



DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS
City of Los Angeles

C.O.L.A. 2014
City of Los Angeles
Individual Artist Fellowships





STEPHEN

FAMILIAR PURSUITS: STEPHEN BERENS

A Familiar Commute

A chapter by Michel de Certeau entitled “Railway Navigation and Incarceration” from his *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984: repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) uses the fluttering landscape speeding past a moving train to introduce a type of passive looking he calls *The Principle of the Machine*. He correlates the limitations of the inert passenger to be descriptive of our visual age, defined by image-making machines and by our willing captivity inside of them. *The Principle of the Machine* calls attention to interplay of atmospheres in and outside the train car. He singles out the familiar rush of airstreams compressing in the narrow space between two passing trains. He notices a thin layer of safety glass and metal separating him from the outside world, filtering his vision and lending a dramatic frame to the unremarkable scenery before him. With a tinge of pessimism, de Certeau sees the endless acceleration of image-making machines as unrelenting mechanisms creating a world in which displacement and disconnection are normal. We are familiar with this fear of escalation. But what of our own immobility lending the machine at each moment its mobility? Reversing the vantage to his own viewership, de Certeau finds a theatrical concept guiding our machine-aided lives: impersonal systems predetermine our purview at every turn. The machine both creates the cacophony outside and keeps it at bay. Eventually these staggered meters of time spent on the railway are recognizable only by their regularity, insignificant frequency and insularity. The brief disturbance they cause is absorbed by the ordered society they represent.

I thought of this essay when I first met Stephen Berens in his studio. His art openly considers the problem of mediation and time elapsing. He considers these qualities not by submitting to modulators that give rise to imagery (like the frames composed inadvertently from a darting train across a continent). He imposes his own arbitrary system of duration and displacement upon images he photographed, in some cases pictures taken decades ago. He sparked the memory of the de Certeau text when he told me, hypothetically speaking, that when two trains pass two systems also pass. They are nearly identical yet opposing fields of perspective, within and without. Repeatedly using the same photographs, in several series laid out in grid, Berens recaptures the time encapsulated in the photos and reapplies them to his present day studio practice. Yet, the images remain caught between two registers. Moments captured on film in the 1970s are lent to today’s digital technology. The technology, which randomizes the sequence of a select grouping, is required due to an inextricable accumulation of images that stick to each other. He breaks up the grammar of these photos taken over a given period and subjects them to a reordering. To paraphrase Berens, they are an accumulation of time, an accumulation of moment that he cannot separate anymore. They are like the figments of countryside that de Certeau reordered to write his own counter narrative to his passivity, railing against the machine.

Photography, perhaps more than other art forms, implies a parallel mobility to other machinery, often documenting otherwise fleeting moments throughout the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This seems relevant to how Berens supplements this principle of transience by doubling down on the element of chance in repurposing his photographs. Apparent in Berens’ work is the simultaneous nature of time passing and multiple perspectives in motion. These intersections are repeated and rearranged in long horizontal compositions attached directly to the wall like wallpaper. Each work restages the trope of the panorama, not as expanded vista but as artistic time elongated in the livery of the artist’s studio.

Berens accomplishes this transference of the studio image from social context to artistic machine by imposing from the onset a predetermined system of delivery. The series *It’s a long story* uses photos the made in the 1970s, mostly across the Great Plains,

which also appeared in *Short Stories*, an earlier collection of individual photographs. Mixed randomly as one matrix after another, the images are numbered (as in a game of Sudoku), with each repeating as integers in contiguous and distinct numeric grids. The work in this context is less about the style of the photographs, according to Berens, than the staggering of representation itself. While this is the case, the photos still encourage pursuit of logic or meaning from the random, computer-generated arrangement of everyday images collected in each frieze. In part, what Berens collates is not a series of images distinctly meaning something, but, rather, images relating to our invariable grasp for meaning at each turn as we move, passively, through the world. It is like the passenger de Certeau scanning the vaguely familiar texture of the landscape from the train, or a cameraman living momentarily in the remote confines of the viewfinder, connecting the vision of the artist to the aperture of a camera.

De Certeau intimated a sense of remote stillness that I find in Berens' photos of his cruise through a similar stretch of scenery. "Outside," de Certeau wrote, "there is another immobility, that of things, towering mountains, stretches of green field and forest, arrested villages, colonnades of buildings, black urban silhouettes against the pink evening sky, the twinkling of nocturnal lights on a sea that precedes or succeeds our histories" (p.111). These minor details, embedded yet separated from our own sedentary histories as viewers, imprint vision with the machinery of everyday life, what de Certeau calls "the premium mobile, the solitary god from which all the action proceeds. It not only divides spectators and beings, but also connects them; it is a mobile sym-bol [sic] between them, a tireless shifter, producing changes in the relationship between immobile elements" (p.113). The randomness imposed on Berens own work carries that same sense of junction between things perceived and perceiving, while also registering the distance stirring between the then and the now of each photograph.

Berens' art resides in comfortable proximity to the theatrical principle of the machine de Certeau describes as constantly opening itself to randomness outside the system while also curtailing disorder within the totality. As the original machine art, photography has since the nineteenth century been synonymous with a mechanization of imagery. Resisting that early-modern notion of control, Berens embraces its most updated form. As analogy for endless streams of visual mediation, art is conceived as a durational process, not subservience to immediacy and speed of a given machinery.

Art returns to itself in Berens' practice. It serves as a Cereauian framing device that "organizes from afar all the echoes of its work" (p. 113). These are formal and technical properties. Vestiges of media (such as the filmic properties of these being black and white) are to a degree overridden in *It's a long story* when the artist recycles and rearranges his previous work. This intervention accentuates the randomness of the camera as a machine. It lays the images out in a chance configuration—again not so different from the randomness of everyday life always passing by the machine, whether or not it is in use. We see in this anti-narrative workers frozen in a bygone era in antiquated offices next to old typewriters and telephones, long American sedans left overnight in parking lots, hand painted signs advertising food and gasoline prices or giving warning, farmers and cattlemen gathered in a state fair coliseum to choose the ideal pig or calf. Moments contained in each image, set randomly next to each other, distill a relationship with no reality left, no intentional correspondence to tell. Yet, like our memory, and like de Certeau's train ride, we search for a sign within the guiding system, even when only the aftereffects of the original system put in place remain apparent.

Matthew Schum



It's a long story (Part 2, no. 1), 2014
Archival dye-based Inkjet print
24 x 34 inches

