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Familiar Pursuits: Stephen Berens

A Familiar Commute

A chapter by Michel de Certeau entitled "Railway Navigation and Incarceration" from *The Practice of Everyday Life* uses the fluttering landscape speeding by on a moving train to introduce a type of passive looking that 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 opposite trains passing; he notices how a thin layer of safety glass and metal separate him from the outside world and filter his vision, 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 is the norm. We are familiar with this fear of escalation. But what of our own *immobility* lending the machine at each moment its *mobility*. Turning the vantage back on his own viewership, de Certeau finds a theatrical concept guiding our machine-aided lives; one in which 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 because his art openly considers the problem of mediation and time elapsing. It 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) but by imposing his own arbitrary system of duration and displacement upon images he photographed decades ago in some cases. He sparked the memory of the de Certeau text when he told me, hypothetically speaking, that when two trains pass two systems also pass by. They are nearly identical yet opposing fields of perspective, from within and without. Repeatedly using the same photographs, in several series that are laid out in grid, Berens recaptures the time encapsulated in the photos and reapplies them to his own studio-practice today. Yet, the images remain caught between the 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 taking over a given period and subjects them to a reordering. In the artist's words, they are, to paraphrase the artist, an accumulation of time, an accumulation of moment that I can't separate anymore. In other words, 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 to me seems relevant to how Berens supplements this principle of transience by doubling down on the element of chance to 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 onto the wall like wallpaper. Each work re-stages the trope of the panorama, not as an 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 a predetermined system of delivery from the onset. The series "It's a long story" takes photos the artist made in the 1970s, mostly across the Great Plains, which also appeared in an earlier collection of individual photographs entitled "Short Stories." These are mixed randomly as one matrix after another, the images here are each given a number (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 some pursuit of logic or meaning from the random, computer-generated arrangement of everyday images collected in each frieze. In part what Berens collates here is not a series of image that mean something distinctly, but, rather, that relate to how we grasp for meaning invariably at each turn, as we move, passively, through the world, 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 as he cruised through a familiar stretch of scenery. "Outside," he 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" (1988; p. 111). These minor details, embedded yet separated from our own sedentary histories as viewers, imprint vision with the machinery of everyday life that is "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" (1988; 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 that stirs 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 ninetieth century been synonymous with a mechanization of imagery. Instead, resisting this early-modern notion of control, Berens embraces it in its most updated form. As an 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 his practice. It serves as a framing device that, "organizes from afar all the echoes of its work" (1988; p. 113). These are its 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 by laying 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 inside antiquated offices next to old typewriters and telephones, long American sedans left overnight in parking lots, hand painted signs that advertise food and gasoline prices or give warning, farmers and cattlemen gathered in a state fair coliseum to watch the ideal pig or calf be chosen. Moments contained in each image, set randomly next to each other, distill a relationship that has 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.