proof that anything lies beneath their beauty. It also dwells on the familiar. Ludy has been collecting found images for some time now, as ordinary and comforting as family and friends, but also as routine and threatening as natural disasters. *Low Prim Room* displays a couple of dozen in a recess modeled after traditional Japanese spaces for rest and contemplation. Quite a few represent interiors with furniture, perhaps studies or an artist's studio. As darkened rooms within a room, though, resistant to identification, they, too, convey displacement.

Still, everything glows, and the digital changes are more gradual than earth-shattering. They are even halfway funny. A winding cord extends from a fur-lined object on the floor to a monitor displaying another object in soft white. Is the first, in more ways than one, a mouse? Readers of John Milton often identify with Satan in *Paradise Lost*, for whom "I myself am hell." Visitors here should take pride in having a subsurface life within.

Her gallery has, to its credit, a clear and longstanding profile. Bitforms is interested in new media as less documentation as for Coco Fusco and political artists, performance as for Andy Warhol, theater as for Bill Viola, philosophical narrative as for Gary Hill, drafting tools as for Alyson Shotz, mass culture as for Mike Kelley, or the object in itself as for Nam June Paik. It focuses on design in motion, often in interaction with the viewer. The preceding show, of Manfred Mohr, begins with lines and algorithms, much like painting for Sol LeWitt. And then the lines begin to dance. It is only one vision among many, but with a dedication to the medium, to skill, and to surfaces.

Ludy, too, begins with them. Her *Cloud Reliefs* look strikingly like wide-screen animations halfway across the Lower East Side, by Jacco Olivier. Olivier also bases his colorful forms on nature, sometimes recognizably so. Still, the Dutch artist is mostly content to let them

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happily flow by. He does not so much question their origins or implications. Sometimes art can stand a little subsurface hell.

*Janet Biggs ran at Cristin Tierney through February 13, 2016, Sara Ludy at Bitforms through February 7, and Jacco Olivier at Boesky East through February 14. Paul Sharits and Trisha Baga ran at Greene Naftali through October 3, 2015, Manfred Mohr at Bitforms through December 27. Portions of the review of Janet Biggs first appeared in Artillery magazine.*