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Assemblage and Photography

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*"There's a moment years ago in the station in
Venice... that no longer exists. And nothing
does, until you name it, remembering, and
even then It may not have existed...."*

John Ashbery

I. Assemblage

On a visit to the studio of Fred Berman some years ago, I became interested in his assemblage and photography. This visit led to an exhibition at the Haggerty Museum of Art in 1988 exploring the relation of the assemblages to the photographs.² The occasion of this retrospective exhibition at the UWM Art Museum provides the opportunity for further reflection on Berman's works in these media. For the purposes of the present catalogue, assemblages and photographs are to be treated separately except that I will suggest a common theme of formal and interpretive concerns that may apply equally to both.

'Assemblage' is a term allegedly coined by Dubuffet in the 1950s to refer primarily to three dimensional works of art constructed from everyday objects.³ Joseph Cornell's (1903-1972) surrealist "boxes" are among the best known of works in this genre. Berman's assemblages were executed over a period of two years between 1964 and 1966. They consist of print-

ers' wooden type cases stripped and sectioned to "stage" blocks of individual type faces of varying scale, printed memorabilia, miniatures, and various found objects, for example *JEB 5725*, 1965 and *Pentecost Bros*, 1964-65. The works are executed with meticulous care and craftsmanship that compresses into heightened intensity their formal qualities of design. If one were to ask the artist, he would say that the works exemplify his concern with the formal aesthetic arrangements of the various elements comprising the assemblages. It would be the organization of the forms rather than any possible literary meanings that concern the artist. His fascination with type faces, fragments of paper, cards, and labels as forms is evident in works such as *Great Primer*.

In eschewing any literary or representational import to his works, Berman aligns his art with the formalist tradition of modern abstract art. At a time when artists felt themselves hampered by the view that art must be



Plaster Studio, 1980, photograph, 16" x 20"

representational, they explored other possibilities including the notion that the forms of art were to be appreciated for their own sake divorced from any representational or literary intent. Currently out of fashion, this view, which dominated much of twentieth century art, has more or less yielded to the claims of post-modern practice and theory which purport to embrace a wider field of strategies for the making and interpretation of art. It has become evident, moreover, that formal properties of art are themselves socially and historically constituted, as the history of abstract art in the twentieth century itself suggests.

Where then does this leave the assemblages of Berman? Left solely to the interpretive devices of a formalism devoid of any other intellectual or emotional associations, these works might well pass into the canon of the merely decorative. Yet I believe that they have, and will continue to have, interest as works of art that compel us to attribute to them a wider

significance than is admissible under a purely formalist aesthetic. To be sure, they remain Apollonian in the sense that their author has compressed, even suppressed their passion into the forms of carefully controlled imagery.

In some respects, nothing could be further from the truth than to suggest that Berman's assemblages have no content apart from their own formal organization. They are in fact replete with suggestions of memories and history including moments in the personal

history of the artist, who, with painstaking care, assembled the bits of type faces, printed materials, photo images and other elements that comprise the assemblages. Indeed it is their ability to evoke our sense of remembrance that makes these assemblages so appealing. Imaginatively conceived, they lead us to search for hidden narratives that reconstruct their continuity with the world in which they reside, or to create our own. Whose secretive doll is this who now resides in *Parade*, 1964-66? And what rich memories of a lost childhood are embodied in the precious toy engine that occupies a space nearby in the construction? The dominant presence of wooden type cases and archaic type faces in these works, fossils from the evolving history of mass communications, reminds of how quickly the world has changed. Such symbols as these, notwithstanding any narrower purposes of the artist, help us to maintain continuity with our past and to place the art more centrally in the context of human life.

II. Photography

By his own designation, Fred Berman is not a photographer.

Rather, he is an artist who uses the camera as another way to express his ideas. His photographs are type C prints, 16 by 20 inches, from 35 mm slides and printed from internegatives by Ron Zabler. In the context of artistic photographic practice today, he is very traditional in the sense that he does not manipulate the photograph in the dark room or otherwise alter the image.

To understand Berman's interest in photography, it is necessary to see this interest in the context of his approach to painting, the medium where he is most comfortable. As a painter, working in a formalist tradition previously discussed with respect to his assemblages, Berman sees the world "as light, color, and texture". He structures these and other pictorial elements such as texture and scale into highly organized formal arrangements. His approach to photography is not that dissimilar from his approach to painting.



Razed House IV, 1958, oil on canvas, 42" x 36",
Collection Patricia and Arthur Gebhardt



Wall, 1982, photograph, 20" x 16"

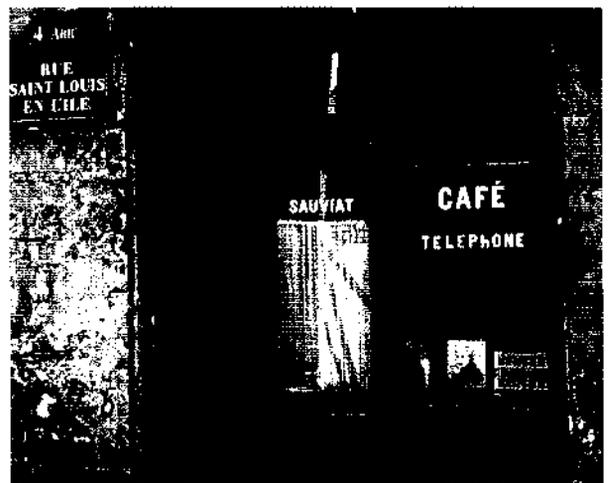
Why then does Berman choose to use the camera? Perhaps it is because he believes that the camera will expand his range as an artist beyond the possibilities offered by painting and assemblage. It is interesting to note that, while his concern with assemblage subsided after two years and a relatively small output of works, the photographs in this exhibition range from 1966 when he ended the assemblage project to 1992. Berman believes that the camera has given him greater freedom to explore the more abstract, imaginative aspects of his materials, and to see relationships that may later be developed in his paintings. At the same time he is aware that painting gives greater latitude for him to alter color, scale, and emphasis in the final picture. When photographing it is not always possible to rearrange the materials; whereas the artist can always rearrange the elements in a painting.

Contrary to the practice of many artists, Berman does not paint from photographs. With him, the process is reversed; he typically photographs subjects that he has painted in the past, for instance *Wall*, Covington, Kentucky, 1980 or *Covent Garden*, London, 1991. This practice reinforces the suggestion that his approach to photography is governed in large measure by his painting. Nevertheless, he would agree that each medium offers different possibilities.

The camera, for instance, offers exciting possibilities for capturing the fleeting moment that might be lost to the medium of painting. This is especially true for the experiences encountered in travels where one sees and moves on, never to return. Travel images indeed are the primary subjects for Berman's photographs represented in this exhibition. His images are from London, Paris, Moscow, Leningrad, New York, Atlanta, Milwaukee, and elsewhere. The photographs such as *Greenhouse*, *Interior Window*, Reading, England, 1966, and *'Café'*, *Ile St. Louis*, Paris, 1967/1985 are as carefully composed as the are the assemblages. These works use the frames of windows and doors as structural elements of the compositions. Windows function also to frame and give additional texture to the images shot through the glass in *Window With Cracked Glass*, New York, 1987 and *Window*, Brighton, England, 1991. In others, the organization of the picture capitalizes upon the arrangement of asparagus piled up in *Asparagus*, Paris, 1992, or on clusters of red, pink, and yellow roses in *Roses*, London, 1991. Only two of the images shown here include persons, *Metro Station*, Moscow, 1987 and *Two Women*, Leningrad, 1987. In every instance the people are simply 'objects' in the composition rather than subjects in their own right. Berman's composition in *Fox Theater*, Atlanta, 1980 orchestrates in photographic detail the elegance of an art nouveau style ticket booth.

Throughout, the photographs maintain a consistency of elegant form and composition fortified by beautiful surface texture and color. Despite the fact that photography can be a more intimate medium than is painting, capable of bringing to its subject a sense of immediacy, I find these photographs to be often cool and distant. Though beautiful to look at, they are less successful than the assemblages which otherwise evoked memories and associations that link them to the world in which they have been produced. Ironically, from his perspective, Berman may well find my observation that his photographs fail to evoke such referential connections with the world to be a compliment to his success as a formalist.

All in all Berman's work in the assemblages and the photographs, as well as in his paintings which are discussed in another essay, maintains a consistently formalist point of view. His explorations in the different media have undoubtedly enriched certain aspects of the work. Evidently he did not encounter the difficulties of Man Ray, Barbara Morgan, and Edward Steichen who each experienced conflict over their respective attempts to work with both painting and photography. Rather, he found that each of the several media provided complementary results when approached from a common aesthetic point of view.



Café, Ile St. Louis, Paris, 1967-68. photograph, 16" x 20" - detail