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On The Road Reconsidered: Art, Identity, and the Highway

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In an iconic image of Dorothea Lange (fig. 1), she sits on top of her car, holding her Graflex camera. The car appears in good shape; it supports the photographer, and her perch on the roof lifts her above a rise in the background landscape. Such a position grants a bird’s-eye view of the immediate situation, implying Lange’s elevated perspective regarding the “big picture” of her subjects and their social context.

Fig. 1. *Dorothea Lange, Resettlement Photographer, in California*, 1936. Digital reproduction from original Nitrate negative, 2 1/4 x 2 1/4 in. or smaller. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-DIG-fsa-8b27245, https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/fsa.8b27245

Unlike the car in her self-portrait, automobiles often appear in Lange’s Depression-era images as simultaneous symbols of poverty, desperation, and hope. We see jalopies and jeeps packed to overflowing with people and possessions, in various states of repair or disrepair, sometimes parked alongside makeshift camps by the side of the road. The cars define their drivers and passengers: Lange’s car grants her the agency of her perspective, while the cars driven by agricultural workers and Dust Bowl migrants reflect their collective determination in the face of long odds. In order to make an honest picture of the

state of the country, the artist had to go out and find it on the road. John Tagg's study of these photographs reminds us that the New Deal government was not particularly effective in radically redistributing wealth in such a way as to fix the systemic economic sources of poverty in American society.[1] Yet, despite this critique, its public-facing arts programs, including these photographs, *did* have an effect of producing a certain level of social cohesion—they gave their viewers a sense that they were citizens engaged in a story of moral uplift, regardless of where they fell on the contemporary political spectrum. Nearly one hundred years later, we still look back to these pictures from the road to get a sense of the nation's zeitgeist.

Many of the images made by Lange and other Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers would have been impossible without their automobiles and the road trips taken to create them; the car's value is apparent as symbol and symptom in these pictures. While they tell us much about the nation, they also tell us is that automobility was a defining feature of American life.[2]

In this In The Round, Jeffrey Richmond-Moll's essay "Holy Rollers: Religion and Modern Mobility in the Art of John Steuart Curry" outlines the intertwined importance of automobility within American Regionalist art and the cultural practices documented and interpreted within this moment of painterly practice. Cars feature prominently in Curry's paintings of Midwestern Christianity during the 1920s and 1930s. More than set dressing or rural props, they illustrate, as Richmond-Moll elucidates, the importance of freedom of movement for contemporary Christian denominations for which immersion baptism was seen as mandatory for religious salvation. In an environment where water was often unpredictably scarce, congregations were forced to move to access this sacred, life-giving resource. In response to droughts, floods, and the Great Depression, automobility became an increasingly important feature of modern life. Shaped by these elements of his Kansan upbringing, Curry's commitment to following the mobility of his fellow Midwesterners was inherent in his depictions of the region and, therefore, of his brand of Regionalism. To picture a society on the move, Curry would need to be on the move as well.

Throughout the twentieth century, the American highway system expanded to connect towns, the people in them, and the social worlds they formed together. In President Eisenhower's "Special Message to the Congress Regarding the National Highway Program" of 1955, he describes the usefulness of the projected highway system: "Together, the uniting forces of our communication and transportation systems are dynamic elements in the very name we bear—United States. Without them, we would be a mere alliance of many separate parts."[3] While the address goes on to discuss the financial costs and national security risks of failing to develop a more extensive and safer highway system, in his initial description, Eisenhower presents the highway as a nationally binding agent.

After the passage of the Highway Act in 1956, the expanding highway system brought new opportunities, not just for travelers but also for those whose livelihoods depended on travelers.[4] In "Roadside California: Tressa Prisbrey's Bottle Village, Theme Parks, and Art Tourism in the Golden State," Elizabeth Driscoll Smith explains how methods of advertising and promotion developed by major theme park destinations, like California's Disneyland, were mirrored by Tressa "Grandma" Prisbrey in her Simi Valley environment and installation, the Bottle Village. For example, Prisbrey's promotional pamphlets provide a pictorial tour of the Bottle Village, an economy-sized version of the Disney television

channel's filmed tours of its theme park. To promote her village, Prisbrey leaned into a grandmotherly persona, serving cookies and telling stories as a performative version of herself that hewed to comforting maternal stereotypes, an archetype one might find in any number of Disney films.

The sociologist John Urry, a leader in the field of mobility studies, describes how technological developments fundamentally restructured the experience of driving in the postwar period following Eisenhower's address. That time saw a transition between what Urry calls "inhabiting the road" and "inhabiting the car," distinguished by the degree to which one was insulated from other travelers.[5] In the early days of car travel, there were fewer insulating technologies, and as a result, one was literally closer to others on the road; many cars had physically thin doors or plastic windscreens, and modern climate control would take time to develop. As insulating technologies evolved, travelers were put at a greater distance from one another. Urry marks the mid-1960s as the moment when this transformation occurs.

Given this timeframe, we can view Robert Frank's *The Americans*—undertaken in 1955 and published in 1959—as a document of the end of the era of automotive travel's social permeability and its replacement by roads filled with increasingly isolated drivers. A Swiss immigrant driving through Cold-War America, Frank had an outsider's vantage point on his road trip, but the physical and social structures of automobility-as-insulation contribute to the sense of isolation and social distance that emerge from his photographs. While Lange's project was directed toward social unity, Frank's was personal: the Americans whom Frank observes and the American scenes he records are foils against which his own identity is defined.

In the words of Jack Kerouac, Frank's "sad poem sucked from the heart of America" became a touchstone for later generations of road-tripping artists.[6] A representative selection of these are cataloged in David Campany's *The Open Road* (2014), which offers both an instructive early history and an extensive inventory of photographic projects undertaken along the American highway system. Campany writes:

> America is not so much out there to be pictured, or even out there *as* a picture; rather, the act of picturing is a primary act of diagnosis, definition, and self-assertion. Each new image and each new photographic project adds to the existing mix a new proposal of identity and value.[7]

Taken together with Urry's notion of increasingly insulated automobility, Campany's observation tells us that images from the road may become increasingly individualistic and provisional in their redefinition of the self and nation, yet they are no less American for being so. Rather than a unified nationalist picture, like the one the FSA strove to produce, the heterogeneity of the American road-trip genre increasingly became one of its defining, and arguably most enduring, features.

The road-trip genre was dominated by male points of view. As a counterpoint, Laura Shea examines French artist Sophie Calle's road-trip film, *Double Blind* (*No Sex Last Night*) (1996). Shea argues for Calle's distinctly feminist road-trip vision through the film and a set of related photographic series. *Double Blind* (*No Sex Last Night*) includes scenes shot during Calle and Greg Shephard's drive across the country, including their drive-through

wedding in Las Vegas, yet the film seems designed to give more of a feel than a sequential narrative. As one might expect of an "honest" documentation of a long road trip, there is plenty of waiting at hotels, diners, and garages for repairs alongside kinetic scenes from a moving car, but these sequences are put together without clarifying their spatial or chronological order. This roughly assembled, temporal jumble imitates the division of consciousness needed to successfully navigate the highway: remembering directions, changing the radio station, talking with passengers, watching out for merging traffic, and the various other tasks facing the driver that require rapid shifts of attention and focus. After arriving home or at a roadside motel, these individual scenes of fractured perception are reassembled into a quasi-coherent memory of the drive, but imposing a linear structure on them would do a disservice to the lived experience. The embrace of partial vision and situated knowledge are, for Shea, the hallmarks of the feminism inherent in Calle's project. Calle never set out to picture America per se, but following Campany, we could say that her drive and the resulting works add to the ongoing development of the American road trip's potential for personal expression.

In 2001, artist Wing Young Huie set out with his wife, Tara, on a photographic road trip that would result in the publication *Looking for Asian America: An Ethnocentric Tour by Wing Young Huie* (2007).[8] In his essay, Peter Han-Chih Wang threads together Huie's heritage and biography; Huie was the first member of his family born in the United States rather than China. Wang offers a series of comparisons between Huie's images of Chinese-American interactions with canonical photographs taken from the established genre of road-trip photography.

In her introduction to the summer 2023 issue of *Aperture*, critic/writer Stephanie Hueon Tung echoes Campany's assertion about the redefinition of America by successive generations of photographers, particularizing this notion by stating: "Being and becoming Asian in America is an unfixed, constantly evolving, and expansive process, and photography plays an essential role in envisioning it."[9] While the road Huie traveled on his ethnocentric tour was the same physical space as his white male predecessors, Wang's article explores Huie's search for Asia in America, leading him to a different set of discoveries about nationhood. Wang's analysis foregrounds the ways in which seemingly incidental details—such as offering a geographic location as a photograph's title or taking a picture of a TV in a roadside motel—articulate a sense of American identity differently for Huie than for Robert Frank, Stephen Shore, or Lee Friedlander, precisely because Huie's Asian-ness mediates his American-ness.

This In the Round features four essays that offer an expansive set of possibilities to what it is that one finds on the road, though all have to do with the notion of identity. Additionally, in the time since Huie's work was made in the early 2000s, other pressing contemporary concerns have come to bear on the road. For instance, the environmental impact of the American relationship with cars is increasingly an urgent concern driving climate change by pumping carbon emissions into the atmosphere. Richard Misrach and Kate Orff's book *Petrochemical America* (2011) looks at the Mississippi River Delta, aka Cancer Alley, as a site where oil is refined and made into a bevy of everyday items, including gas for cars, alongside the social and environmental impact of that industry. Interestingly, the book includes an additional booklet tucked into a fold in its back cover: a summary of the authors' own environmental impact in making the book, alongside some practical suggestions for reducing our reliance on these toxic industries. As the automotive industry

proceeds in its transition to electric vehicles, car companies invest in and even become mining operations, with long-term political and environmental effects that are yet to be seen.[10] Urry's third era of automobility is "inhabiting the intelligent car," where smart devices are built into the car to automate ever-expanding elements of the driving experience, from steering to picking the tunes.[11] It seems like it is only a matter of time before someone programs their smart car with a photographic itinerary generated by artificial intelligence.

In a world filled with digital images made from an automotive perspective, some artists, like Doug Rickard in his *A New American Picture* (2010), left the highway behind altogether and turned to his computer and Google Street View to make his own picture of America. It feels easy to be cynical about the encroachment of seemingly impersonal technologies into a genre once largely defined by the artists' personal relationships to their trip, yet these projects are also telling about what it is to be American. As automotive technology, digitization, and wayfinding continue to intertwine and evolve, the artistic responses to them will surely continue to proliferate in ways unexpected and intriguing.

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Notes

In years past, Peter Wang and I have cochaired conference panels on the topic of art and visual culture on the road at CAA and SECAC, and those were foundational in the genesis of this feature. I would like to thank Peter and all of the panelists who presented on those panels for their collaboration in that endeavor. I would also feel remiss if I did not direct readers to published and forthcoming projects by some panelists whose work we were unable to include: academic research by Karen Mary Davalos on Magu's art, which reflects an identity crossed by the US-Mexican border, and by Louise Siddons on Laura Gilpin's photography and midcentury lesbian identity on the Navajo reservation; as well as contemporary photography by the artists Armon Means, whose portraits of Black motorcycle-club members set out to correct the perception (that we owe in part to Danny Lyon's 1967 *Bikeriders*) that bikers are all criminally minded white men, and Jeremiah Ariaz, whose photographic series record his road trips to and through the disappearing town of Tucumcari. I would also like to thank the *Panorama* executive editors for their assistance in polishing this In the Round into its present form and the authors of each paper for the effort it took to make this happen.

[1] John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 84. For a recent case study of a specific Lange photograph and the way it created a compelling nationalistic narrative without materially uplifting its subject, see Sarah Hermanson Meister, *Dorothea Lange: Migrant Mother* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018).

Throughout this introduction I use the term "American," as distinct from "United States," as a way of gesturing towards an concept of nationhood and a subjective feeling of belonging to that nation, rather than towards the idea of the United States in its strict geographic or geopolitical sense, though of course the boundary between these notions is porous, and ideas of the United States and its place in world politics can certainly affect one's sense of American-ness.

[2] For more on automobility, see Mike Featherstone, Nigel Thrift, and John Urry, eds., *Automobilities* (London: Sage, 2005). In the introduction, Featherstone summarizes Urry's conception of automobility: "For Urry automobility should be seen as a 'self-organizing autopoetic, nonlinear system' which links together cars, car-drivers, roads, petroleum supplies and other 'novel objects, technologies and signs,' in an expanding

relatively stable system which generates unintended consequences. Social life has become locked into the modes of mobility that automobility generates and presupposes" (2).

[3] Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Special Message to the Congress Regarding the National Highway Program," The American Presidency Project, University of California Santa Barbara, accessed June 1, 2023, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/special-message-the-congress-regarding-national-highway-program.

[4] The Federal-Aid Highway Act, popularly known as the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act (Public Law 84-627), was enacted on June 29, 1956. This act funded construction for the beginnings of the modern interstate system. "Federal Aid Highway Act," Wikipedia, accessed June 1, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_Aid_Highway_Act_of_1956.

[5] John Urry, "Inhabiting the Car," in "Against Automobility," special issue, *Sociological Review* 54, no. 1 (October 2006): 17–31.

[6] Jack Kerouac, introduction to *The Americans*, by Robert Frank (New York: Grove, 1959), n.p.

[7] David Campany, *The Open Road: Photography and the American Road Trip* (Reading, PA: Aperture, 2014), 35.

[8] Wing Young Huie, *Looking for Asian America: An Ethnocentric tour by Wing Young Huie* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

[9] Stephanie Hueon Tung, "Being and Becoming: Asian in America," *Aperture* (Summer 2023): 26.

[10] See, for example, Clifford Krauss and Jack Ewing, "Lithium Scarcity Pushes Carmakers Into the Mining Business," *New York Times*, July 2, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/02/business/lithium-mining-automakers-electric-vehicles.html?searchResultPosition=5.

[11] Urry, "Inhabiting the Car," 26.