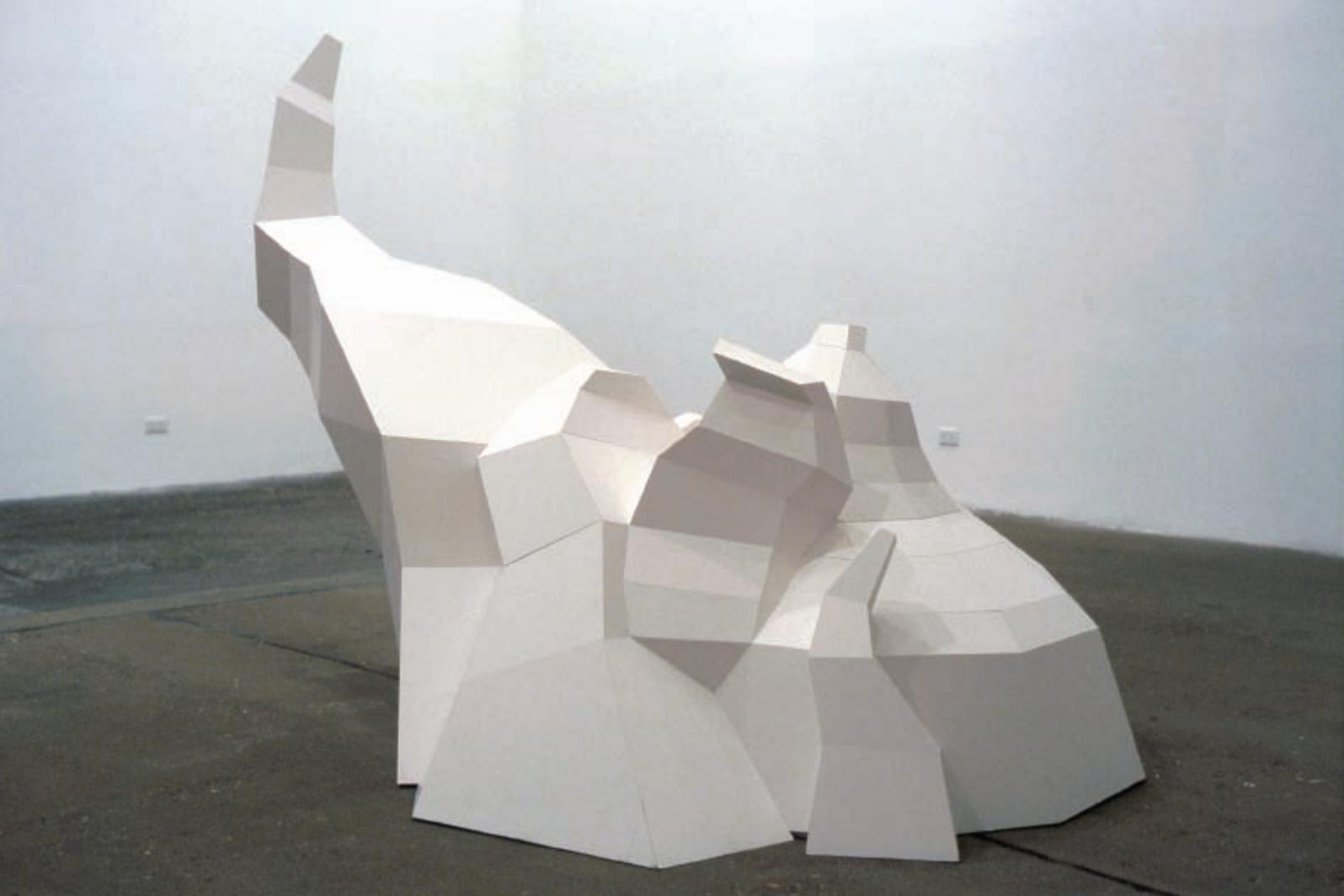


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## Being [Having Been] There

There is a form of sightseeing that might better be called sight being or, better yet, site being. This is the kind of travel (a sort in which we all participate at some time or another) whose goal is immersion, not necessarily in the totality of a different culture, but in the feeling of a specific place. We can reason this goal as we will: Perhaps, because the haunts of our daily lives lose their sparkling sensations as a matter of course, we need periodically to renew a newness somewhere else. Perhaps the farther we travel, geography-wise, from our own site-certainty, the closer we come to remembering that a place, any and every place, has a feeling at all.

Susan Giles represents and grapples with this feeling-as-a-destination sort of travel in her current exhibition. It is a subject she has addressed before, in recent years: in her video installation *Panzoomtilt*, 2005, in which six video monitors methodically demonstrated the technical tools at hand for amateur travel videographers, and in her short collage of



*Site Broadcast (Torch)*, 2007, YouTube videos

found travel footage *Glitches*, *Hitches*, and *Hiccups 2* from 2004. Reminiscent and clearly a thematic continuation of these earlier works, the videos and sculptures in the current show represent the spectrum of ways in which



*Untitled (Travel Stories), 2006, two DVDs on monitors*

tourists might be able to solidify and record that reinvigorated feeling they so earnestly seek. Her installation is in multiple media; in its most sensorially commanding segments, *Site Broadcast (Torch)* and *Site Broadcast (Wall)*, nine-gridded, streaming YouTube videos from each of two iconic travel destinations, the Statue of Liberty (and its site, Ellis Island) and the Great Wall of China — clattering, variously

paced, sonically overlapping, and stutteringly documentary of nameless people's visits to a place they want personally to record — fill two freestanding walls. YouTube's logo punctuates the bottom corner of each video, underscoring that not only is this found video, but it is footage fervently self-published by its creators and, almost inexplicably, reviewed on the Web by large numbers of people.

But the show is about much more than video artistry; Giles is a trained sculptor and considers the sculptural and the digital to be components of a larger idea. Complementing these video samples are two silent, colorless sculptures constructed by hand from Foam-Cor rest upon the floor. An extension of a project begun with the Eiffel Tower (*Pilier Sud, 2005*), these sculptures are full-scale sections of the Statue of Liberty and the Great Wall (the flame of the former; a representative portion of the latter's parapet), though, in their fractured presentation and lack of lifelike coloration, they are not necessarily recognizable immediately as such. As quiet white presences they provide a stark

contrast to the found video footage. Platonic ideals, they illustrate the enormous weight cultures place upon national monuments, what travelers carry home in their minds from tourist sites, and how abstracted and site-less this baggage finally becomes.

Abstracted and site-less, yet somehow, even in their brittle construction, physically tangible: Once we settle upon these designations, Giles' show flows logically toward its final segment, a duo of videos (*Untitled (Travel Stories)*, 2006) in which couples, each partner in turn, recount a specific event from an exotic vacation. Giles' videos, as this set does, often take the form of segmented, illustratively edited investigations (as with her 2000 suite *Um, (space)*, and *Vagueness*). When these couples tell their stories, they talk with their hands; they gesture and trace and emphasize. This tactile form of talking is what Giles preserves; she edits out the still moments and lets the resulting gaps themselves point toward the speakers' attempts at literally grasping their former experiences. But if grasping the true feeling of a site is what



*Untitled (Travel Stories)*, 2006, two DVDs on monitors

Giles wishes to reveal as a goal of travelers everywhere — the United States and China being only two of innumerable sites (and it must be noted that the juxtaposition of destinations from these two nations is by no means a political one) — it might seem surprising that Giles' own aesthetic is relatively austere. Sol LeWitt's white and mathematical sculptures echo within her Foam-Cor constructions. The gridded structure



*Site Broadcast (Wall), 2007, YouTube videos*

of the streaming videos and the positively blank wall behind the speakers in *Untitled (Travel Stories)* recall the ascetic appearance of much 1970s Conceptual production. Not a simulation of what it actually feels or looks like to be at

any site — the sounds; the smells; the sights; the vast novelty — Giles' installation is instead a stark presentation of the futility of any such representative gesture.

Giles is herself well traveled; her interest in the issues of site and its relationship to tourism originated with her own art-focused visits to India and Indonesia. She travels much less these days, for various reasons, and when she does, the prospect of performing the role of a tourist by standing behind the lens of a camera, taking or posing for photos at a location of designated significance, seems to her at this point almost absurd. Every place does have a feeling; new places possess ones that are most easily graspable. But the ephemera associated with travel recreate this feeling imperfectly, if at all. To assign representative responsibility to a souvenir from a site — a model; a video; a photograph — this is to grasp at air.

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Gahlberg Gallery

**Susan Giles**

Thursday, June 7 to Saturday, Aug. 4, 2007

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**Barbara Wiesen**

*Director and Curator*

Inside Cover Image: *Torch, 2007, foam-core*  
*All works courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago.*



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