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Paul Fusco, untitled, from the series "RFK Funeral Train" (1968).

RFK funeral train: images that move us

By Charles Desmarais

Though most museum visitors are only vaguely aware of the fact, what we see in exhibitions often expresses the vision of a single person, or a very small group. Subject to various approvals and safeguards, the key artistic decisions rely upon the ideas and methods of individual curators. Each

has his or her own predilections, unique educational and experiential background and, occasionally, biases.

And make no mistake: Exhibitions have a thesis, even if it is not stated explicitly.

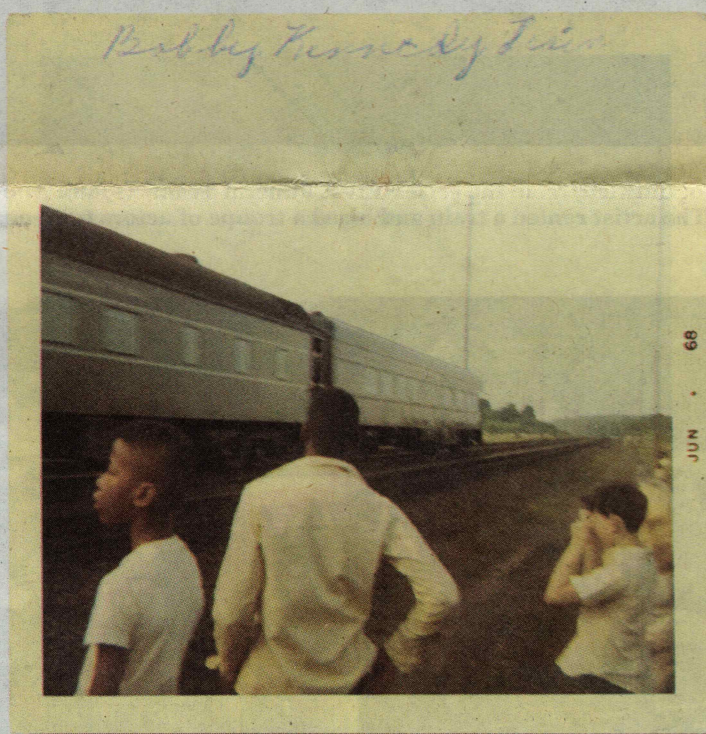
I was tough on

Clément Chéroux's first exhibition outing as senior curator of photography at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. His Walker Evans retrospective, which closed in February, was the art museum equivalent of a fanboy's rock star scrapbook, mounting every ticket stub and stage-gleaned sequin alongside objects of more solid value.

With "The Train," however, offered in SFMOMA's photo galleries through

"Train" continues on E2

Deft curation enhances the impact of an emotional event of the 20th century



Melinda Watson

The Train: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Fridays-Tuesdays, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays. Through June 10. \$19-\$25; ages 18 and younger free. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., S.F. (415) 357-4000. www.sfmoma.org

Annie Ingram, "Elkton, Maryland" (1968); from Rein Jelle Terpstra's "The People's View."

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

SFMOMA's deftly curated 'The Train'

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June 10, Chéroux lives up to the promise of his resume. Before coming to San Francisco, he was chief curator of the department of photography at the Musée National d'Art Moderne at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. His 2012 exhibition "Shoot! Existential Photography" took its inspiration from a carnival-game picture of the philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

I did not see the show, but the innovative approach to art history it suggests is confirmed by the decision to combine three separate, if related, bodies of work into a single extraordinary experience.

"The Train" launches from a noted series of documentary photographs made by Paul Fusco from the funeral train of Robert Kennedy, 50 years ago this June, as it passed along the corridor from New York to Washington, D.C. That keystone sub-exhibition is flanked by alternative interpretations of the same event.

In one direction in the galleries, a small but touching exhibition of amateur snapshots, collected by Dutch artist Rein Jelle Terpstra, presents the unvarnished reactions of bystanders. In the other, a sumptuous film by French contemporary artist Philippe Parreno re-creates the day as the kind of fiction that extends and enlivens fact.

Of all the photographs Fusco made from that train, very few depict what seem to be disinterested spectators. They don't look much like mourners, either, in their sundresses, shirtsleeves and swimsuits.

They are more like friends, dropping by on a Saturday to pay respects. They hold in their hands and above their heads not signs, but enlarged personal notes: "So-long Bobby," "We will miss you Bobby." A man and a boy salute militarily. Others, mostly African Americans, raise a hand in prayer, in a gesture one might mistake for a neighborly wave.

They had no reason to think they were being observed, much less recorded on film by a photographer from Look magazine, later to be scrutinized by its 7 million weekly readers. Fusco himself hadn't planned the shoot, but when pictures of the train interiors and its riders were ruled off limits, he pointed his camera out the window.

What does it mean to publicly share a personal message to a dead person? It seems unlikely that Fusco considered that question in the heat of the moment, yet it seems the only one to ask as we see the gesture repeated uncounted times from railway embankments north to south.

He would have not have framed his project as conceptual art, a term then only recently coined, and one that an editorial photographer would have rejected in that day. Yet his instinctual response to what he saw as his train car slowed, city by town by curve in the track, was to extract something human from an almost algorithmic serial record.

Terpstra's "The People's View" (2014-18) is a conceptual project, too, and probably more purposefully so. Seeing



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Top: Paul Fusco, Untitled, from the series "RFK Funeral Train" (1968). Above, Philippe Parreno, "June 8, 1968" (2009, film still). Parreno The artist rented a train and hired a troupe of actors to re-enact the funeral train's now-famous journey.



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Paul Fusco, untitled, from the series "RFK Funeral Train" (1968).

the Fusco series in one of the two books in which it was previously published, he was struck by all the cameras people in the photographs are carrying. He spent four years painstakingly tracking down their photographs and films of that day, building upon the rare opportunity to create an archive of pictures by the pictured.

One surprising revelation is how much better we have become, as a society, at pho-

tography. There's a certain charm in their awkwardness, but compare the most readable of these pictures to virtually any Instagram collection. Even allowing for vastly improved snapshot tools (Brownie versus iPhone), half a century of treading water in a sea of pictures created by the image industry have at least taught us how to frame.

More significant is what these pictures tell us about the purpose of the snapshot.

A number of the pictures in this series are of a spot where the train once was, made after it has passed. Others show the wait: an empty track and hordes gathered around. A blur that stands for a train that stands for ... what?

These pictures mean to record the thing a photograph can least successfully capture: an idea. Of a man, of history, of death.

Though none of the sub-exhibitions would be as good

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on their own as they are in tandem, Parreno's film "June 8, 1968" (2009) is the strongest of the three legs. The artist rented a train and hired a troupe of actors to achieve it.

Beautifully recorded at high resolution (70mm), it is a precise re-enactment of the funeral train's now-famous journey. Long shots of the various characters recall the Fusco originals, yet the rocking of the train, the wind in the figures' hair or in the grasses around them, place them — situate us — somewhere different on the continuum between past and present, life and image.

It leaves us with the kind of question we expect, the challenge we demand from our best curators.

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