

Travis Diehl

Ascending a Little

Review: *Matt Siegle: The Human Potential Movement*
Park View, Los Angeles
August 11–15, 2014

Reopening a Closed Door

“I celebrate myself, and sing myself.” Matt Siegle flicks his glance up, back down; at the sound of a Tibetan bell he lights a match, lowers it to a small white candle, waits until the wick catches, then waves the match out. He discards it on a slowly mounting pile of dead matches. A few seconds pass; the artist licks his thumb and forefinger and pinches out the candle. The artist doesn’t speak, he lets a laptop do the talking; the flowering of a guided meditation, lines from Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, selections from the artist’s own journals are spoken in turn by the notched, cadenced voice of a MacBook Pro.

Opening the apartment’s front door, a half dozen people face you on or around a green couch; but most stay focused on Siegle, who crouches to the left of the entrance. The spread of his candle, laptop, smartphone, and speakers occupies this quarter of the room. There is perhaps some hushed conversation; maybe someone walks to the closet to view a selection of Siegle’s framed works, or to the kitchen for more wine. “And what I assume you shall assume.” The performance, like politics, is dire but boring.

What role does the machine have in the attainment of Human Potential? What is spirituality on life support? Hunched in the center of a web of consumer technology, the artist lights and relights a candle with Pavlovian obedience whenever his Insight Timer meditation app plays the sound of a brass bowl, struck three times. The slowed tones of the default male Mac voice (Male: Alex) objectively render each text with the same degree of drama. “For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.” Is enlightenment this mechanized, prescriptive, pre-set? The human Urgency of the material, the rote Apathy of its presentation, are mediated only by Siegle himself, who (we shall assume) still cares; the performance setting, domestic and familiar, suggests a base level of hope; beyond this, though, is a retreading of deferred actualization—the ongoing Manifest Destiny of the Self.



Matt Siegle, *The Human Potential Movement*, August 11–15, 2014. Performance at Park View, Los Angeles. Courtesy of the artist and Park View. Photo: Jeff McLane.

Eye Contact



Why set yourself up for failure? But the artist's embodiment of this failure—or, more optimistically, his embodiment of this incompleteness, this *not-yet*—forces the issue of our weariness. The conquest or confrontation of apathy (a subject Siegle has treated in detail, having spent the better part of 2009–11 dressed as Kurt Cobain) is apparently prerequisite for political action—that is, for progress toward the potential represented by our tired countercultural symbols. In California, where most folks have had their fill of utopia and of artwork latching on to or leeching what's left in utopian ideals, the reaction is often boredom or dry resistance.

If Siegle's eyes meet yours—that is, if the artist looks up from whatever spot on the hardwood floor of the apartment fixes his gaze or from the small white candle that he lights and snuffs out and relights, *ad absurdum*—that is, if he slits the stillness separating his own carefully cluttered tableau from the rest of the room, from the audience—then you might remember that this artist, performing a piece he calls *The Human Potential Movement*, for the third night of five consecutive nights, is in fact human. The texts spoken by a MacBook Pro are not metal or silicon but flesh texts; the stress position the artist holds, supported by a cork yoga block in the most horizontal (or Los Angeles) orientation, is causing real stress.

No one sees me with the high school counselor or the Marine cadets from the mall. The patella, the space between the kneecap and the shin bones, rubs into the rock.

The Duration of the Struggle

At Park View, Siegle's bid for Human Potential lasts three hours a night, from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m., Monday through Friday: an evening routine. The artist recompresses, perched on a yoga block, after a long day. He shifts his weight, then walks to the kitchen to trim the candle's wick. He lights it again. The OCD precision of Siegle's performance stresses the desire for engagement, the distance from engagement, the awkwardness of engaging. Be here now. The piece is more than an illustration of this distance: Siegle embodies this distance. The work of personal potential both *operates within* the given dead ends of human progress and the attendant clichés of ecstatic material and is *hindered by* or *mediated by* same: kept from purity. Just as a poem—a poem by Walt Whitman, say—if it is to carry any power today, must first negotiate the bleeding wrists, pretentious humanism, escapist sensitivities, and other clichés we might expect of poetry.

Selected Objects

Just as the cliché image carries particular and limiting associations, here we might list the objects that Siegle selected (or allowed, but we shall assume their specificity) as his performative kit:

A couch, already present in the living room of gallerist Paul Soto's one-bedroom apartment-cum-gallery

One small white pillar candle, lit and extinguished repeatedly

Two large white pillar candles of different heights, stage right, unlit throughout

Between zero and four used white tea candles from previous nights, placed against the baseboard

A green dinner candle set in an empty organic wine bottle, lit while the artist trimmed the main candle's wick

A box of kitchen matches, Diamond brand, 300-count, strike-anywhere, the box marked by a picture of green leaves advertising that the wooden shafts are sustainably sourced

A pile of same, extinguished

A MacBook Pro, 13 inch, c. 2010–11

An iPhone 5

Portable speakers, plugged into MacBook and iPhone, lit with blue and red LEDs

An orange utility knife, Husky brand, with small box of replacement blades

A cork yoga block, standard size, on the lowest setting

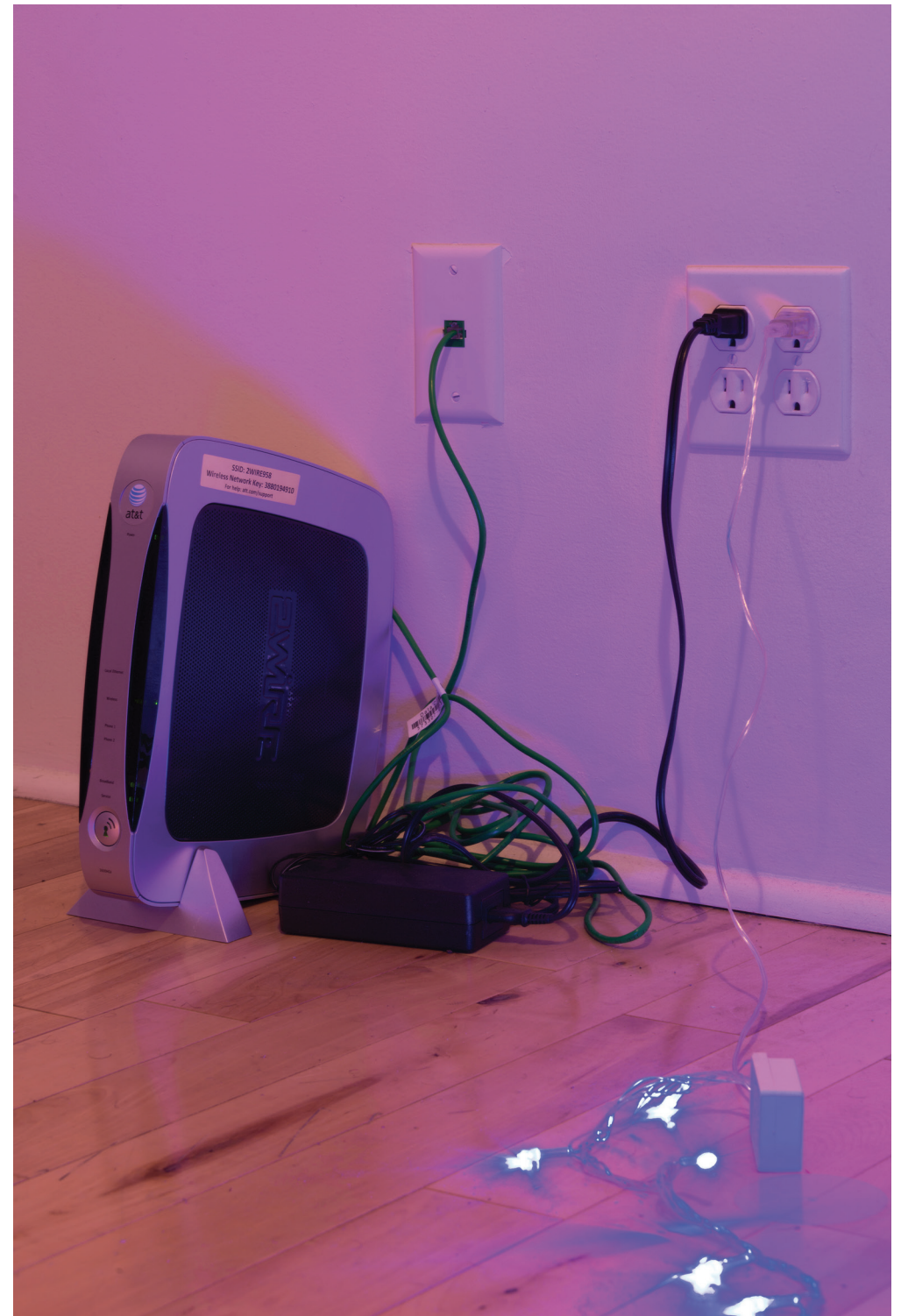
Three white plastic grocery bags

A black neoprene laptop sleeve

Power supplies, extension cord for smartphone and laptop

Three bunched strings of blue LEDs, one on the floor in front of the artist, one beside the couch, stage left, one in the kitchen on the countertop beside the wine

An Internet router and wireless gateway, 2Wire/AT&T brand, stage left, wired to the wall.



Matt Siegle, *The Human Potential Movement*, August 11–15, 2014. Performance (detail) at Park View, Los Angeles. Courtesy of the artist and Park View. Photo: Jeff McLane.

To our list of “physical” references, each charged, like the elements of a *nature morte*, with significance both symbolic and banal, we should add a list of immaterial content: the texts. Animated in turn by the software voice, the textual playlist is selected and sequenced by the artist, on the fly, from a cascade of TextEdit windows:

Promotional materials from the famous self-actualization retreat Esalen, sited on a cliff in Big Sur, California since 1962

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, in particular the Calamus Poems, which deal with what the poet calls “the manly love of comrades”—a cycle notable for its homosexual overtones

The artist’s journal, in particular a passage describing a sexual encounter in a latrine.

The Image of Dystopian Telecom

These physical and textual objects constitute the implements of a ritual, an invocation—but what kind? of what? Siegle’s piece poses *embodiment*, on the one hand, the performer in the room as the activator and fulcrum of his references with, on the other, *distance*, displacement onto or through an array of depleted items. Their common theme is personal growth; or, lapsing into the New Age rhetoric tugging at the room’s tension, self-actualization; or, to lean on the piece’s title: *The Human Potential Movement*. The texts fed into the MacBook Pro are in turn highly personal and highly mass, at a remove from the viewer, as well as detached from the artist, his body, his experience, and from ours. The sinking realization of the texts’ robotic inflection mirrors the fated idealism of past generations, past movements. How to bridge this gap? How to improve? Esalen, Whitman, the 1960s, and the 1860s occupy an uncomfortable, incompletely realized past—studded with the clichés of latent, or failed, idealism: the notion, for example, that a seaside resort can open us up to a fuller existence, a higher state, has morphed into hundreds of elaborate and elitist detox rituals—if Esalen were ever anything more. New Age experimentation decays into Nu Age parody, encased in time, kept from awakening by more than a MacBook Pro, the codification therein.

To belabor the obvious, remember that the artist—his selection, his interest—is the interface between Whitman and router, Esalen and couch. Past, present, and future. Further—the texts’ retelling of sexual awakening adds the most bodily pitch to self-realization. To what extent should we accept the sincerity of such a ritual? Should we laugh or cry? Or, to put it another way, does judgment have a place here at all? To the extent that vintage New Age rhetoric might arrive in 2014 as cliché, it is the artist’s confrontation with such platitudes—and, through his ritualistic artwork, our confrontation—that provokes us to restate our apathy.

Here we are, facing the artist’s embodiment of the clichés of self-enlightenment—the artist, staring you in the face, or not, at once distanced from his own “awakening” and reenacting it, just as we are resistant, or not, to ours. Just as we all occupy, for a few moments of an evening, the same stripped down apartment, next to the same bulky, blinking AT&T router—the magic of the Internet, in the package of a crappy company—the arbitrary image of dystopian telecom. What, if anything, in the calculus of apathy versus action, does all this add up to? That our hope has been automated? As clickable, or not, as an email from MoveOn.org? Might we be inspired by this challenge to open a new folder on our desktop titled “Human Potential,” even “Movement”?

Clichés, Clichés, Clichés

It might seem that progressive politics has been reduced to a selection of items—objects and texts—each of which bears its own share of history and can therefore be made to emit a thin hologram of good intentions. It goes beyond commercialization, of course, deeper into a kind of acquiescence to the failure of ideals, and the realization of their almost immediate compromise or their relegation to neat packets of meaning. Whitman’s paeans of self-discovery—in their intercourse with nature, their celebration of entwined humanity, their electric romance with technology—tumble into the long-since-yellowed naïveté of a nation in its teens. To whom did Whitman’s industrialization keep its promises? The MacBook—our steam engine—not only embodies progress, it speaks for us now. Such are the metaphors of America; the America where Siegle grew up; the America that gave the world, in lieu of revolution, another of Siegle’s favorite props: the tie-dyed Converse hi-top. So be it. Abstract the pattern from the commodity; affirm the cliché; let the freak flag fly.

A Cowboy in Copenhagen

Siegle has performed this piece once before, at Years, a small, artist-run gallery in Copenhagen, over the course of a single night. The setup was simple, and slightly reduced: MacBook, candle, matches, speakers, LEDs. More importantly, the audience was predominantly Danish, and thus maintained a different relationship to the material presented, a different “openness” to the clichés of counterculture. At Park View the audience talked quietly and drank *vinho verde*: the performance transitioned to background. But many viewers at Years stood to watch Siegle perform and saved their conversation and their gin and tonics for the back room or the street. Perhaps, for this European audience, the ironic is subdued by the meditative. Is it safe to say that Danes are not as weary of American romanticism as Americans?



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Living with the Dead

And yet: we want it. Desire here intertwines: *capitalist* desire, *erotic* desire, *utopian* desire. Siegle presents this triple contradiction, locked in a set of object-references. If he does not punch through—after all, he less attacks than keeps watch—then at least he reapproaches the subject, most cliché, of progress; perhaps, one day, to move on...

The real test of endurance, then, is to marinate in such bloodless material. Siegle's *The Human Potential Movement* seems not so much meditative as stuck on loop. What more can we do than watch? This feeling of impotence, of dissatisfaction, is lasting, durational; there is seemingly no beginning to this vigil, and no end, only a performance transpiring regardless of its being spectated. Symbolic texts stay locked into their own clichéd use, regardless of attempts at reanimation.

Being Here Now

But Siegle is still alive. The artist who seduces apathy, the earnest young man or woman who keeps a journal, the Whitman in the grass: Is there not still an element of vitality in an uncomfortable poem? For the poet of the cliché, the time of writing was HERE, NOW, NEW, and POSSIBLE. Like the sulfurous odor of a pile of quickly snuffed out matches, might this “bad taste”—this confrontation with the deadness of our idealisms in their current titanium forms—raise us, like the repressions at the heart of past movements, to some future ideal? Can the practice of failure put us in touch with ourselves?

Travis Diehl lives in Los Angeles. He is a recipient of the Andy Warhol Foundation / Creative Capital Arts Writers Grant.



Above: **Matt Siegle**, *The Human Potential Movement*, May 2, 2014. Performance at Years, Copenhagen. Courtesy of the artist and Years. Photo: Søren Aagaard.

Previous spread: **Matt Siegle**, *The Human Potential Movement*, May 2, 2014. Performance at Years, Copenhagen. Courtesy of the artist and Years. Photo: Søren Aagaard.