

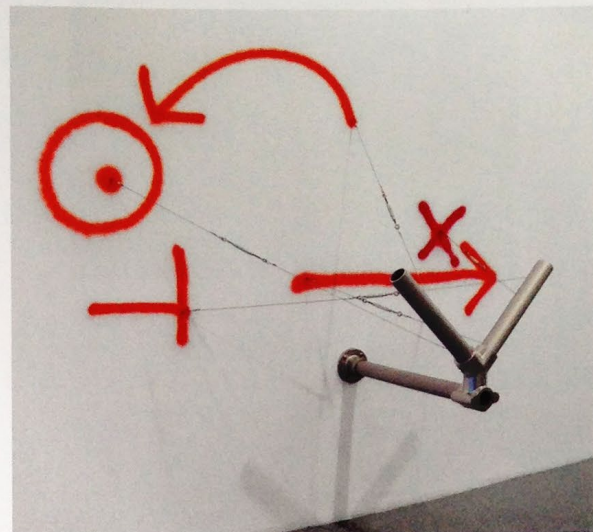
Take an object
Do something to it
Do something else to it

—Jasper Johns, sketchbook note¹

Everything can be transformed into something else, and knowledge of the world means dissolving the solidity of the world.

—Italo Calvino, "Lightness"²

In 2004, Peter Soriano set his art on a new course. While preparing to relocate for an artist's residency, he discarded all but a few of his unfinished sculptures, filling a dumpster with the casting molds and resin forms that had been the focus of his work since the early 1990s. The sculptures made from these materials had called for laborious sanding, and this investment of time was at odds with the rapid unfolding of his ideas and observations on paper.³ Soriano tends to keep a notebook close at hand, making drawings that complement an associated practice on large sheets of paper, which he cuts into, folds, and marks. Recognizing the conflict between his work in two and three dimensions, he experimented with using found objects, and so nudged the pace of his sculptural output forward. He subsequently introduced linearity into his sculptural installations by attaching tautly strung steel cables to sections of aluminum piping. Soriano had reached a point where he was making sculptures that resembled drawings in space, and in response to the presence of pared-down three-dimensional elements, he added spray-painted motifs—arrows, lines, squiggles, and boxes—to the walls of his studio



Other Side #19 (EMEU), 2008
Aluminum, steel cable, and spray paint, 59 1/4 x 59 x 23 1/2 in. (150.5 x 149.9 x 59.7 cm)
Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, France

and the galleries where his works appeared. These marks, a nascent graphic lexicon, replaced his cast forms, and the walls rather than the space between them became the primary site for the manifestation of his practice. By 2012, even the cables and pipes had become superfluous: his works now consisted entirely of wall drawings. After eight years of experimentation, Soriano had calibrated his process to the speed and spontaneity of his drawing hand. He had become, by his own account, "a sculptor who no longer makes sculptures."⁴

This artistic evolution resulted in works that document Soriano's observations of a given place or experience. He arrives at abstraction through visual impressions, with landscape figuring prominently in his directed looking and iterative drawing. The Bagaduce, a tidal river that empties into the Penobscot Bay near his Maine studio, served as his point of departure for one wall composition; another was inspired by a cluster of granite rocks that he could see from his studio window. Invited by the Colby College Museum of Art to create a wall drawing for its lobby, Soriano proposed that the surrounding campus serve as his experiential source. *Permanent Maintenance*, the three-part work he created for this commission, required him to work at a new degree of remove from his subject. Over the course of ten months, he visited the campus several times, taking photographs, making drawings, and accumulating ideas. Between these visits he composed the piece in his studio, and having some distance from the site exerted a useful sort of creative pressure, helping him to advance and refine the work's distinctive visual language. For the first time in his practice, he made use of satellite imagery, which he annotated by noting the areas of the campus that interested him. More difficult to gauge but of no less significant relevance was the educational purpose of the place he considered from afar. Soriano's responses to the site demonstrated or modeled the processes of inquiry and exploration, and the work he created tells a story of thinking in action that foregrounds the value of approaching a subject from a fresh perspective.

The dematerialization that characterizes Soriano's recent work evokes comparisons to the activities of an earlier generation of American artists, Sol LeWitt chief among them. LeWitt famously maintained that "ideas can be works of art" and, more provocative still, that "all ideas need not be made physical."⁵



Polyester Points of Contact II, 1998
Cast resin, 100 3/4 x 68 3/4 x 63 in. (255 x 275 x 160 cm)
Private collection, Germany

1. Jasper Johns, Book A, c. 1963–64. Reproduced in *Jasper Johns: Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews*, ed. Kirk Varnedoe (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1997), 31.
2. Italo Calvino, "Lightness," in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. Patrick Creagh (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 9. Calvino is referring here to the role of transformation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.
3. Soriano discusses this event in a 2012 interview. See Brian Dupont and Peter Soriano, "Where I Am Now: In Conversation with Peter Soriano," *Idiom*, September 11, 2012, <http://idiomag.com/2012/09/where-i-am-now-in-conversation-with-peter-soriano>.

4. Peter Soriano, comments at the Colby College math colloquium, Colby Museum, September 21, 2015.

5. Sol LeWitt, "Sentences on Conceptual Art," 0–9 (New York) 5 (January 1969): 3–5.



Annotated satellite image of the Colby campus, Peter Soriano's studio, July 2015

In these simple statements was an invitation for change that sought to weight art toward its communicatory function and, by extension, its accessibility. By focusing on elementary concepts—LeWitt favored geometry—art became newly systematized, depersonalized, and liberated from the artist's autographic gesture. How to institute an art of ideas? LeWitt took up this question by composing instructions for more than twelve hundred numbered wall drawings between 1968 and his death in 2007. Two of these works are currently installed at the Colby Museum, whose grounds are home as well to his sculpture *Seven Walls* (2002), which was similarly created via the guidelines given in a group of prescriptive phrases. LeWitt's *Wall Drawing #803*, a work in the museum's collection, has periodically been exhibited in the lobby where Soriano has realized *Permanent Maintenance*. An artist so integral to the museum's identity was, for Soriano, a natural and not unwelcome point of reference. Yet Soriano's own instruction-based art (for he also composes sets of instructions for the installation of his wall drawings) was inspired, first and foremost, by "lightness," a concept he adopted from an essay of that title by the Italian writer Italo Calvino, written (though never delivered) as the first of his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard in 1985 and collected posthumously in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988). In this eloquent text, Calvino equates lightness with transformation. Enabling the dissolution of fixed ideas, lightness is a means of achieving "weightless gravity."⁶ As Soriano relinquished his sculptural practice in order to discover new ways to convey his encounters with the world, it was this conceptual framework based on lightness, akin to LeWitt's but distinct from it and very much his own, that guided him forward.

Resourcing

Having previously sought out subjects of significant weight and dimensions, Soriano similarly chose to initiate his Colby project by focusing on what is arguably the college's most formidable monument to permanence and solidity: Richard Serra's 4-5-6 (2000), a Corten steel sculpture consisting of three parts (see page 20). Situated in the Paul J. Schupf Courtyard adjacent to the Colby Museum's lobby, each of the blocks that compose this work are identical in size (4 x 5 x 6 feet), yet each rests on a different side, an arrangement that generates illusions of differences in scale as the viewer moves from one block to the next. Drawn to the phenomenological complexities of this work, Soriano used 4-5-6 as a resource for documenting visual experience. His investigations included drawing the blocks on site and from memory, as well

as creating makeshift models of Serra's sculpture to draw from in his studio. He looked at the sculpture straight on, peripherally, and from the bird's-eye perspective of a satellite image. He came to know 4-5-6 so well that its imposing solidity softened, rendering his relation to it permeable and open. The piece he composed from these explorations, which eventually filled the west wall of the Colby Museum's lobby (see page 12, top image), is at once an homage to three weathered steel blocks and, as Soriano quipped, an "anti-Serra": varied, adaptable, and undeniably light.⁷

Soriano gathered visual content for the second and largest section of *Permanent Maintenance* (see page 12, bottom image) by applying the idea of objects in relation, drawn from the experience of 4-5-6, to the campus as a whole. This approach allowed him to look for unusual sites, seeking out the habitats of what he could regard as found sculptures. Existing outside of the structural hierarchies that typically organize a planned area, be it a campus or a courtyard, these clusters of objects were, by definition, unmonumental. Among Soriano's finds were the boxy components of an HVAC system partially hidden by a hedge, a fire hydrant protected by stanchions, and an assemblage of plywood positioned in front of a garage during mud season. Through these and other choices, he explored a method of filtering experience that was inherently partial; while everything (potentially) mattered, his interest inclined toward signs of infrastructure hidden in plain sight.

Within Soriano's process of selection lies an acknowledgment of the constant, or "permanent," maintenance that goes into the meticulous upkeep of the campus he had been asked to consider. Care for the Colby grounds suggests parallels to Soriano's own efforts in sustaining his project: his task required a comparable but decidedly messier commitment to monitoring the interplay among his notebooks, his drawings, and the studio walls where he mounted full-scale, section-by-section mockups of the piece. Measurements, dates, and initials—signs of observation and assessment—factored into the finished work. Arrows approximated the sizes of the objects and phenomena (snow piles, shadows) he had encountered and, more enigmatically, registered shifts in his attention, moments of distraction that led to new observations.

Connecting

Spray paint was the logical material for a project that assembles sets of notational codes based on real-world observations. Soriano prefers standard spray-paint colors that are readily available at any hardware store, and he sees his graphic lexicon as being akin to the surveyor's marks that so ubiquitously annotate streets and sidewalks. He developed seven spray-painted responses to the sites on campus that he had chosen to work from. And to each of these independent compositions he added the outline of a square or rectangle in acrylic paint, masking these elements during the spray-painting process so that their "clean" forms could be seamlessly connected to the equally neat parallel lines that formed a kind of schematic piping running throughout the wall. This circuit serves as a unifying force that partially overrides the spray-painted imagery floating around it. Evidence of illusionistic depth and dimensionality in the sprayed marks cede to this assertion of frontality. The effect is consolidating rather than contradictory, aligning the piece as a whole to a structure of interrelationships among objects, of things in association.

Soriano composed the last *Permanent Maintenance* wall (see page 13) by focusing on the college's central axis, which runs from the main library, the highest point in the campus plan, to a broad rectangle of lawn surrounded by buildings. Bisecting this open area are walkways interspersed by steps that absorb the

7. Peter Soriano, in conversation with the author, September 14, 2015. Adaptability is inherent to Soriano's wall drawing instructions. Not only can the whole of *Permanent Maintenance* be installed elsewhere, but each of its three sections includes one or more components that can be presented independently.



Peter Soriano's studio, August 2015

slope of the hill. The architect Jens Fredrick Larson based his 1931 design for Colby's campus on Thomas Jefferson's plan for the University of Virginia. The latter also features a library at its apex (Jefferson called it the Temple of Knowledge), with a view that surveys the surrounding area. In his wall drawing, Soriano represented Colby's axis as a set of parallel lines oriented on a diagonal. Suspended in an indeterminate relation to them is a grouping of yellow lines that forms two planes. Expansive and only partially contained by the wall, these hovering forms approximate Soriano's experience of the platformlike areas between the stairs. Crossing these spaces, Soriano said, is like floating within "two geometries."⁸ In his wall drawing, one of these geometries is evoked as the conduit of the campus's main axis; the other is far more exploratory, comparable to the thematic connections he forged over the course of the project. As if to suggest such an individualized map, Soriano added a constellation of seven small circles in blue spray paint, one for each of the object groupings that make up the penultimate drawing.

Releasing

The installation of *Permanent Maintenance* in the Colby Museum's lobby took place in September 2015 and involved a team of eight assistants. Soriano arrived at the site with three notebooks of written and drawn instructions that underwent further refinement as the piece took its complete form for the first time. Most of the Colby installers had never worked with spray paint before and it presented new challenges. Aerosol paint, a medium that lacks the qualities of touch and degrees of finish characterizing paint

applied by brush, possesses its own inherent effects and idiosyncrasies: paint delivered by a directed current of air can appear extremely smooth, but only if the user applies consistent pressure to the nozzle and sprays at a moment free of interference. Given the public nature of the site, Soriano assumed the process would be unpredictable and welcomed the tangible sense of freshness to the task that was captured in the crew's sprays. When the full team was in action, it seemed to this viewer that the artist was conducting an ensemble, particularly when he made a gesture while describing some nuance of a mark.⁹ The musical analogy extends to his wall drawing instructions, which include guidelines for qualities of expression—a quickly rendered line versus one slowly produced, for instance—while encouraging the inevitably interpretive contributions of different hands. Unlike LeWitt and his peers, who conceived of Conceptual art as an antidote to what they perceived as the individualistic excesses of Abstract Expressionism, Soriano has comparatively few reservations about overtly demonstrative or expressive marks, perhaps because he sees them as gestures to be reenacted. As an artist who emerged in the 1990s, he has taken a sampling approach to the artistic practices of these postwar movements, once considered to be diametrically opposed. When Soriano makes a wall drawing, each gesture is to be used and shared, like any tool, and every individualized mark is potentially transferable from one person to the next. Nothing, his proliferating marks suggest, is fixed. His art of lightness is a manifestation of perseverance—attentive, exploratory, and open-ended—in the face of permanent flux. Make a drawing, he suggests. Do something to it. Do something else to it. Repeat. This is the process that Soriano sends into the stream of collective experience.

8. Soriano, remark at Colby College math colloquium.

9. Indeed, Soriano himself has suggested a musical analogy when he compares his wall-drawing instructions to a musical score; see his instructions for *Almost a 40" Flatscreen TV* in this volume, pages 2, 23.