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### Take Your Time

Terry A. Ratzlaff

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, [ratzlaff.terry@huskers.unl.edu](mailto:ratzlaff.terry@huskers.unl.edu)

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TAKE YOUR TIME

By

Terry A Ratzlaff

A THESIS

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For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Major: Art

Under the Supervision of Professor Dana Fritz

Lincoln, Nebraska

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# TAKE YOUR TIME

Terry A Ratzlaff, M.F.A.

University of Nebraska, 2021

Advisor: Dana Fritz

I see the world not as one seamless world but as a world composed of other worlds, built on top and within one another. They exist harmoniously, bound not by space but by time. In an instant I can move from one world into another where I can exist in two worlds simultaneously—*in space, I am here. In time, I am there.*

Worldmaking is a conceptual process of seeing connections and making distinctions within our lived reality.<sup>1</sup> It is a process of dividing and organizing parts into collections that represent different narratives. Only through suitable arrangements can we handle vast quantities of material and information. Time is marked off into seconds, minutes, hours, weeks, months, years, decades, centuries, millennia, eons, and so on. This way of ordering makes time comprehensible despite not being found in the world but *built into a world*. Seen in this view, Take Your Time is a collection of re-constructed perceptions of time connected by the train.

Trains connect worlds. They are the subconscious driver of this work, suggesting a meta-narrative—I am the train, the train is me—inspired by the train's innate ability to signify time, order, and desire. In looking at the railroad's vast and interconnected systems of travel, commerce, telecommunications, and information, I perceive trains as

meaning-making-logic-machines; a structural device that threads seemingly disparate worlds together. *The world is what you make it.*

In *Take Your Time* I photographically deconstruct three idiosyncratic characters: a man who watches trains (*The Watcher*), a collector of model trains (*Dwayne Sam and The Romanticization of The Last Coal Train Through Crawford*), and myself—an agent who tracks and mirrors these watchers and collectors (*An Echo Requires Distance*.) Each character is represented in its collection of coded photographs that visually collide and collude. By coupling the characters, I analyze how obsession organizes a collection with the intent to control the experience of time.

### *The Watcher*

On September 8, 2018, at 1:44 pm after waiting for a train to pass, I met Craig. In what mathematicians call a catastrophe—the interruption of one system with another<sup>2</sup>—a hyperactive personality collided with a tenacious obsession with trains. Since this epiphanic and serendipitous moment, time seems to have slowed down, despite the world accelerating around me.

Craig has been watching trains from the parking lot of The Old Mill since 1983. He watches trains obsessively, once without missing a day for eleven years and six days. The physical act of clocking in for eleven years and six days can be seen as a negative act since that which repeats does so through either a natural inadequacy attributed to it or by not comprehending, not remembering, or not recognizing.<sup>3</sup>

To Craig, trains dictate the passage of time like the hands of a clock. Over time, the act of seeing transforms into a structural mechanism, re-integrating thought and action.<sup>4</sup> Meaning is found in the experience of seeing and is represented through undeciphered notation. Over time, the notations translate into an analytic structure where they accumulate serially and chronologically. Within the annotations are timestamps, serial numbers, direction and destinations, categories of cargo, and the number of cargo within the train. These annotations represent control over what is seen and become the direct physical object of Craig's obsession with time.

Photographically, I employ a similar approach, one that mirrors Craig's. Through systematic repetition, I construct a ritualistic method for making photographs of Craig watching trains. Over time, I become obsessive; I take on qualities of a mechanized accumulator compiling a cache of images that appear the same, but because time is always moving forward, every image is different.

In 2017 Craig suffered a stroke. As a result, there are gaps, blank lines, and scratch marks visible within his notes. I also encountered errors that caused deviations in my surveillance. The anomalies in my process appear in the form of shutter failures—an in-camera technical failure that randomly occurred, and mirrored Craig's errors. The result is an abstract fragment of an image, representing a momentary lapse of reason or a lack of consciousness. I speculate that Craig's stroke affects his ability to recollect his past and that his 'forgetting' transforms his existence into a perpetual unrolling of the present, where *here comes a train* represents a renewed moment—full of beauty and wonder—caught in a closed referential loop exempt from the passing of time.

Using the visual language of the grid, I structure each of Craig's days vertically while separating each day from the next. Moving through space and encountering another day has a recursive effect, inviting "double takes" to verify differences and changes while recognizing the familiarity and uniqueness of every moment.

### *An Echo Requires Distance*

In *Ft. Madison Virtual Railfan No. 1* and *No.2*, I place myself in view of a passing train thus subjecting myself to the gaze of the all-seeing eye, where an omniscient moderator sets the rules to this game of watching. In selectively dictating what is seen at all times, the moderator makes the screen the center of this virtual universe. No train passing through this world goes unseen, but the moderator is also curious of the world outside of trains; I watched in admiration one night, as our gaze sat resting upon the lonely Moon.

In this mode of surveillance, I move from the role of the watcher to the role of the watched. Coincidentally, I happen to be watching a group of train watchers watching a train at the very same moment of being virtually watched myself. In this möbius-strip<sup>5</sup> event—the watcher watches the watcher watch the watcher—I move from my actual self (the collector) into my virtual self (the collected) where I become an object added to my collection. The visual language of this series mimics the vertical grid in *The Watcher* to ask; *who is watching whom?*

*Dwayne Sam and The Romanticization of The Last Coal Train Through Crawford*

Worldmaking is also a physical construction that materializes between the act of collecting and the ritual of play within the collection. Dwayne started collecting toy trains when he was five, and by his twenties, was engineering coal trains for the Santa Fe Railway through the landscapes of Wyoming, Nebraska, and beyond. Upon retiring, Dwayne bought a house that borders the rail yard in Crawford, Nebraska—the mainline he regularly passed through—and proceeded to fill an entire barn with his collection of model trains and related objects.

By collecting objects associated with trains, Dwayne is able to narrate his past and establish the specific context of the object to a time and space in which the object was a part. In this context, the meaning within the objects lies not in their physical appearance nor their realization, but somewhere between the two.<sup>6</sup> When Dwayne orchestrates his model trains and drives them around his miniature track he enters a virtual dimension of time and space—train-time—that brings together ritual (cyclical time) and play (linear time), where he re-lives his days of engineering trains around the country. *Time flies when you're having fun.*

The relationship between ritual and play corresponds and opposes one another in the sense that both engage with the calendar and with time. Ritual structures time while play destroys it.<sup>7</sup> The change and destruction of time are common within railfan communities. Timepieces called “Fast Clocks” operate on desired ratios of miniaturized time—a similar concept to model train scales<sup>8</sup>—where fifteen minutes in real time,

accelerates to sixty minutes in train-time. Within train-time, Dwayne not only miniaturizes time by way of acceleration but miniaturizes his world to better possess and dominate it.<sup>9</sup> In the act, he also miniaturizes himself; where he constructs, arranges, classifies, and manipulates his world as he desires, causing a collapse between the man he is and the child he once was.<sup>10</sup>

Train-time re-constructs Dwaynes past within his present where he may experience a feeling similar to déjà-vu; making him believe he has already experienced something that is in fact, happening for the very first time at this very moment.<sup>11</sup> The phenomenon of déjà-vu as a ‘false recognition’ points to history itself in the words of Henri Bergson: the feeling that *the future* is closed, that the situation is detached from the thing although I am attached to it.<sup>12</sup>

If déjà-vu points to a future that is closed, where nothing new can happen, then the act of repeating oneself points to history repeating itself. This couldn’t be depicted better than through the annual re-enactment of the Wedding of the Rails, also known as the driving of the Golden Spike at Promontory Summit; a public ceremony that is repetitiously re-enacted annually at the same original temporal coordinates (12:47pm, May 10th 1869.) In the re-enactment two replica locomotives leave their positions at opposite ends of the short run track, approach each other, and with exhalations of steam, nudge noses and return to their original distances.<sup>13</sup> The nudging of noses symbolize the joining of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans while simultaneously collapsing the distance between the past and the present in the re-enactment itself.

### *An Echo Requires Distance*

This collection uses a monochromatic visual language to capitalize on the photographs believability. By emphasizing form, style, and structure, I can use photomontage and abstraction techniques to visually contradict the formal subject matter. In *Belmont Tunnel After 1982*, I use a double exposure to eliminate distance within the tunnel, creating a telescoping effect that makes the far appear near. Multiple photographs of manipulated tunnels are used in cadence to signify the entering and exiting of subconscious dream-worlds.

In *Aphasia Battery Test Error*, I use photomontage to place myself in three different roles of an aphasia battery eye test—referencing Craig’s stroke and notation errors—making myself the doctor, patient, and assistant all at once. However, the image appears to be discombobulated; the patient is outside the frame, floating in negative space. By introducing the stereoscope<sup>14</sup>, the viewer can ‘correct’ the error and complete the illogical nature of the image itself. In making images like this, I’m hoping to re-orient the viewer to my world of contradictions while asking; this way or that way? Real or not real? In questioning the authenticity of the image, I’m pointing to the way we question our visible reality; *Did I just see that, or am I still dreaming?*

My process of worldmaking begins with curiosity and wonder. The simple act of train watching or model collecting can be analyzed and deconstructed to understand and appreciate the uniqueness within the acts themselves. In doing so, the banality of these activities explodes into an intricate web of complex and far-reaching connections. This

fevered pursuit of deconstruction is like taking apart a train, piece by piece, and not knowing how to put it back together. I introduce pieces of myself in the process of reassembling to fill in the gaps caused by confusion, resulting in a refracted assemblage of disconnected parts that only function to mirror the original train. *I am the train—the train is me.*

Mirroring allows me to appropriate visual languages and codes from both The Watcher and Dwayne Sam while implementing an aesthetic designed to contradict itself. I arrange, classify and manipulate truths to fit the scope of my world where making sense means not making sense; up is down, forward is backward, small is large, far is near, day is night, work is play, the past is present and the end is the beginning. These contradictions point to the train itself: a train simultaneously brakes and accelerates, is near and far, loud and quiet, high and low, past and present, and the end can be a beginning.

*Here comes a train.*



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Photographs



Figure 1. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *Blue Train (Jupiter)*, 2020, Archival Pigment Print.



Figure 2. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *Red Train (UP 119)*, 2020, Archival Pigment Print.



Figure 3. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *Powers of Ten 2018 After The Eames Brother's*, 2018, Archival Pigment Print.



Figure 4. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *Craig on Google Maps 2009, 2012, 2012, 2017, 2019, 2020*, Archival Pigment Print.





Figure 5. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *Error A4549836a.tif*, 2018, Archival Pigment Print.



Figure 6. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *Aphasia Battery Test Error*, 2020, Archival Pigment Print

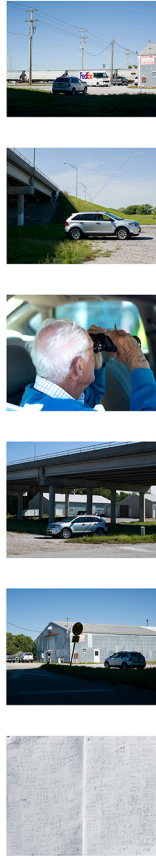


Figure 7. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *The Watcher* 9.22.2018, 2018, Archival Pigment Print





Figure 8. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *Clocks and Trains, Trains and Clocks*, 2020, Archival Pigment Print



Figure 9. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *Time is Money, Money is Time*, 2020, Archival Pigment Print



Figure 10. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *Frankford Arch After 1890*, 2020, Archival Pigment Print.



Figure 11. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *The Lonely Moon*, 2020, Archival Pigment Print





Figure 11. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *Dwayne Sam and The Romanticization of The Last Coal Train Through Crawford*, 2020, Archival Pigment Print



Figure 13. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *A World Within The World Perspective A*, 2020, Archival Pigment Print



Figure 14. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *A World Within The World Perspective B*, 2020, Archival Pigment Print





Figure 15. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *Dwayne Sam is not Present*, 2020, Archival Pigment Print





Figure 16. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *Maker of Worlds*, 2020, Archival Pigment Print



Figure 17. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *The Watcher 10.24.2018*, 2018, Archival Pigment Print



Figure 18. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *The Watcher 10.14.2018*, 2018, Archival Pigment Print



Figure 19. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *Ft. Madison Virtual Railfan No.1*, 2020, Archival Pigment Print



Figure 20. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *Dwayne Sam's World after Albert Bierstadt*, 2020, Archival Pigment Print





Figure 21. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *Choo Choo*, 2020, Archival Pigment Print



Figure 22. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *Train-Time*, 2020, Archival Pigment Print



Figure 23. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *The Wedding of the Rails 2020 after The Wedding of the Rails 1869*, 2020, Archival Pigment Print





Figure 24. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *Belmont Tunnel Vision*, 2020, Archival Pigment Print



Figure 25. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *Cyclical Time Meets Linear Time Error (Lightness Blinds)*  
2020, Archival Pigment Print



Figure 26. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *Cyclical Time Meets Linear Time (Darkness Reveals)*  
2020, Archival Pigment Print



Figure 27. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *Ft. Madison Virtual Railfan No.2*, 2020, Archival Pigment Print



Figure 28. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *The Watcher* 7.23.2019, 2019 Archival Pigment Print



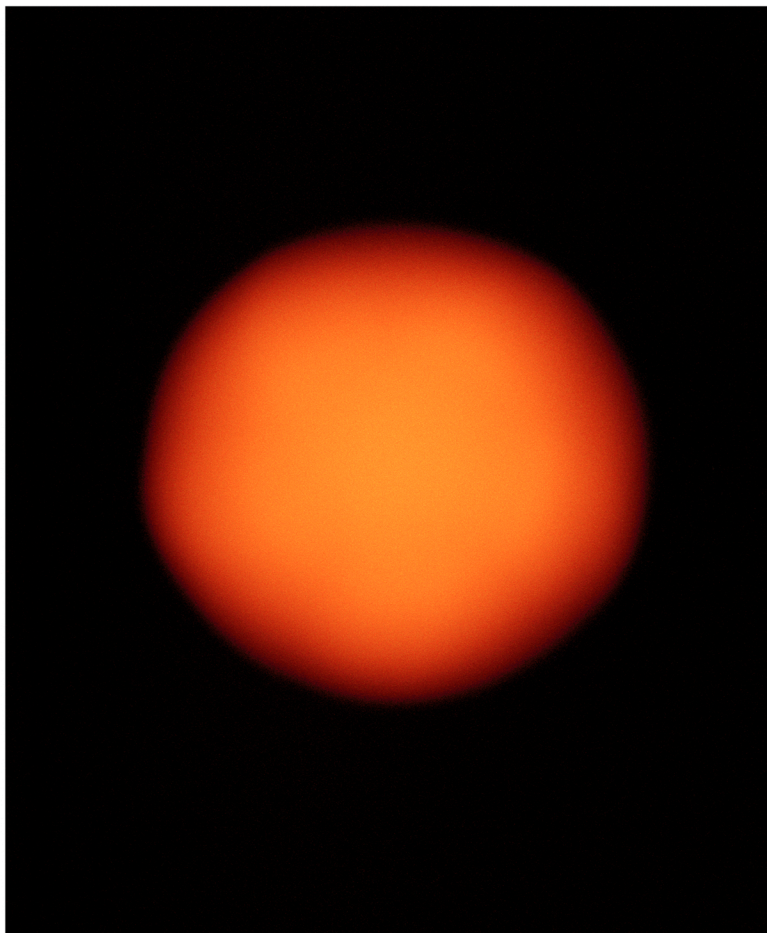


Figure 29. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *The Sun Watches The Earth (Left Eye)*, 2020, Archival Pigment Print



Figure 30. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *The Lonely Moon Watches The Earth (Right Eye)* 2020, Archival Pigment Print



Figure 31. Terry A. Ratzlaff, *Belmont Tunnel After the 1920 Collapse*, 2020, Archival Pigment Print



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Goodman, Nelson. *Ways of Worldmaking*.

<sup>2</sup> Barthes, Roland. *A Lover's Discourse*

<sup>3</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*.

<sup>4</sup> Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*.

<sup>5</sup> The Möbius strip is a one-sided nonorientable surface obtained by cutting a closed band into a single strip, giving one of the two ends thus produced a half twist, and then reattaching the two ends

<sup>6</sup> p.21 Pearce, Susan M., Objects as meaning; or narrating the past. *Interpreting Objects and Collections*.

<sup>7</sup> p.77 Agamben, Giorgio. *Infancy and History. On The Destruction of Experience*

<sup>8</sup> On the real railroads as well as toy trains, gauge refers to the distance between the outside rails of the track. The different scales are N, O, HO, and G scales.

<sup>9</sup> Bachelard, Gaston. 1969. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston. Bachelard writes of the miniature: Because every universe is enclosed in curves, every universe is concentrated in a nucleus, a spore, a dynamized center. And this center is powerful, because it is an imagined center.

<sup>10</sup> Stewart, Susan. 1984. *On Longing: Narratives of The Miniature, The Gigantic, The Souvenir, The Collection*. Stewart describes this collapse in the miniature: The child continually enters here as a metaphor, perhaps not simply because the child is in some physical sense a miniature of the adult, but also because the world of childhood, limited in physical scope yet fantastic in its content, presents in some ways a miniature and fictive chapter in each life history; its a world that is part history, at least the history of the individual subject, but remote from the presentness of adult life. We imagine childhood as if it were at the other end of a tunnel—distanced, diminutive and clearly framed.

<sup>11</sup> p.7. Virno, Paolo. *Deja Vu and The End of History*

<sup>12</sup> p.155. Bergson, Henri. *Memory of the Present and False Recognition*.

<sup>13</sup> Roberts, Jennifer L., and Robert Smithson. 2004. *Mirror-travels: Robert Smithson and history*.

<sup>14</sup> p.7 Lyden, Anne M. *Railroad Vision*. Two photographs produce one seemingly three-dimensional image, re-creating human binocular vision.

## Exhibition









































