

zingmagazine

a curatorial crossing



JACKIE ROBINSON

October 24, 1947

Mrs. Paul
P.O. Box 101
Center, Colorado

Dear Mrs. Paul:

I have no special recipes, but my
favorite menu is:

Fillet Mignon
Baked Potato
Lettuce & Tomato
Apple Pie & Milk

The apple pie as my wife makes it only.

flaky	}	3 cups flour--sifted	}	mix well
crust		1 tsp. salt		
	}	1 cup shortening	}	mix well
		8 baking apples peeled and sliced		
	}	1 tsp. cinnamon	}	mix well
		1 tsp. nutmeg		
contents of pie	}	1 cup sugar	}	mix well
		3 tbsp. flour		

Place drops of butter and lemon juice on pie before
Bake 45 minutes. placing top crust on.

I trust this will be of some help to you.

Sincerely,

Jackie Robinson

JRK:ss



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Stephen Berens: Who's Afraid of Reification?; Richard Heller Gallery •
Santa Monica, California

For several years now, Stephen Berens's artistic gaze has been turned in on itself. As in the myth of Narcissus, what appears in the reflecting pool is an image of youth, but a youth devoid of innocence or innate beauty, and accordingly, one which may be tampered with. Since 1991, in fact, Berens has been busy constructing a new culture from the ruins of the old; former art school projects, slide-files and statements of purpose long ago abandoned to dusty obsolescence, the abject accumulation of useless work that weighs like a monstrous albatross upon all but a chosen few artists, as they schlep from one garage, studio or (in mounting degrees of prestige) gallery to the next. Here all that dreck, basically, is recycled and repackaged as a secondary yield of what? More or less legitimate art? More or less viable product? Or still more dreck? Confronting the insanity of artistic ambition head-on, such questions inevitably loom large.

Berens's basic method could easily sustain an entire career, and shows every indication of doing so. Putting aside the particular works for a moment, it is, in itself, almost excessively resonant, proposing no end of hermeneutic openings and avenues, an intimidating wealth of theoretical incentives ranging from jokey to dead-serious. On the whole, we might approach this project as a kind of excavation of early creative impulses, intentionally thwarted from the get go. The aim is not to revisit a long-lost, magical terrain, but to confirm that it does not, in fact, exist, and never did.

As for the myths which stand in its place, the first to fall by the wayside concerns the intrinsic worth of "untrained" expression. The output in question betrays a generic photo-shop anality; high-minded, work-intensive and way beyond clumsy, it is no doubt also much more ponderous and over-intellectualized than anything which could possibly come after. Yet Berens does not dote upon this fledgling product, nor does he plumb it specifically for sociological insight. As an archival project, this is substantially lacking in the requisite appearance (at least) of objectivity. The mock-scientific rigor and "hands-off" preciousness typically associated with Conceptualism, while not relinquished outright, are undermined at every turn.

That Berens does not appear to be pursuing any one particular objective with regard to content, grants leeway to a sensibility which tends, rather, toward a baroque and over-determined theatricality. Above all, he is much too eager to get on with the business of production, and thereby treats his various artifacts as though they were, more or less, a raw material. In 1992, for instance, he carved a series of photographic works into a variety of eccentric shapes, and then rehung them facing the wall. Another installation mounted at the former Federal Reserve building in downtown Los Angeles involved the bronzing of a stack of slides to resemble a gold brick. Former objects d'art and their informational supplements are subject to every sort of abuse and elevation; only a small portion of their original significance survives amidst Berens's forceful manipulations, and even that is largely recontextualized in the process. Yet it is just these push and pull dynamics of concealment and revelation which grant the work its coy and somewhat forbidding allure. We can see no more than is shown, which holds true for all art, I suppose, only here the perceptual limits are emphatically proscribed, and the eye is continually drawn to the borders.

Often enough, occlusion is directly contingent upon the archival process itself, as with the semi-opaque protective sleeves within which Berens likes to present his photographs. The sleeves promote a generalized blurring of the image, a pseudo-pictorialism of concealed rather than eradicated detail. The resulting effect, just like his overall aesthetic, is at once elegant, instructive and slightly irritating. Articles of storage are misapplied to purposes of display and vice versa; these erroneous conflation and happy accidents are the operative principle of a kind of surrealism brought to bear upon the art-institutional apparatus. An initial "mistake" supplies the alibi, the motor, and everything else follows suit. Art and error become consequently indistinguishable. This, I believe, is one of the central conceits of Stephen Berens's work, and his current show at the Richard Heller gallery in Los Angeles provides its most concise and effective elaboration to date.

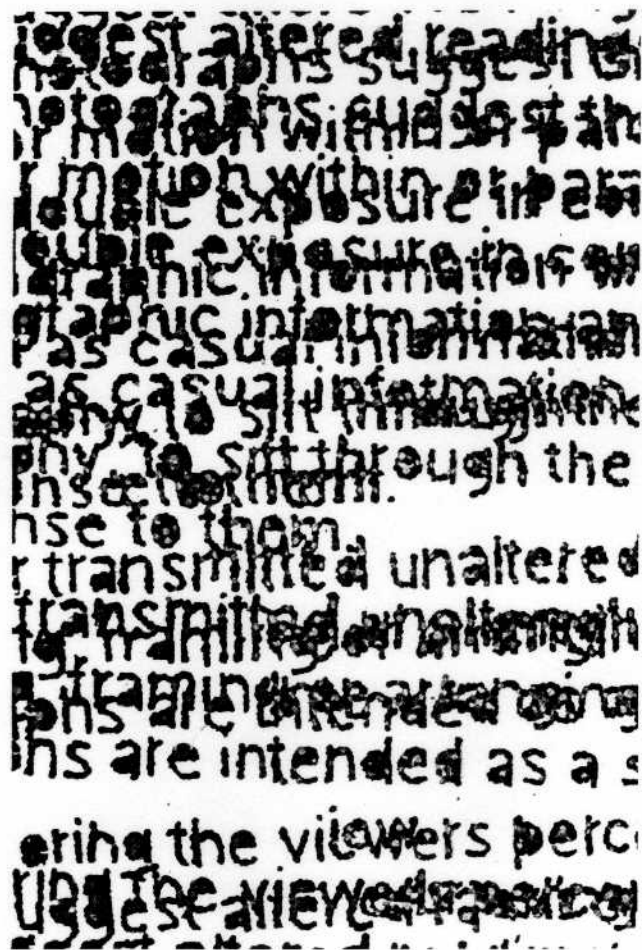
Here, an eight page M.F.A. thesis, three smallish photographs from 1977 and their attendant statement of purpose comprise the basic elements of an extensive and often hilarious meditation on the impossible rift which separates the theory and practice of art. Characteristically, their absolute difference is figured through a failed reconciliation—an ostensibly naive attempt to actually make the words "look like" the pictures. This program of overcompensation suggests its own logistical problems, all of which Berens resolves quite deftly. Generating a stylish suite of objects in the process—objects so aesthetically "sound," we cannot help but occasionally overlook their shaky premise. At the same time, we are reminded that such sleights of hand, precisely, are a stock in trade of art. What else should we expect of this absurd and openly nonfunctional endeavor, after all, than to be dazzled by structure and complexity, the rules of the game over and above its point? Berens seems at first to adopt this imperative outright, he seems to be just playing along, up until the last moment, that is, up until the punch-line, which as everybody knows, in art typically goes missing. It is a fact he never seeks to deny or in any way diminish.

The theme of failure which runs through so much of the writing on Conceptualism is here crystallized as subject of the work itself. It is as though Berens were purposefully misreading the cautionary texts of Joseph Kosuth, Charles Harrison, Terry Atkinson, et al., as a gung-ho prescription for objecthood. The distinctions are outwardly slight, the basic discursive elements remain in place. It is, in fact, the same theoretical construct, but put to an entirely different function. The idea of art as a highly precarious and susceptible practice besieged on every side by the forces of reification has, at any rate, already been standardized in art course curricula across the country, as has the idea of production as a dialectical struggle between art and its context, its housing and history. For Conceptualism, a "movement" (if we can call it that)

which thrived on covert strategizing and secrecy, the worst of all possible fates was, precisely, recognition, success and annexation to the grand canons of art-history. Berens hardly disputes such assessments of avant-gardist defeat, and, in fact, adopts them as a kind of given, a starting point. He occupies the Conceptual as something finished, a tradition already dead.

Berens's work reactivates the oppositional structures of Conceptual Art in the absence of any kind of utopian agenda. Instead, it unfolds as a kind of theater, a parodic dramatization of art's continual defeat and capitulation to language. In the writings of Kosuth, among others, this perceived enmity between art and institution is nowhere more present than in the process of academic naming. The name is an agent of ideological recuperation, the ectoplasmic extension of an institutional amoeba that consumes every object in its path, and then displays their spat-out shells. For all its vehemence, this critique nevertheless maintains a glimmer of idealism, a stubborn faith in the capacity of art to resist these linguistic encroachments, which, by the time we come to Stephen Berens, is altogether extinguished. Here, academic labels and categories, in fact, precede art—they are its *raison d'être*. By the same token, however, the fearsome power with which Kosuth and others imbue these institutional dynamics is considerably depleted. A tentative intellectual scaffolding, at best, it necessarily partakes in the flimsiness of its core structure.

On a purely technical level, it all makes a great deal of sense. Berens classifies one group of his "word-pictures" as paint-



Stephen Berens • MY STATEMENT FROM 1977 PAINTED IN SUCH A WAY THAT IT APPROXIMATES, AS CLOSELY AS POSSIBLE, ONE OF MY PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THAT PERIOD AND THE ORIGINAL SCENE AS I REMEMBER IT, OR, I WANT TO BE PAID BY THE HOUR, 1995, oil on canvas.

