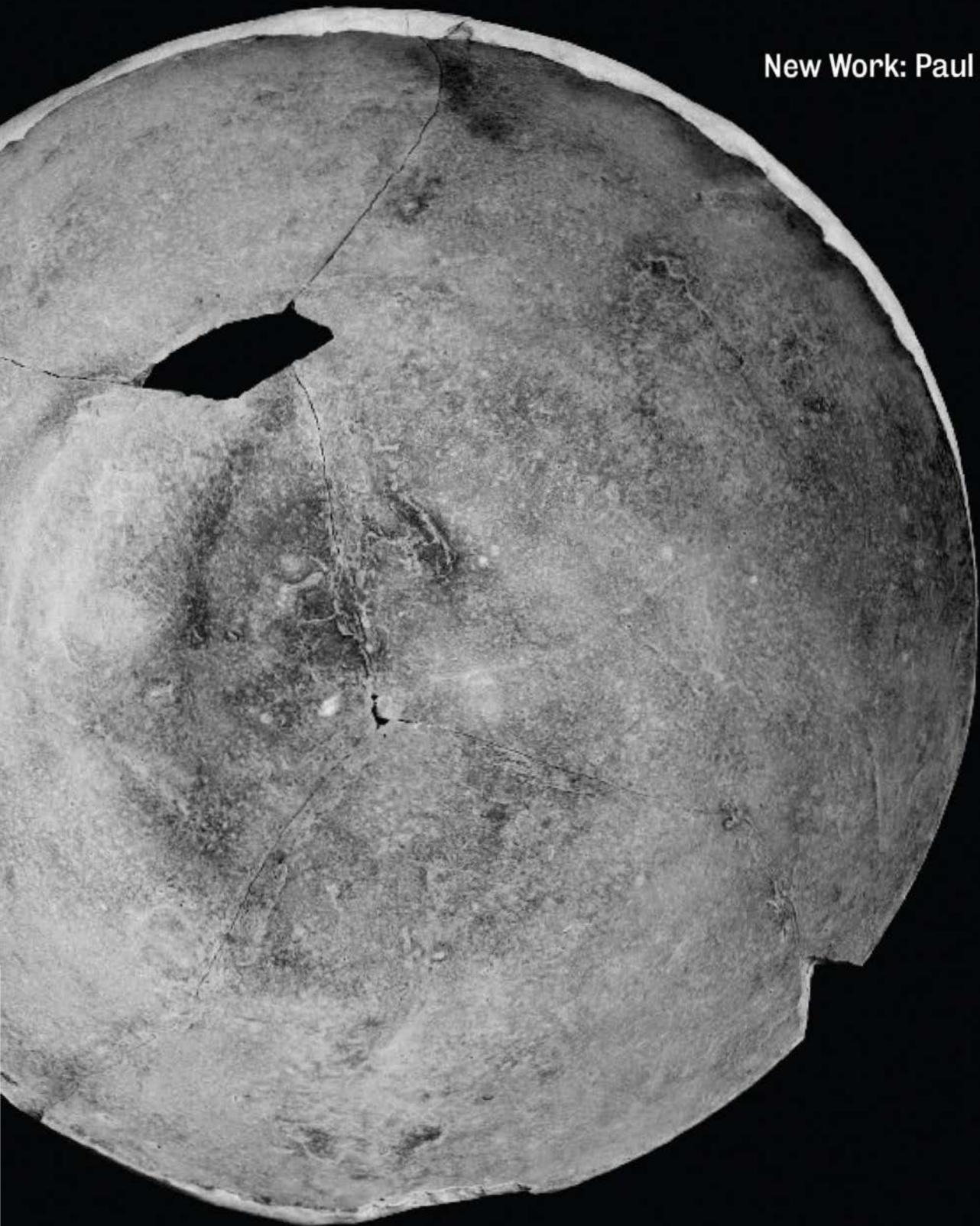


New Work: Paul Sietsema



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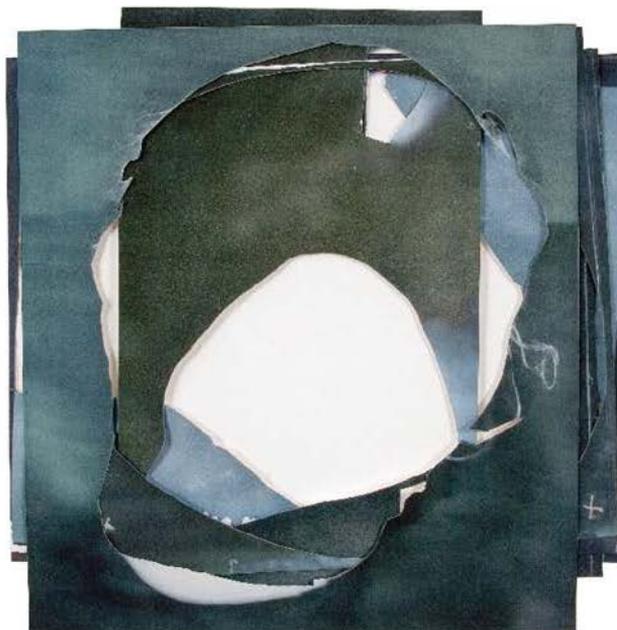
*The secret of the photograph, the very clear mystery of its being lost and straying, is its flight into the strange in the very midst of the familiar.*

—Jean-Luc Nancy<sup>1</sup>

Over the last eight years Paul Sietsema has culled photographs from the often rare anthropological and ethnographic books he has collected. These mostly black-and-white reproductions, largely of indigenous artifacts, constitute the substratum of his newest body of work. From these images he has constructed a layered world that fluctuates between historical periods, material phenomena, documentation, and reverie. The space of his studio circumscribes this conceptual environment, wherein the images and books become portals enabling the artist to traverse a wide range of locations, subjects, objects, and materials. At the crux of the project is the matter of representation and its fugitive, shifting nature—the subject’s ultimate flight into abstraction as a result of cultural mediation.

Countless photographs of artifacts from lost cultures—a Nguni cape, a Maori navigational chart, ancient coins, a Gilyak tunic, a stone mauri, wrapping fiber, a spear—form Sietsema’s imagistic ground. Together they stand for the everyday belongings of an imagined individual just before the advent of Western exploration. Through extensive studies involving raw materials as diverse as burned paper pulp, cement, latex, clay, jute, and human hair, Sietsema attentively reconstructs the objects, pushing the two-dimensional forms into three-dimensional ones that uncannily resemble their photographic counterparts. In the process, however, the material composition of the artifacts changes. A Gilyak tunic originally made from fish skin, for example, transposes into a flat-lying, black sculpture made from burned and carved paper pulp. Raw materials replace the vestigial photograph and the image becomes a “reformatized subject”<sup>2</sup> that points to a material and cultural slippage. This displacement indexes a representational matrix involving photography, sculpture, time, and identity and also directs one to the material and formal studies carried out by artists such as Eva Hesse, Yves Klein, and Robert Morris.

The artifacts Sietsema examines, for the most part, derive from geographic locales dramatically impacted by the onset of Western



exploration, colonialism, and industrialization—places including Oceania, South Asia, and Africa. Through such encounters the understanding of these cultures has shifted at the hands of Westerners such as the Norwegian Thor Heyerdahl, who took pictures of indigenous island cultures and wrote at length about his explorations in journals that later became representational documents for those not able to experience such places firsthand. Another notorious example is Paul Gauguin, an artist who sought out so-called primitive cultures in Tahiti, assimilating their aesthetic into his own. These Western appropriationists were allured by what the art historian Gill Perry describes as “the absence of an accessible iconography or history to the objects [that] allowed them to be easily absorbed into a modern artistic culture.”<sup>3</sup>

The artifacts’ relationship to modernism is of seminal importance to Sietsema, who builds his project around historical loss and the resulting inability to know a subject. “Many of the subjects I choose are to structure a kind of loss,” he states. “In this project the objects for me epitomize a certain kind of loss, one structured by, and in this case caused by, representation. The attempt to record and represent these cultures to the West changed them.”<sup>4</sup> For the artist, photography acts as a superstructure that emblemizes this representational loss.

The centerpiece of the project is Sietsema’s third film, *Figure 3* (2008), in which he sequentially presents a selection of the remade artifacts in

*Stack drawing, 2006*

a simplified manner, almost as a slide show, against spare, mostly black or white backgrounds. Anthropological photography, museum display methods, and documentary film provide the aesthetic models for the work. In fact, Sietsema shot the film using an Arriflex 16-millimeter camera—a model typically used by documentary filmmakers in the mid-twentieth century. While making the film, the artist subjected his sculptural objects to many studies, experimenting with lighting, color, and materials in order to elicit the objects' tactile, or haptic, properties on film. In effect, this concentration on the sculptures' formal attributes replaces the lost subject matter. Drifting between abstract close-ups and more distant figurative shots, Sietsema establishes a third, time-based space that reanimates the objects while exploring the overlapping terrain between photography and sculpture. If one thinks of the space of the studio as the project's ground (comprising informative photographs, sculptural objects, and books) and of the film as its figure, then one nears the essence of Sietsema's ongoing project: a study in the shifting relationships that shape perception.

Also presented in the exhibition is a related group of drawings that examine photographic processes without the use of actual photographic media (such as cameras, chemicals, or light-sensitive surfaces). To make them,



*The Famous Last Words, 2006*

Sietsema employed hand-applied methods for retouching photos, such as cut stenciling and alternating layers of ink that together form a dense surface. Thus, the drawings emulate photography by using manual rather than mechanical processes. In *Stack drawing* (2006), one of the first of these works, he excised the central image after replicating photographs of the artifacts. The unknown object is suggested only by the contour of its negative space and the few remaining traces that remain around the edges, such as the wisps of hair in the top sheet. Absence and a dense ground, therefore, assume prominence in the layered sheets of cut paper. In this way the artist inverts standard compositional relationships that typically privilege the image over its ground. *Stack drawing's* dark midnight surface, created by alternating many layers of ink and chalk, could perhaps be best understood as the unknowable historical terrain of the missing artifacts.

*The Famous Last Words* (2006) encapsulates the dynamic, reconstructive thrust of Sietsema's project while at the same time conveying the frustration inherent in wanting to know (or visually read) subjects that have in essence become illegible over time. This work depicts a text the artist crafted by blending appropriated excerpts from various writings, including Heyerdahl's travelogue *Fatu-Hiva: Back to Nature*, the Belgian poet Henri Michaux's opium diaries, and writings by the expressionist art historian Wilhelm Worringer. These sources and more are filtered through the artist's own voice, forming a fluid, diaristic account belonging to the absent protagonist of Sietsema's film. Rendering certain passages of the drawing's text illegible and folding the paper to yield a sculptural quality, the artist creates a "representational terrain the reader/viewer has to contend with."<sup>5</sup> The cursive script (made from a hand-cut stencil) derives from a computer font, but it also recalls an ancient handwritten document—perhaps a lost message in a bottle.

Made of more than forty layers of built-up stencil applications, *The Famous Last Words* aesthetically emulates a photographic negative. Another work, *Note drawing* (2007), features the same text, but this time rendered in positive. Moving from one drawing to the next, one witnesses a shift between negative and positive representations of the same subject—the verso and recto of the image, respectively. Unlike *The Famous Last Words*, however, *Note drawing* displays an inky black imprint of the artist's hand—a trope of identification applied to the paper's surface that obscures passages of the text.



*Black Land drawing, 2007*

If *The Famous Last Words* and *Note drawing* are linguistic representations of Sietsema's absent subject, then *The Fold* (2007)—the largest and most intricately drawing in the series—is an attempt to visualize this imagined persona via the artist's own self-portrait (again based on a photograph). To make it he built up many layers of ink over an extended period of time, turning the paper upside-down, reversing it, folding it, and letting drips cascade down its surface. The drawing's lush texture, which immediately summons the gestural canvases of the modern painter Jackson Pollock, hampers the viewer's ability to identify the subject. The two folds in the upper right and left corners, furthermore, play off the diamond shapes in the background—representational creases—and again assert the work's cultural status. Whereas *Stack drawing* points to a disembodied, absent image, *The Fold* suggests its physical embodiment, realized through the artist's use of his own likeness and the drawing's material presence.

*Black Land drawing*, *Chinese Porcelain*, and *Untitled* (all 2007) also exemplify a disembodied subject, albeit through language. Each drawing depicts a barely legible text that, from a distance, emulates a photographic representation of ancient signposts—words carved in stone. To make the drawings the artist applied many layers of black ink to the white surface of the paper. Up close the words dissolve into a pure abstraction as the viewer identifies the individuated marks of ink. From a distance, however, the letterforms emerge from the white ground. In each work Sietsema pinpoints different moments of discursive slippage. The text in *Black Land*

*drawing* refers both to a derogatory name American soldiers assigned to the region occupied by the Vietcong and to the term's original indigenous meaning (*Cau Mau*, which in Vietnamese denotes the dark, fertile soil of the land). *Chinese Porcelain* (inscribed in Dutch in the drawing) refers to the precious object, but also distantly to the sometimes dangerous trade routes of the South Pacific connecting Holland and China. And in *Untitled*, the words *Die November Gruppe* correspond to an early twentieth-century group of German socialist artists—named after the revolution in Weimar—that was ultimately undermined by its members' bourgeois leanings. These three drawings typify how meaning can easily shift even as the representational forms remain fixed.

In this new body of work Sietsema explores how diverse media, filtered through the photographic, affect the viewer's perception of a given subject whose identity is constructed through evolving absence and the subsequent loss of representational form. The shifting dynamic established between Sietsema's film and the related objects in the exhibition shapes an exploratory model based in fluctuating relationships developed through time and space and among various materials. "The entire history of representation—that entire fevered history of mimesis, of the image, of perception, of the object and the scientific law, of the spectacle, of art, of political representation—is thus traversed by the fissure of absence," writes Jean-Luc Nancy,<sup>6</sup> Sietsema skillfully navigates the dark recesses and tactile surfaces of that elusive fissure.

Apsara DiQuinzio

Assistant Curator, Painting and Sculpture

#### NOTES

1. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 106.
2. Paul Sietsema, email correspondence with the author, November 8, 2006.
3. Gill Perry, "Primitivism and the 'Modern,'" in *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century*, by Charles Harrison et al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 56.
4. Sietsema, September 27, 2006.
5. Sietsema, September 12, 2006.
6. Nancy, 37.

Paul Sietsema was born in 1968 in Los Angeles, where he continues to live and work. He received his BA from the University of California, Berkeley, and his MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles. In 2005 he received a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship to develop his current project. His work will be the subject of an upcoming solo exhibition at the de Appel, Amsterdam, and it will also be included in the 5th Berlin Biennial and the 2008 Carnegie International. He has had solo exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; and Brent Petersen Gallery, Los Angeles. His work was included in the group exhibitions *Le mouvement des images* at the Centre Pompidou, Paris; *Live/Work: Performance into Drawing* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; *Uncertain States of America* at various venues, including the Serpentine Gallery, London; *Ecstasy: In and About Altered States* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and *The Americans: New Art* at the Barbican, London. The artist's work is represented in many important public collections, such as SFMOMA; MoMA, New York; the Whitney Museum; MOCA, Los Angeles; the Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; the Tate, London; and the Dallas Museum of Art.

## Works in the Exhibition

Unless otherwise noted, all works are courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

### *The Copyist*, 2005

Gouache, watercolor, and glue on paper  
16 7/8 x 22 1/4 in. (42.9 x 56.5 cm)  
Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Second Century Acquisition Fund

### *Untitled (Rise and Fall)*, 2005

Ink on newspaper  
16 x 12 x 3 in. (40.6 x 30.5 x 7.6 cm)

### *The Famous Last Words*, 2006

Ink on folded paper  
62 3/8 x 48 1/8 in. (158 x 122 cm)  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Ruth Nash Fund purchase

### *Stack drawing*, 2006

Cut-and-pasted painted paper with chalk on board  
32 x 31 in. (81.3 x 78.7 cm)  
Museum of Modern Art, New York, Fund for the Twenty-First Century

### *Untitled split*, 2006

Woven cotton  
Two panels: 60 x 55 in. (152.4 x 139.7 cm) and 59 x 55 in. (149.9 x 139.7 cm)

### *Black Land drawing*, 2007

Ink on paper  
51 x 56 x 1 1/2 in. (129.5 x 142.2 x 3.8 cm)

San Francisco Museum of Modern

Art, purchase through a gift of Joan E. Roebuck

### *Calendar Sticks*, 2007

Bamboo, paint, tape, paper, latex, staples, paper clip, string, urethane powder, and clay  
74 1/2 x 14 x 5 in. (189.2 x 35.6 x 12.7 cm)  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, purchase through a gift of Joan E. Roebuck

### *Chinese Porcelain*, 2007

Ink on paper  
44 x 68 x 1 1/2 in. (111.8 x 172.7 x 3.8 cm)

From the series *Composition Suite*:

### *Composition*, 2007

Ink on paper  
23 x 16 1/2 in. (58.4 x 41.9 cm)  
Private collection

### *Cut drawing*, 2007

Ink, varnish, spray paint, and glue on paper  
16 3/8 x 14 1/8 in. (41.1 x 35.9 cm)  
Private collection

### *Errata drawing*, 2007

Ink on paper  
25 1/8 x 20 in. (63.8 x 50.8 cm)  
Private collection

### *The Fold*, 2007

Ink on folded paper  
87 x 71 x 5 in. (221 x 180.3 x 12.7 cm)  
Private collection

### *Note drawing*, 2007

Ink on paper  
62 x 47 1/2 in. (157.5 x 120.7 cm)  
Collection of Dean Valentine and Amy Adelson

### *Untitled*, 2007

Ink on paper  
48 x 48 in. (121.9 x 121.9 cm)  
Collection of John Rubeli

### *Untitled collection*, 2007

Tape, paper, ink, latex, string, urethane powder, varnish, plaster dust, wood, and glue  
68 x 15 x 5 in. (172.7 x 38.1 x 12.7 cm)  
Collection of Allen and Kelli Questrom

### *Untitled (Gourd #2)*, 2007

Portland cement and epoxy  
19.5 x 11 x 11 in. (49.5 x 27.9 x 27.9 cm)

### *Untitled (Gourd #4)*, 2007

Portland cement and epoxy  
16 x 14 x 14 in. (40.6 x 35.6 x 35.6 cm)

### *Untitled (Gourd #5)*, 2007

Portland cement and epoxy  
12 x 9 x 9 in. (30.5 x 22.9 x 22.9 cm)

### *White Eyes drawing*, 2007

Ink on paper  
24 x 16 3/4 in. (61 x 42.6 cm)  
Collection of Allen and Kelli Questrom

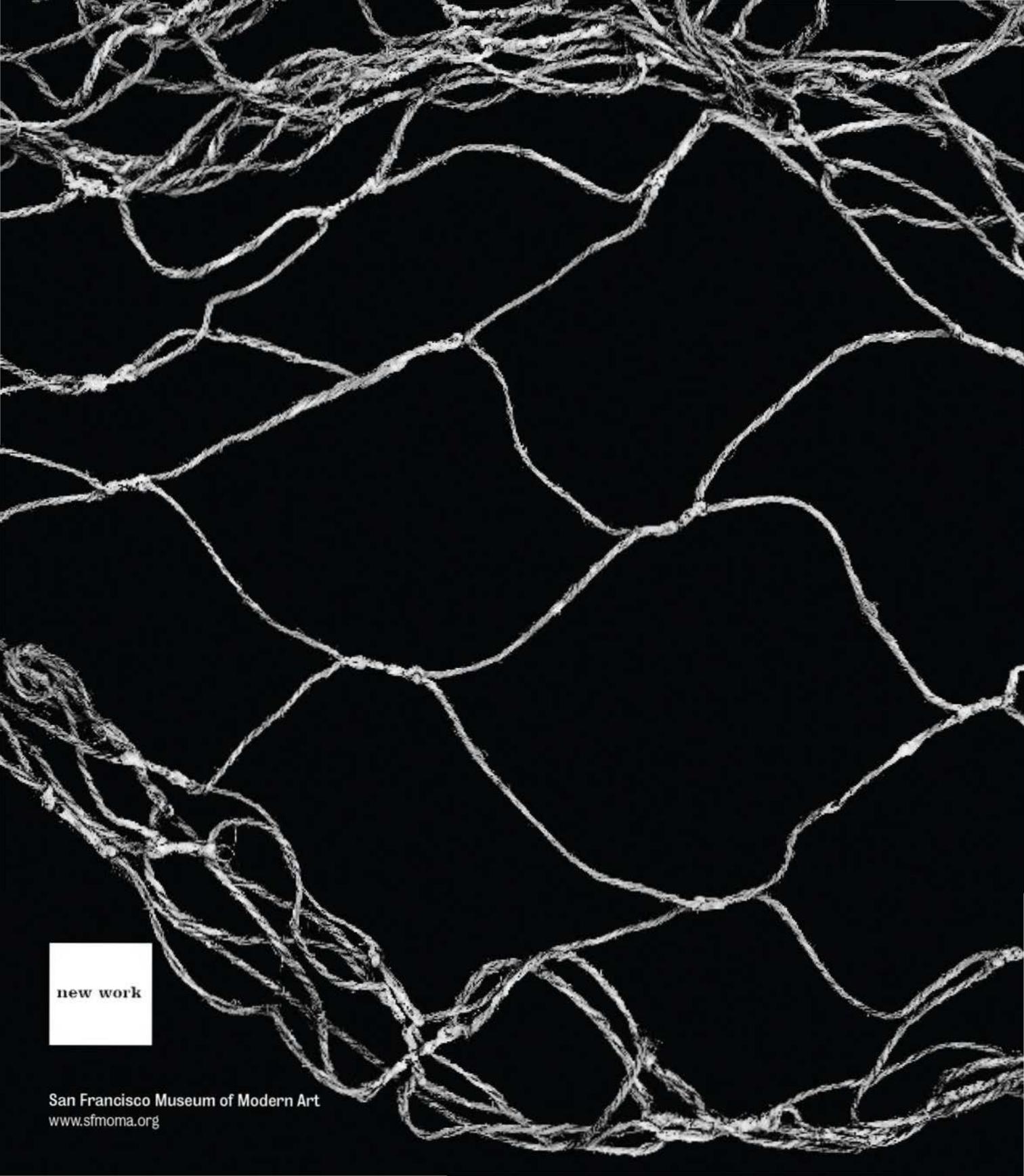
### *Figure 3*, 2008

16-millimeter film, black-and-white, silent, approximately 25 min.

All images are courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles. © Paul Sietsema

This side: photos by Joshua White  
Reverse: stills from *Figure 3*, 2008

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new work

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