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## Matt Siber: Idol Structures

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Matt Siber **Idol Structures**

Essays by Gregory J. Harris and David Raskin  
DePaul Art Museum

*A symbol that has no substance behind it cannot fool the public for long.* — Doris E. Fleischman and Howard Walden Cutler <sup>1</sup>

Speed down a highway, cruise along a city street, or saunter about a sidewalk and you are endlessly confronted by a cacophony of visual messaging. The public view is littered with notices, warnings, identifications, enticements, and slogans—a dizzying array of color, text, and images—that mold and mediate our experience of the built environment.<sup>2</sup> *Idol Structures*, a series of photographs and sculptures by artist Matt Siber, probes the systems of marketing and mass-media communication that permeate the urban landscape. Rather than focusing on the message itself, Siber emphasizes the physical infrastructure of the signage that delivers visual messaging, revealing a component of advertisements meant to stay subservient to the graphic and linguistic instruments of corporate branding. His work creates a glitch in the communication process of advertising, disrupting an ad's ability to convince viewers that a purchase can transform their lives for the better. By aestheticizing the conceptually mute elements of this system in meticulous photographs and finely crafted sculptures, Siber interrogates the power of the intended message, undermining its ability to persuade and influence.

Examining the power structures underlying the visual noise of the built environment is a longstanding interest of Siber's. In an earlier body of work, *The Untitled Project* (figure 1), Siber investigated the complex interaction of text and image that takes place in urban spaces. Using Photoshop, he painstakingly removed all the text from a photograph, playfully making clear our dependence on reading to navigate public spaces. By re-presenting



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Figure 1 Untitled #22 inkjet print 2003



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the erased text in the corresponding location on a parallel panel, Siber gave credence not only to the power of words (in absentia) but also to the subliminal messages conveyed by colors, graphics, logos, and the other tools of branding that litter our daily lives. Where *The Untitled Project* draws attention to the messages in a given environment and the layered means by which they are communicated, the photographs and sculptures of *Idol Structures* subvert that message entirely. Taking a critical approach, Siber employed a simple technique, presenting the sign itself, uninflected but rendered unfamiliar. Unlike advertising, Siber's work is neither narrative nor transportive. Rather than manipulating the viewer through fantasy, escape, or fear, his pieces create an intensely visceral encounter that roots the viewer in the present time and place. Depicting signage in such an uncommonly direct manner lays bare advertising's highly calibrated messages as nothing more than thinly veiled, empty promises.

The strategies that Siber's work scrutinizes were pioneered by an early twentieth-century public-relations expert named Edward Bernays.<sup>3</sup> A nephew of the neurologist and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, Bernays used his uncle's ideas to show "American corporations for the first time how they could make people want things they didn't need by linking mass-produced goods to their unconscious desires."<sup>4</sup> He described the field of public relations, of which advertising is a subset, rather innocuously as "the attempt, by information, persuasion, and adjustment to engineer public support for an activity, cause, movement, or institution."<sup>5</sup> Bernays taught advertisers to craft widely distributed messages using language and visual media to speak to people's deep-seated feelings of "self-preservation, ambition, pride, hunger, love of family and

children, patriotism, imitativeness, the desire to be a leader, [and] love of play" in order to motivate them to take a particular course of action.<sup>6</sup> Advertising functions by proposing that such an action will satisfy desires beyond basic needs or simple material wants, thereby making the consumer, according to Steve Ewen, "a happier, more successful, more sexually appealing, less fearful person—somebody to be admired rather than reviled."<sup>7</sup> The wares of the advertiser are thereby "enchanted" through the touch of advertising and branding creatives.<sup>8</sup> *Idol Structures* critically examines how these practices function in the public spaces they permeate.

The proliferation of messaging on highways and city streets—capex suggests that we live in an unprecedented age of advertising. However, as Anne Cronin noted, "The ubiquity of advertising in the west has been the focus of comment for centuries and many have claimed theirs as the ultimate era of advertising."<sup>9</sup> Beginning in the eighteenth century, outdoor advertising increasingly became a visual element of urban space as it progressed along with advancements in technology. Inexpensively produced signs, cards, and posters were layered repeatedly on top of one another, filling nearly all of the available wall space in cities. As the electric lightbulb became commonplace around the turn of the twentieth century, large illuminated billboards appeared on top of buildings, and lighted signs brightened the night, providing new opportunities to reach potential consumers.<sup>10</sup>

The newly illuminated city of the first half of the twentieth century was a goldmine for artists, notably Walker Evans, who photographed the city with a poetic sensibility and deep interest in the creative possibilities to be found in the built environment. Commenting on Evans's interest in the visual qualities of the

written word, Andrei Codrescu described the era:

It was also a time of popular writing, of huge advertisements, of lettering that invaded every nook and cranny and even wrote the skyline. America wrote big, with bold new alphabets, in lightbulbs, in neon, in smoke. One could follow the text of twentieth-century America from coast to coast and read it either as a single dada phrase or as small interlinked sections of an epic poem.<sup>11</sup>

The present moment is not so dissimilar in terms of the pervasiveness of signage. While messaging still dominates the landscape, however, the emphasis on text that so interested Evans has been replaced by imagery and corporate logos, scaled up and presented in vibrant color on image-wrapped buses and video billboards with boundless pizzazz.

In this morass of public communication, Siber focuses on a particular system of message delivery: billboards and large signs posted along thoroughfares, nestled between buildings, or perched at the edge of parking lots—all advertisements designed to be viewed while in motion. In their landmark study of the “ordinary” architecture of the Las Vegas strip, *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), postmodern architectural theorists Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown outlined a similar interest in this type of signage. Venturi and Scott Brown analyzed how massive signs and their messaging actually shaped the space of the city, describing its form as “an architecture of communication over space”<sup>12</sup> and declaring that the “graphic sign in space has become the architecture of this landscape.”<sup>13</sup> They noted how these visually loud signs conveyed messages to automobile-bound citizens from great

Figure 2 Yellow/Gray inkjet print 2012







distances and at high speeds, freeing buildings to be designed in rather plain styles and set back from the street. The signs linked all the structures together:

But it is the highway signs, through their sculptural forms or pictorial silhouettes, their particular positions in space, their inflected shapes, and their graphic meanings, that identify and unify the megastructure. They make verbal and symbolic connections through space, communicating a complexity of meanings through hundreds of associations in a few seconds from far away. Symbol dominates space.<sup>14</sup>

The complexity of meanings and associations that such signs are calculated to convey is precisely what Siber aims to dissect and subvert. Advertisers rely on a fastidiously constructed system of color, shape, typography, and graphic design to articulate a brand and communicate a message. When distilled into a roadside sign, these elements must be used boldly and, as Siber himself observed, “screamed at high volume.”<sup>15</sup> As Cronin described, when these signs are “viewed, as intended, when mobile in a car, on foot, on a bus or train, reception of these commercial messages may be reduced to snatches of text and glimpses of colour and images that are detached from the semiotic coherence of the original advertisement.”<sup>16</sup> Siber’s photographs and sculptures force this dissociation to an extreme, completely undermining the coherence of the message and disrupting the system of delivery.

Though spare in approach, Siber’s photographs reveal much about the deep power of corporate messaging and its ubiquity within the built environment. In *Idol Structures*, he focuses on signs that speak in a “commercial vernacular”—utilitarian, branded,

often mass-produced signs that stand sentry at strip malls, shopping centers, car lots, or chain hotels.<sup>17</sup> Siber photographed these signs from a severe angle, and it is not immediately apparent that the objects are signs at all since their messages are not visible (plates 9-15). This vantage point creates tension between two and three dimensions, rendering familiar structures unsettling and puzzling in their flatness.

Siber’s photographic rhetoric oscillates between a documentary and a commercial style. The photographs are frank, directly describing their subject without judgment or embellishment. At the same time, they possess the polish of a corporate studio shot—a legible and nearly flawless presentation of an enticing industrial good. His compositional strategy is consistent and rigidly defined. The object, presented as a decontextualized fact, is centered, filling the field of view with no ground or horizon visible. The photographs would be at home among a Bernd and Hilla Becher “typology,” a Richard Avedon portrait, or a product shot of a can of soup. They exhibit the cool disinterestedness of an Ed Ruscha gasoline station, a declaration of accuracy over expression. Like the early photographs of Lewis Baltz and the other so-called New Topographics who photographed the built landscape of the 1960s and 1970s, Siber’s photographs borrow from the dry aesthetics of commercial studio and real estate photography. Also in keeping with the aims of the New Topographics, Siber’s images are at variance with an agenda of mindless consumption and disposability.<sup>18</sup> In his hands, the signs become inoperative relics of corporate speech.

Siber presents the images of *Idol Structures* in two distinct formats that deconstruct the viewer’s encounter with advertis-

Figure 4. Columns (installation view) 2015

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ing. As traditionally framed photographs, they are printed at an imposing scale and displayed on a gallery wall to maximize their visual impact and seriality. In this way, conventions of construction and material can be identified, and the telltale signs of branding begin to emerge even though the signs themselves are largely invisible. Despite their fidelity to the real world, these prints push against an illusionistic depiction of space, compelling the viewer's eye to scan the surface. Siber also displays this type of photograph en masse as an immersive installation (figure 4). He flush mounts the photographs to columns that are 20 to 27.5 inches wide and 8.5 feet tall, then strategically arranges them so that the viewer must navigate a maze of reticent pillars. Here the two-dimensional image asserts itself with an unnerving physical presence. Both presentations make the quotidian exotic, inviting viewers to reevaluate their relationship with advertising signage.

The play between two and three dimensions in Siber's photographs complements his sculptural work. Nearly all of his sculptures are meticulously derived from his photographs of existing structures (figure 3). He re-creates this found signage using unconventional materials and unusually fine craftsmanship. Where Siber's photographs primarily depict mass-produced corporate structures, his sculptures spring from a range of references—from the ever-present gas station shelter (plate 7) to idiosyncratic vernacular signage (plate 5). Using metal, wood, acrylic, and fluorescent light tubes, he crafts these anonymous structures with warmth and attention to detail. The artist's move to emphasize the container over the message turns the function of the sign on its head, disrupting the language of finely tuned branding.

Through scale and materials, Siber seeks to engage viewers'

bodies in the gallery space, sharing an affinity with the Minimalists, though to a different end. Minimalism is marked by "seemingly impersonal" works that exhibit reason and restraint.<sup>19</sup> Artists such as Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, and Donald Judd broke convention by using industrial materials to create non-referential objects that contain no traces of artistic decision-making or overt expression, but are instead designed to make viewers conscious of their bodies in space.<sup>20</sup> Siber's sculptural work demonstrates a similar reserve and seeks to foster an encounter for the viewer that is contemplative and experiential. Unlike the Minimalists, however, his work employs a sort of representation and consciously refers to specific objects that are unlike most mass-produced signage. He chooses to re-create eccentric structures to draw further attention to formulas of control that are built into the landscape. Siber infuses a minimal visual approach with a critical sensibility that disrupts and distorts the established forms of messaging that permeate the built environment. Stripping away the barrage of enticements, Siber's sculptures allow space for critical reflection. In opposition to the forceful commands and sly manipulations of advertising, they invite open-ended inquiry about our ambitions, fears, and desires.

Siber's work highlights aspects of the urban landscape that are, in essence, hidden in plain sight. We have learned to ignore the systems that deliver commercial messages while absorbing their content. Siber's work seeks to change how we relate to the urban environment, enabling us to perceive both the systemic nature of mass-marketing practices and the degree of interventions applied to the containers of those messages. Ultimately, Siber's work renegotiates the terms of our encounter with advertising, imploring us not to remain idle.

- 1 Doris E. Fleischman and Howard Walden Cutler, "Themes and Symbols," in *The Engineering of Consent*, ed. Edward Bernays (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 152.
- 2 John McMorrough, "On Billboards and Other Signs around (Learning from) Las Vegas," in *Relearning from Las Vegas*, ed. Aron Vinegar and Michael J. Golec (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 130.
- 3 See *Century of the Self*, directed by Adam Curtiss (London: BBC Four, 2002), DVD, 240 min.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Edward Bernays, "The Theory and Practice of Public Relations: A Résumé," in *The Engineering of Consent* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 3-4.
- 6 Fleischman and Cutler (note 1), 139.
- 7 Quoted in *Century of the Self* (note 3).
- 8 Anne Cronin, *Advertising, Commercial Spaces and the Urban* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 90.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 11 Andrei Codrescu, "Introduction," in *Walker Evans: Signs* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1998), 5.
- 12 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 8.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Matt Siber, "Visual Literacy in the Public Space," *Visual Communication* 4, 5 (2005): 6.
- 16 Cronin (note 8), 64.
- 17 According to Britt Salvesen, Venturi and Scott Brown and the New Topographics addressed "the commercial vernacular, as opposed to the primitive, idealized, or industrial vernaculars celebrated under the rubrics of romanticism and modernism ...Explicitly rejecting modernism's pretensions to transcendence and its glorification of heroic originality-perpetuated, ironically, through formula and replication—they turned to the 'ugly and ordinary,' where genuine diversity and contemporary aspirations found expression." See Salvesen, *New Topographics* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2009), 23.
- 18 See Matthew S. Witkovsky, *Lewis Baltz: The Prototype Works* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2010), 8-9.
- 19 Michael Darling, *The Language of Less* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2011), 23.
- 20 James Meyer, "Preface," in *Minimalism*, ed. James Meyer (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2000), 15.



Advertising creates some of the desires we internalize, and it helps forge the identities we think actually belong to ourselves rather than to Sprite or Boeing. Even if I am overstating the effects of commercial speech on Spirit and Being, consider the evidence. According to a study published in 2015 by Harvard University business law professor John C. Coates IV: “Corporations have begun to displace individuals as the direct beneficiaries of the First Amendment, [a development that is] recent but accelerating.”<sup>1</sup> Coates’s conclusion follows from the aftermath of the Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* (2010) decision, and it aligns with the progressive assertion that nonhuman entities increasingly determine the terms of public conversation. This position has long been the refrain of *Adbusters*, the anticonsumerism magazine that calls itself “The Journal of the Mental Environment.” It is also the contention of artist Matt Siber, whose practices stage a quiet protest against such mind control. He targets the advertising debris that litters our minds—“psychological pollution,”<sup>2</sup> he calls it.

Though advertizing impacts us all, it mostly manages to slip past our conscious notice. Only sometimes does it actually draw our attention; sometimes we even find it fun. Yet advertising is big business. Researchers estimate that people view anywhere from a few hundred commercial messages to many thousands each day.<sup>3</sup> Chicago, where Siber lives, is nothing if not a company town.<sup>4</sup>

Siber, who urges us attend to what we usually take for granted, is best known for his digitally manipulated photographs. One exemplary diptych, *Untitled #22* (figure 1), shows a disrupted street in suburban Chicago. Beautifully photographed at eye level are a McDonald’s, Ramada Inn, street sign, and other familiar suburban features, all made strange by the artist, who stripped



the words from every surface. The M-shaped yellow structure is no longer quite the same as the Golden Arches; the concrete tower has no purpose; and the green rectangle in no way locates us on Higgins Road. Although physical structures can signify their identity with or without words, as the architectural design of any McDonald's restaurant makes clear, this power also proves Coates's claim that commercial speech is increasingly the foundation of public infrastructure.

In *Untitled #22*, the words missing from the suburban streetscape were not merely removed; instead, Siber displaced them to an adjacent blank surface, where they retain their absolute spatial position. It is as if speech is only a transparency lying on top of the built environment, free to be removed at will. Dream on, Siber, dream on. Because then we could wipe away the advertising that destroys souls and liberate our social spaces—or perhaps shape them to increase responsible behavior. Rather than “Billions and Billions Served,” we could internalize messages like “Meat Is Murder.”<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, Siber has made sculptures that also deploy disjunctive strategies. His *Billboard Vinyl* series (plate 6), begun in 2012, is most directly tied to those earlier photographs (which are the subject of Gregory Harris's essay in this publication). In this series, he draped billboard ads from the ceilings of galleries, much like tents that no one can enter. Though marketing messages are partly obscured in the folds of the fabric, the billboards nonetheless command attention. The vinyl off-gases, takes up a lot of space, and is dirty, encouraging viewers to keep their distance. Though Siber removed its existential rationale, some of the psychological force of the ads' commercial speech remains intact.

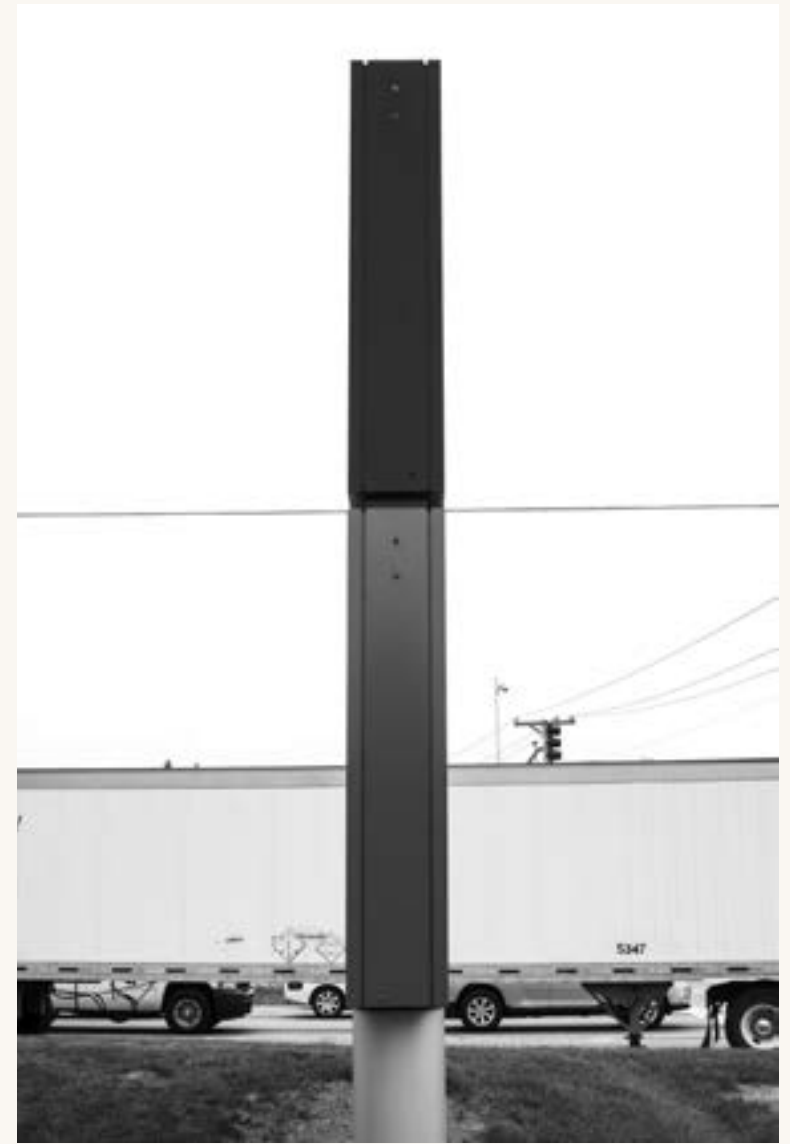
With more physical presence than any two-dimensional image, these signs impose on the viewer.

There is a recent tradition among Conceptual artists of using billboards to reshape public spaces in order to counter the impact of advertising. In the late 1970s, for example, Joseph Kosuth posted paragraphs analyzing language and text next to advertisements selling fast food and alcohol (*Text/Context*, 1978–79). And in the early 1990s, Félix González-Torres displayed a photograph of an unmade bed on billboards throughout New York City as a memorial to his lover, who had died from HIV/AIDS (*Untitled*, 1991). We need to see more protests like these and Siber's because advertising companies take pride in how they saturate our lives with commercial speech. Clear Channel Outdoors, for one, claims its signs reach ninety-three percent of Chicago's “Designated Marketing Area” each week.<sup>6</sup> We must fight back.

Siber's newest sculptures are more than simply protest pieces. Many are beautiful and celebrate skilled craftsmanship, stripping away commercial speech and imposing aesthetic experiences. *Trapezoid* (plate 1) is notable among them. A few years ago, Siber stumbled across a freestanding outdoor business sign in Mishawaka, Indiana. Eighteen feet tall and derelict, it was exactly the type of sign you would find outside a small-town insurance agent's office. If Siber had captured this sign in a photograph, it would likely have filled us with nostalgia for summer days at the pond. But instead he took the image's basic structure and had it lovingly crafted from tung oil-rubbed walnut and maple, white Plexiglas lit from behind, and six glowing fluorescent bulbs. The grain of this wood sign is immaculate, the organic colors luscious, the whites radiant. While the sculpture retains some reso-

nance with its past life in advertising, Siber's transformation also created an object with its own unique existence. In this sense, though *Trapezoid* is nearly as spare as the Minimal art from the 1960s, it does not completely share that earlier genre's autonomy or serial production. Minimal art carries on a private conversation with itself, while Siber intends his art to teach what he calls "visual literacy in the public space."<sup>7</sup> His sculpture is a soft weapon against capitalism.

*Red/Green* (plate 4), *Yellow/Blue* (plate 3), and the other sculptures show Siber's near-elimination of the images of commercial speech and conclude one trajectory of his artwork, from photographs of ads to objects freed of psychological pollution. These works employ the same transformative tactics as *Trapezoid*, giving us a taste of beauty where consumer desire had previously existed. They sell us nothing but the dream of a slightly better reality.



- 1 Adam Liptak, "First Amendment, 'Patron Saint' of Protesters, Is Embraced by Corporations," *New York Times*, Mar. 24, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/24/us/first-amendment-patron-saint-of-protesters-is-embraced-by-corporations.html?ref=us>.
- 2 Alec Quig, "Matt Siber," *Bomb Magazine*, Apr. 15, 2009, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/4281/matt-siber>.
- 3 Ziad Elhady, "The Dogma of Advertising and Consumerism," *Huffington Post*, Jan. 25, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ziad-elhady/the-dogma-of-advertising\\_b\\_2540390.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ziad-elhady/the-dogma-of-advertising_b_2540390.html).
- 4 In Jan. 2014, *Crain's Chicago Business* magazine reported that nearly 24,000 people were employed in the advertising industry in Chicago. Brigid Sweeney, "The Revolution in Chicago's Ad Industry," *Crain's Chicago Business*, Jan. 25, 2014, <http://www.chicagobusiness.com/article/20140125/ISSUE01/301259981/the-revolution-in-chicagos-ad-industry>.
- 5 "Meat Is Murder" is both the title of a Smiths album (singer Morrissey is a prominent vegetarian) and the theme of a protest by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals held in New York City in 2010. See <http://www.peta.org/blog/nyc-drop-dead-meat/>.
- 6 See Clear Channel Outdoor's Chicago market statistics at <http://clearchanneloutdoor.com/where-we-are-chicago/>.
- 7 This phrase comes from Matt Siber, "Visual Literacy in the Public Space," *Visual Communication* 4, 1 (2005): 5-20.



#### **Contributors**

**Matt Siber** is a Chicago-based artist, working in photography and sculpture. His work has been exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Contemporary Photography (Chicago, IL), the Transformer Station (Cleveland, OH), and La Fábrica (Madrid, Spain). His work is held in public and private collections, including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Aaron Siskind Foundation, and the Bidwell Foundation. Siber earned a BA in history from the University of Vermont and an MFA in photography from Columbia College Chicago and is currently on the faculty at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Columbia College Chicago.

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#### **Artist Acknowledgements**

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Plate 5 Shapes birch, steel, fluorescent lights 168x60x72" 2015



Plate 6 Billboard Vinyl #3 used billboard vinyl 15' 2015



Plate 7 Lighted Shelter aluminum, acrylic, fluorescent lights 108x108x168" 2015



SHAPES + MATERIALS

Plate 1 Tropicoid walnut, steel, acrylic, fluorescent lights 134x55x55" 2015



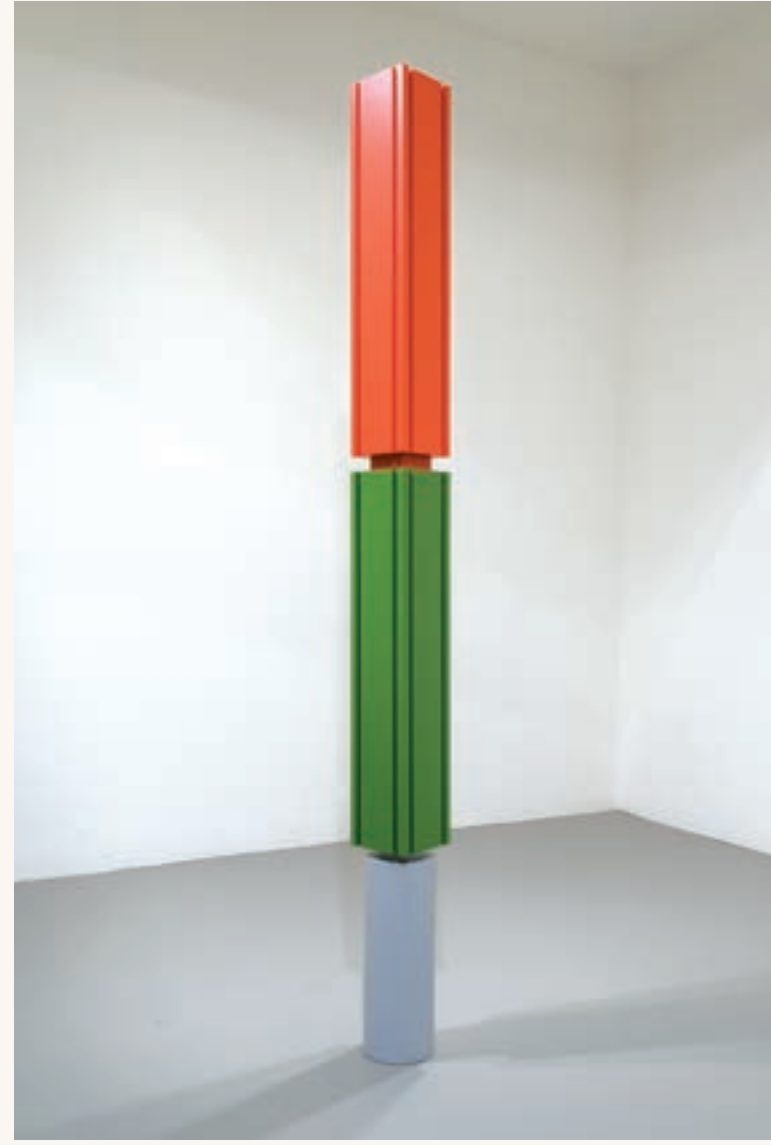
Plate 2 Yellow/Gray steel, paint 102x15x15" 2015



Plate 3 Yellow/Blue poplar, acrylic, fluorescent lights 92.25x92.25x18.25" 2015



Plate 4 Red/Green steel, paint 96x7x7" 2015



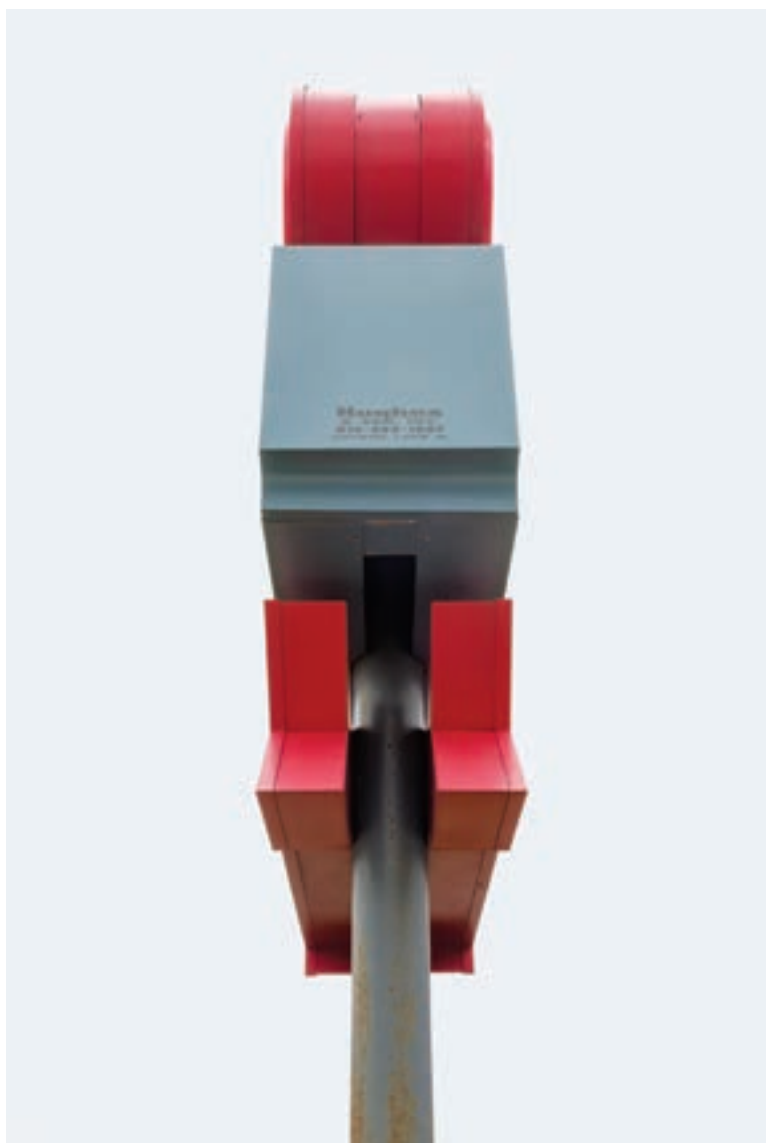
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