

A Distinct Effort

David Bergé



A Distinct Effort

single screen installation,
18 min, looped

with photos by August Klipstein
& Charles-Édouard Jeanneret

Curated by Laura Herman

A Distinct Effort is the third chapter in a series of works by Belgian artist David Bergé (lives and works in Athens) which centers around a collection of 286 photographs taken by Charles-Édouard Jeanneret—who later would adopt the name Le Corbusier—and August Klipstein during their *Voyage d'Orient* in 1911. At Atelier Bouwmeester, Bergé focuses on the performative aspect that lies enclosed in these photographs. By electing not to use a tripod, the two men took these photographs by supporting their cameras with their own bodies and directing them at things and landscapes, thus placing the human body central to the experience of place. Combining a selection of images and recorded prose, *A Distinct Effort* slowly uncovers an early twentieth-century desire for spatial understanding rather than photographic representation—an approach to space which feeds into Bergé's ongoing interest in non-optical photographic strategies for perceiving and navigating relations within urban environments.

6–10 September 2017

Opening

6 September, 6–9 pm

Live reading by David Bergé at 7:30 pm

Exhibition

7 September, 3–9 pm

8–10 September, 11 am–7 pm

Live readings by David Bergé

9 and 10 September at 4 pm

Atelier Bouwmeester

Galerie Ravenstein Brussels

Some Notes on the Work of David Bergé

Laura Herman



silent Walk Pieces in Brussels, Tbilisi and Vienna, ongoing project.

David Bergé looks at photography through the lens of the body; an engagement with the medium that points directly to the performative qualities of taking pictures—an exploration of the interplay between self and the world. While this approach might reveal hidden relationships between the viewing subject and his environment, foregrounding the performative also means to understand the role of the viewer in the (un)making of space. Bergé is not especially interested in questions of representation—in solidifying time into images—but rather in understanding how the act of looking, traversing, framing, composing, or pointing to is deeply entrenched in dynamics of appropriation and articulation.

Over the past few years, Bergé has developed a series of projects that tease out the status of the (walking) body as a tool for navigating, experiencing, embodying the many temporalities of the urban environment. The *silent Walk Pieces* , for example, fit into a long history of walking, which one might argue is everyone's history (even though this history is fraught with racialised and gendered divisions). While walking allows us to engage with the specific outcomes of mobility such as colonialism, migration, and progress, as a visual rather than transportational activity it has also propelled many artists and writers to travel (not necessarily toward a destination) and engage with the sensorial qualities of landscapes. It is through this prism that Bergé approaches his *silent Walk Pieces*. In silence and over a period of 100 minutes, he guides his audience through the knitted texture of historical, political, social and climatic layers that constitutes the urban fabric. A carefully carved out passage through a blend of particular smells, textures, sounds, and light intensities opens up the senses. Moving from one place to another, the embodied

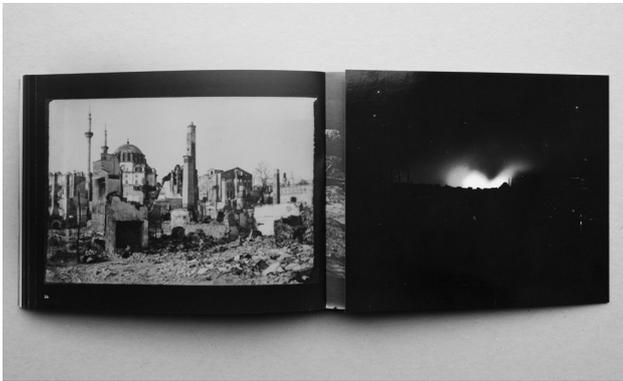


The Voyage Piece (2014), synchronised 3-channel digital projection, 20 min, looped.

experience translates into a profusion of affects and desires, which soon enough become the subject of the walk.

Since 2014, Bergé has been working with the archive of photographs taken by Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (who would later come to be known as Le Corbusier) and August Klipstein during their *Voyage d'Orient* in 1911. These included: images of vernacular architectures and tombstones, a shot of Istanbul going up in flames, a photo of Turkish army cavalry in the open plain, a distant view of a cathedral in Hungary, and a picture of Jeanneret on horseback. By electing not to use a tripod, the two men took these photographs by supporting their cameras with their own bodies and directing them at objects and landscapes, thus placing the human body central to the experience of place. Departing from their invisible presence implied in these photographs, Bergé formulated three angles proposing different readings of the archive, from the spatial and temporal relationships enclosed in the images, passing through a contemporary reading of the historical trope of the voyage, to finally end with a subjective narrative as a way to interpret the experience surrounding Klipstein and Jeanneret's picture taking.

In *The Voyage Piece*  (2014), the images are presented in three looped life-size projections, accentuating the temporal and spatial relations in and between the photographs. The enlarged images then reveal what underlies the seemingly mere documentation of a journey through the East: the privilege of travel and exploration, but also the appropriation of the territory for self-understanding—an avant-garde approach to the relationship between the body and the environment that prefigures Le Corbusier's concept of ineffable space.



Fragile City (2015), published by MER. Paper Kunsthalle, isbn 978-9-491-77557-4.



Celebrity Eclipse y otros barcos (2017–2018), site-specific performance, work in progress, San Juan, Puerto Rico.

If pre-existing images can be read to reconstruct events and offer insight into bygone times, they can also be contrasted with present-day experiences. What can we learn from former modes of looking at and walking through the built environment? In *Fragile City* (2015), a book conceived in collaboration with Tülay Atak and Elke Krasny, the unpublished images of *Voyage d'Orient* are confronted with Bergé's photographs taken in 2011— a reflection on the contemporary condition of the city through the act of traveling as knowledge production.

A Distinct Effort is the third chapter in the series of works. Combining a selection of images and recorded prose, the work slowly uncovers an early twentieth century desire for spatial understanding rather than photographic representation through the subjective interpretation of the artist—a narration which again feeds into Bergé's ongoing research into non-optical photographic strategies for perceiving and navigating relations within urban environments.

To conclude, it is useful to touch upon two recent works Bergé is currently developing. In *Celebrity Eclipse y otros barcos* (2017–2018), conceived in collaboration with Nibia Pastrana, Bergé presents yet another way in which he approaches the performance of photography. In proximity of the harbor of San Juan, Puerto Rico, Bergé and Pastrana recited the names of the cargo ships travelling through the sea passage, such as *Tropic Express*, *Atlantic Conveyor*, *Endurance*, and *Ocean Eagle*. The sun is about to set and ships slowly recede from view. The performance makes visible images that are both ephemeral and temporary—they straddle the line between nature and modernity, tradition and progress, the rural and the urban. This line, however, is quickly wiped out again as the ships pass from sight.



Soul Modern Express (2017-2019), work in progress, Seoul, South Korea.

The upcoming work *Soul Modern Express*  (2018) addresses the relentless city expansion in Seoul, South-Korea, that violently slices into virgin forest. Departing from the confrontation between the slow pace of old-growth forests and the accelerating pace of modernisation, Bergé intends to bring together the rhythm and choreography of two colliding times and spaces in text and image, restaging the experience of living through conflicting temporalities.

Conversation between David Bergé and Laura Herman

Saturday, 19 August 2017

LH: What does the title *A Distinct Effort* refer to?

DB: *A Distinct Effort* refers to the courage and precision that Klipstein and Jeanneret invested to undertake such a bold photographic project in 1911, a time in photography's conventional and linear art historicisation during which the rest of the world was still framing soft focus foggy landscapes in a painterly aesthetic.

LH: When we speak of Le Corbusier's *Voyage d'Orient*, one cannot help but think of Edward Said's acclaimed book *Orientalism* in which he argues that orientalism contributed to an inferior image of the other, while simultaneously allowing the West to define itself positively as civilised and superior to the East. Are orientalist traits legible in these images?

DB: Yes. The context, the available discourse, and infrastructure for travel of the time, oriented the two men's gazes on space, objects and people in ways that are questionable today. Besides the photographs of the journey, the archive also contains postcards, sketches and notes. However, I chose to only work with the photographs and isolate them from these other materials. When ignoring their heroic and mythical notes and sometimes naive or problematic sketches, I found the photo project distinguishes itself from the conventional understanding of travel logs and travel literature, back then but today as well, when a western, often male, author describes non-western rationality from a single and personal point of view.

My research takes these photos out of that framework, and when I look at these pictures I see two people negotiating space through one camera. In that sense, the photographs are quite a vulnerable project, considering that

two authors look at space in order to define their own understanding of form. The work imagines what their conversation may have been, what banality they may have decided to pick up on and transform into something in the form of a picture.

To me, most of the pictures reveal an imposing and genuine curiosity towards built environment, both urban and rural. They look for non-ornamental details and plain surfaces in Ottoman monuments and empty fields around cities.

Again, they went on this trip to educate themselves. Yet, in defining their own Western twentieth-century modernism, they had to confront themselves with Ottoman modernism, which was a late version of Ottoman architecture with less ornaments and often quite abstract in its form, which took place more than a century earlier. So going through 'the Orient' in 1911, they had to confront themselves with a modernism that had already taken place, way before they were about to define it through their later projects in the twentieth century. This is also legible from these images.

LH: Do you feel an affinity between your practice and the way in which Le Corbusier approached photography in relation to his environment?

DB: The pictures I look at were produced in 1911 by two authors: Charles-Édouard Jeanneret and August Klipstein. The transformation of Jeanneret into Le Corbusier (and where Klipstein kind of got forgotten), happened later in the 1920s in Paris. I do feel an affinity with those explorative moments in 1911, where Jeanneret and Klipstein shared one camera.

At an early stage in the research, I held this camera in my hands at the Fondation Le Corbusier in Paris, and I understood [then] that the camera did not allow for precise framing.

They could not define the edges of their frame, they could not control what would appear inside and outside of the picture. They had to kind of clamp the camera against their bodies and direct their body towards what they wanted to somehow have central in the composition. They pointed at things in the world rather than conventionally framed them.

Here I understood that photography is not so much about recording or producing evidence, but rather about being in space and articulating space using a camera. Also, the fact that they shared a camera, that they were not interested in a singular authorship, but rather in what photography could bring them, and how it could serve and assist them in the formation of their gaze, was highly influential for my work. Because these photographs are the result of two people looking and pointing at things—and not actions—I can look at them today as a negotiation of built space in 1911 and not as some sort of single author-driven aesthetic.

Today, phone pictures frame the way producers/spectators prefer to see their world; photography is assumed as a mirror rather than a window. Never were there so many pictures taken and preserved on phones, clouds and servers for very long times. These pictures capture a moment in the moment, which is their formal or material significance. They are assumed to be of limited relevance later, except for mildly preservational purposes, and are in most cases never looked at later either. By ignoring this reduced material outcome of photography, the act of taking pictures does not become obsolete but becomes instead almost a performative gesture in the present.

LH: In the long history of walking artists and thinkers - from the peripatetic school to the Wordsworthian walk to the conceptual art

walks by Stanley Broun or Richard Long—the act of moving the body through space has greatly influenced practices of writing, painting, philosophy, musicology and architecture. Could you speak to how, in your practice, the performance of traveling adds up to the performance of photography?

DB: I have developed most of my work through artist-residencies, where I used my visitor's perspective and experience of foreignness to create something new. When arriving at these places, I look at the topography, the urban space in relation to the rural, the way art objects are presented in these places. History is always alive around us and I found that in trying to understand what sort of modernities these places have gone through and have become, often helps to understand the complexity of these places today.

In other works I have looked at how artistic ideas and movements have mutated throughout their migration to other geographies. What does the form of Bauhaus mean after the institute was dismantled in Germany and most of its members met on Cape Cod? What does Lina Bo Bardi's work become after she migrated from Italy to the baroque city Salvador de Bahia? What would a *silent Walk Piece* mean in a city where there is no space or climate for pedestrian movement?

Throughout the years I understood these questions are too large and these spatial problems in today's changing geographies, are too layered to freeze optically into a photographic image. Just as other photographers, I work with existing elements in space, yet I organise the time differently. My material is organised time that finds its form in *Walk Pieces* and installations. In conceiving these installations and walk pieces, I imagine the body rather than the camera as a recording device. The metaphor or image for this way of working comes from the flash of

atomic light in Hiroshima, the strongest light ever witnessed, strong enough to imprint kimono patterns onto victims' skins. This extreme, genocidal dialectic of modernist imaging was produced without a camera. This to say that in my work the imprint of time and locality does not get registered on a photographic support, but rather on the skin of the audience member throughout the duration of the work.

LH: You have said that your *Walk Pieces* cannot be linked to practices of *derivé* and psychogeography of the Situationists. What is of interest to you is the erasure of prosaic meaning. Why do you feel it is necessary to experience the city as abstract form?

DB: When I started researching and working on these *silent Walk Pieces* taking place in urban space, the first ones you run into historically are the Situationists, but I feel like they mostly operated through processes of serendipity and language. In that way they somehow tried to escape their time and their modernity. I felt I wanted to articulate the current condition of urban space and make people experience it under different circumstances, not through language, nor prosaic meaning or even an image, but through deep and organized time in silence. In that sense the form I present is an abstract one and in framing my *silent Walk Pieces*, I can relate more to Walter Benjamin and his work in the Arcades, the shopping mall of the early twentieth century. Benjamin was able to turn cityscapes and topographies into texts and physiognomies. He was the first material philosopher to acquire knowledge from actually reading urban layers, from distinguishing the layers the built world consists of and putting that into form, in his case, writing. By focusing on the present, he surpassed generations of knowledge and could observe how time

imprinted itself over those generations in the urban texture.

LH: Thinking of the performative qualities of photography, I'm curious to know whether you are interested in increasingly complex modes of photography and representational technologies. Interfaces such as Google Maps but also Instagram, for example, have brought about new relationships between the body and space, allowing us on the one hand to more easily scale up and down, and on the other to mediate our experience of the environment. As you suggested earlier, moving through the urban tissue while experiencing the world through a smart device is a very performative act, and I wonder how this new reality could seep into your work.

DB: I am more interested in two technologies that also came to light in Silicon Valley, yet some 150 years earlier: The early photographic work of Eadweard Muybridge and the construction of the transcontinental railroad around the same time. Both inventions irreversibly changed the perception of time and place. In the pre-industrial world, before the train, people walked. Everything further than a day walking was hard to imagine and remained unaccomplished for most people. The railroad, a compression of spatial distance, changed the notion of being in movement, where the body is radically accelerated into the world: senses, smells and tactility got amputated, and the eye was slowly prepared for purely visual experiences such as cinematographic and photographic viewing. The train moves one while one is disconnected from the soil. Simultaneously Muybridge developed a fascination for the image of something rather than the original. One does not need to be local and in the present any longer.

This shift in dimension and scale of turning bodily experiences into viewing experiences, has been of larger importance for my practice. In my work I imagine the body in urban space differently, not as a result of these recent technologies, but by acknowledging the rupture that took place during modernisation. My work therefore consists of very analogue—and unsmart—gestures such as guiding a group of people in silence at 6 AM through the texture of urban space, or through the reenactment of a cocktail party that took place at Cape Cod by exiled Bauhaus artists in the 1940s; or through making work at the border between wild urban expansion and wild nature in South Korea; or through the movement of a changing light intensity erasing projected pictures, rather than displaying them.

LH: In many ways, walking along with the speed of a particular moment in time is a both political and sensorial practice that—as you have suggested—cannot easily be represented or reified in an artwork, let alone a transcribed conversation. Perhaps next time we should continue our dialogue while taking a stroll, without devices.

DB: and in silence!

Biographies

David Bergé

David Bergé looks at photography through the lens of the body.

Rather than employing only the optical application of the camera, his work revolves around the gaps in space and time that have emerged through the invention of photography.

In his work, he asks how the body can be a central device to capture images and he invites his audience to share this experience. His work reveals and unfolds the complexity of urban space, rather than capturing it in one picture. Unlike other photographers, he doesn't freeze time, but opens it up. His material is organized time, which is manifested through *silent Walk Pieces*, durational photo-installations, performative talks and publications as continuations of actions.

Bergé's work has been presented at various international art centers including Kunsthall Extra City in Antwerp (2015, 2016); CAC in Vilnius (2015); NETWERK Center for Contemporary Art, Aalst (2012, 2015); SALT, Istanbul (2011); Maison Particulière, Brussels (2014); Goethe Institute New Delhi (2011); TanzQuartier Wien, Vienna (2010) and Kunsthaus Muerz, Muerzzuschlag, (2012). He published a book with MER. Paper Kunsthalle (2015).

Bergé has also collaborated with a range of artists and curators across many projects that have been produced for festivals and site-specific venues such as the Artefact festival at STUK arts center, Leuven (2013, 2017); MoMA, New York (2013); KCB, Belgrade (2013), The Barbican, London (2017) and Kaaitheater, Brussels (2009).

He has been invited to artist in residence programs around the world, such as the

Cape Cod Modern House Trust in Wellfleet, USA; the Ars Aevi collection in Sarajevo; Beta-Local in San Juan, Puerto Rico; geoAIR in Tbilisi; Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin; Saari residency of the Kone Foundation in Finland; the BOZAR in Brussels and the PAF in St. Erme, France.

Since 2009, Bergé has been teaching as well as speaking about his work at a number of different institutions, including Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology in Bangalore (IN); Beckett University in Leeds (UK), Ghent University (BE); UdK, University of the Arts in Berlin; LUCA school of the Arts, Brussels, and many others.

David Bergé currently lives in Athens. He holds an MA from the Dutch Art Institute (2017) and an MFA from LUCA Brussels (2005). His work is being produced by the organization Platform 0090.

www.davidberge.be

Laura Herman

Laura Herman is a curator and writer whose work focuses on spatial infrastructures and organisational models. She is currently working at La Loge, a Brussels-based space dedicated to contemporary art, architecture, and theory. Laura recently graduated at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College (CCS Bard, 2016) in New York, and holds a master's degree in Comparative Modern Literature (Ghent University, 2010). From 2012 to 2014 she served as an assistant curator at Z33, House for Contemporary Art in Hasselt. Her reviews and essays have appeared in Frieze, Spike Art Quarterly, Metropolis M, De Witte Raaf, and elsewhere, and she has curated exhibitions and events including: *Wild Horses & Trojan Dreams* at Marres (Maastricht, 2013); *Definition Series: Infrastructure* at the Storefront for Art and Architecture (New York, 2016); *The Office for Doubts and Desires* at P!, (New York, 2016); and *Third Nature* at the Hessel Museum (New York, 2016). Laura is a member of the evaluation committee of the Arts and Heritage Agency of the Flemish Government for art and architecture, and a member of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA). She is currently co-developing *Natural Capital* with Charlotte Dumoncel d'Argence, a forthcoming exhibition and online publication in the framework of Europalia Indonesia's Curatorial Award (Brussels, 2018) and *The Family Trap*, an exhibition at Kunsthal Extra City (Antwerp, 2019) co-developed with Charlotte Van Buylaere that questions family as the legal basis of citizenship, property and the state.

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Charles-Édouard Jeanneret and August Klipstein,
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