

Christoph Ribbat

## Toxic Driving

### American Photography and the “Oil Epiphany”

#### 1. Legends of the Road

“Our country is made for long road trips,” Stephen Shore writes in his photobook *Road Trip Journal* (2008). Shore remembers the enthusiasm he felt upon embarking on his months-long car trips through the United States in the early 1970s, how the automobile made him feel like an “explorer inside a bubble of familiarity,” clear and focused while on the move<sup>1</sup>.

Many admirers of photography will instinctively find themselves nodding when reading Shore’s notes. There is, so it seems, hardly a better combination around than car, camera and America. A whole series of twentieth century icons bear witness to this fact: the (overly) familiar picture of that gaunt migrant mother for which Dorothea Lange, after already criss-crossing California for weeks in 1936, turned off onto a road between Nipomo and San Luis Obispo when she saw a sign reading “PEA-PICKERS CAMP”<sup>2</sup>. Or, in his dark travel essay *The Americans*, Robert Frank’s 1955 picture of his family sleeping in the back seat of a car parked on the shoulder of US Highway 90, just outside Del Rio, Texas, with the car cropped by the camera – a view that exudes an incredible ambivalence between nearness and distance, between the viewer outside on the road and the passengers within. The shot by Joel Sternfeld, a Volkswagen Bus nomad on North American roads for eight years, of an exhausted elephant, surrounded by men and cars brought together by their concern for (or pursuit of) the pachyderm, the animal as gray as the asphalt on which it collapsed near Woodland in Washington State, on a June day in 1979. And then there are the anecdotes: how in 1936 James Agee and Walker Evans drove together through the most poverty-stricken stretches of Alabama, bathed in sweat in the southern summer heat, more on dirt roads than on asphalt, and how a simple church at the side of the road moved them to blurt out “Jesus!” in unison<sup>3</sup>. Or how Bernd and Hilla Becher, on a US

road trip in a Volkswagen Bus in 1980, wanted to photograph a blast furnace in Pennsylvania; since a small group of bushes seemed to be in the way, the Bechers, in an excellent pre-*Photoshop* move, got their “good Swedish saws” out of the car and began to hack away at the shrubbery<sup>4</sup>.

These pictures and stories are part of the photography community’s collective memory. Many find that the photobook is the ideal object for evoking the interplay between movement and standstill, leaving through and looking, or driving and pausing. The United States, that always somewhat improvised-looking republic, appears as the perfect geographical setting. As powerfully as Frank’s *Americans*, Jack Kerouac’s novel *On the Road* has shaped the cultural imaginary that automotive photographers are drawing from. Perhaps even more importantly, Walt Whitman’s buoyant poems from the nineteenth century urge their readers to spread American democracy, to sing its praises, and to get to know as many men and women as possible in the cities, in the country, in the valleys, in the mountains, to extol and embrace them. “I tramp a perpetual journey, (come listen all!),” Whitman exclaims in his *Song of Myself*<sup>5</sup>. His influence on American aesthetics can still be felt today. On Whitman’s “open road” each and every one of us, criminals, illiterates, drinkers, is welcome, accepted, appreciated<sup>6</sup>. Democracy is manifested in the people you meet and open up to, and through whom you can finally begin to really understand America as a great collective quasi-poem — this, at least, is the popular narrative that emerges from Whitman’s enthusiasm.

#### 2. After the “Oil Epiphany”

The matter is a bit more complicated today, our enthusiasm for automobile expeditions somewhat dampened. Take Edward Burtynsky. At the beginning of his career, it must have been the late 1970s, the

Canadian photographer undertook a four-month journey through North America, a young man in a Volvo, equipped with not much more than a camera, film and gas money. Burtynsky says his trip was like nothing else he had ever experienced. Nothing since then had promised such a feeling of joy, “of pure adventure and discovery – and of absolute freedom”<sup>7</sup>. Decades later, however, around the millennium, something occurred to him. Burtynsky calls this his “oil epiphany”. That Volvo no longer appeared as a symbol of freedom and independence, but as a pretty ambivalent vehicle instead, because it not only catapulted him, young Edward, across the continent, but also consumed the scarce resource of crude oil in the process, and thereby did its small, but tangible part in destroying the Earth as habitat.

After this flash of enlightenment, there could only be one subject for Burtynsky: his photobook *Oil* (2009) depicts the latest phase in the global fortunes of this fossil fuel as an extremely worrisome epoch. In dramatic images, often shot from cranes or helicopters, the book covers the entire crude oil production cycle: the monumental oil fields, the mad post-urban world of single-passenger traffic, the poisoned wastelands left behind once all the oil has been drained out of the ground. No matter which of these scenes haunt our memory, whether it's the oil fields of Baku in Azerbaijan, the junkyards of Tucson, Arizona, or the tanker graveyards of Chittagong, Bangladesh: no one who has leafed through *Oil* will ever push down the gas pedal of a combustion-driven vehicle again without a sinking feeling of guilt.

In a broader framework, the arts scene and environmental research are converging more and more each day. Raimar Stange proposes subjecting artworks to a new reading informed by climate change. According to Stange, this not only applies to those positions that explicitly engage with the theme, but also to works throughout art history that can be seen in relation to predatory environmental depletion<sup>8</sup>. Lawrence Buell, one of the pioneers of the discipline known as ecocriticism, insists that there are fundamental differences between the holistic ideas of earlier ecologically-oriented authors and the much more urgent warnings voiced in what he calls the “toxic discourse”. As early as 1998, Buell wrote that,

in view of the environmental crises of our day, we have no choice but to deal with the cultural reactions to these dilemmas<sup>9</sup>.

Being inspired by the “toxic discourse” evidently does not involve calculating the carbon footprint of the Bechers' Volkswagen Bus. The challenge is more difficult and can be located on the symbolic level. We have to ask to what extent the pictorial works of the road-trip photographers are wrapped up in a global system that gave rise to an unshakeable faith in individual mobility and hence maneuvered our planet to the edge of the precipice. Just as the nineteenth century camera brought forth a democratic subjectivity, the automobile encouraged a radically subjective lack of respect for environmental resources. Here again, photography, whether used by laypersons, journalists, or artists, played a central role. It accompanied and glorified individual transport, filling it with meaning. Why is it that we deem those very image sequences to be interesting photography that presuppose the greatest amount of automotive movement over the broadest of geographic ranges<sup>10</sup>? Has the oil system programmed us to think that way? If we take Edward Burtynsky's “epiphany” seriously, we would have to interpret automobile-based photography somewhat differently than merely as a medium for boundless creativity.

Observers outside photography cast doubt on the alleged freedom and independence of automobile traffic and hence on essential prerequisites for photographic road trips. The mass motorization of the 1950s has been read as an era of great homogenization. Along the interstates, the republic dedicated to the motto “E pluribus unum” was transformed into a uniform franchise nation: the same hotel beds at Holiday Inn, the same burgers at McDonald's, from San Diego to Portland (Maine), from Portland (Oregon) to Miami. The social consequences were more far-reaching still: the spread of the automobile sorted what were once multiethnic cities into white middle-class suburbs and abandoned inner cities that rapidly sank into poverty – a process that has yet to be halted<sup>11</sup>. In their study *Motoring*, John Jakle and Keith Sculle show how romantic fictions about driving as an individualistic, invigorating activity soon break down as the realization dawns that drivers are nothing

but cogs in a thoroughly planned-out, automated system. They don't really have the freedom to make all their own decisions. Instead, they follow rigidly prepared routes. Their gaze is not directed at the landscape all around them, but is detached from it in a kind of tunnel vision, eyes glued to the road<sup>12</sup>. The car is not much more than a hard shell like that of a beetle, as Marshall McLuhan already put it in allusion to a familiar Volkswagen product in 1964<sup>13</sup>. In fact, the Volkswagen Bus, the classic counter-culture car, vehicle of surfers, self-discoverers and photographers such as the Bechers and Joel Sternfeld) owes its success in America to an extremely well-run advertising agency in New York City whose ad campaigns urged the purchase of a Volkswagen (problematic in view of Nazi crimes) as a counter-cultural act. As American author Thomas Frank shows, Volkswagen thus played a major role in the process of commercializing and emptying of content ostensibly rebellious activities and styles that are sold today like toothpaste<sup>14</sup>.

Twentieth century fiction made similar observations. While Whitman and Kerouac enthusiastically praise mobility, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) proffers the description of a two-year car trip back and forth across the United States as the exact obverse of Whitman's journey of discovery into everyday democracy. For Humbert, the people he meets are nothing more than obstacles preventing him from living out his sexual obsession with Lolita. The serial destinations they head for ("hundreds of scenic drives [...] Our twentieth Hell's Canyon [...] Our hundredth cavern, adults one dollar, Lolita fifty cents") are grotesque excesses of banality, taken for granted as the price he has to pay for pursuing his passion with his pre-pubescent lover in the next motel room ("a prison cell of paradise"). This trip across America is no love song for democracy. Only one world is discovered here: that of the narrator, "umber and black Humberland"<sup>15</sup>. First and foremost, however, this is a story about Vladimir Nabokov's fervor to stage his own discovery of everyday life in America, with the greatest possible verve and the richest nuances.

Robert Frank's *Americans* (1958), arguably the most influential twentieth century photobook, also addressed the destructive power of the automobile it-

self or, in Ulrich Keller's words, the "poverty of the technology-colonized spirit"<sup>16</sup>. Nonetheless, Frank's work hasn't inspired too many photographers to stay put. Quite the opposite is the case. Energized by Frank's and Kerouac's road trips, countless photographers and literary lights came to favor the genre of the carbon-powered picaresque over a deep reading of social phenomena. The pattern is familiar. An outsider sets out across the land. He exposes the quaint oddities of a specific locale. He (or she) drives on. This model has worked quite well at least since the year 1554, when gas stations were hard to find, and could be perfected even further in a nation addicted to the automobile<sup>17</sup>. In the era of "toxic discourse", this kind of mobility doesn't seem to be enough<sup>18</sup>.

### 3. On Standing Still

Certainly, however, car-based photography also developed new visual narrative forms of modernism. These perspectives enable us to explore phenomena such as urban sprawl, climate change and the end of oil within the art sector, and to move beyond dry didacticism. They point to visual strategies emphasizing stillness rather than constant motions. As the fictions and legends of photographers at the wheel loom so large, it may be necessary to look back into photography's history in order to produce a new canon of camera work approaching the automobile culture in a more nuanced fashion. The history of this process must begin with Edward Ruscha and his gas stations (although his works *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965), *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) and *Thirty-Four Parking Lots in Los Angeles* (1967) are by all means equally deserving of our attention). The books Ruscha created in the late 1960s developed a new visual vocabulary for the motorized world, depicting its grids and cataloguing new phenomena on its urban and geographic surfaces. They refer neither to allegorical dimensions nor to emotional turbulences: there is no enthusiasm for automotive freedom to be found here, nor any anti-oil revelations à la Burtynsky. Ruscha insists that he was only interested in the book itself, as a rigidly produced, precisely functioning object. He sees *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* as a kind of "training manual for people who want to know about things like that,"<sup>19</sup> as

an objective information source, plain and simple. And it did in fact become a “training manual” of sorts – although less for those studying gas stations than for artists and photographers who followed Ruscha’s cue in developing similar sequences. We can hardly escape the charm of Ruscha’s work here. Its casual irony seems the only adequate response to the patterns established by the oil empire.

Stephen Shore became acquainted with Ruscha’s photobooks in the late 1960s<sup>20</sup>. And sober functionality would become central to his work as well. Whereas for Ruscha photography is more of a means to an end, Shore focuses on the potential of each individual photographic image to reflect how the American landscape has been transformed by the automobile: so he studies the motel parking lot with as much attention to detail as the pancakes in front of him in a road-side diner. The large-format camera with its enormous range of possibilities for rendering visual information takes on special significance here. It allowed Shore to deal with the innumerable incidents of the postmodern landscape by incorporating into his images, as Christy Lange writes, an “infinite number of centers of attention”<sup>21</sup>. Not only the way the photographer chooses to frame his image signals that he is immersing himself in the visual chaos brought about by the proliferating road network. The picture itself, as an extremely fecund store of information, forces the viewer to come to terms with this jumbled vista, instead of simply driving by unawares in his car, like the conventional consumer of the drug of oil.

Ruscha and Shore are hence not concerned so much with the natural resource of crude oil as they are with the resource of focused attention and therefore with the key prerequisite for making our motorized world comprehensible. They showed us new ways of reading pictures, superficial in the best sense of the word, ways that neither condemn nor praise, but instead hone our vision. Shore’s pictures, when we view them in sequences, accept the standardized structures of road traffic described by historians as a given – the commercialization, the regularity, the restriction of each driver’s perspective to the road itself. While the oil system is based on the premise that gas consumption is the key to freedom, Ruscha and

Shore developed strategies that exposed this assumption as an extremely brittle fiction.

Finally, a key photographic project of the 1970s countered road trip phantasies with particular urgency and intelligence: the exhibition *New Topographics*, curated by William Jenkins at George Eastman House in 1975, a show examining photographers Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore and Henry Wessel Jr. Britt Salvesen, mastermind of a 2009 rediscovery of the show, views the *New Topographics* as a turning point in the history of American photography, one that went far beyond the individual protagonists to shape this art form on both sides of the Atlantic over the ensuing decades. Here was a new approach to the road, to being on the go, to America’s jeopardized wide open spaces. A photographic style emerged that allowed the artist to consistently devote his attention to the present, to the new forms of land development, to the new relationship between countryside and city. Sobriety permeated these images. They were just as austere as the territories they portrayed. The *New Topographics* demonstrated the potential of a gaze that consistently adheres to the surface of the landscape, rejecting the anecdotes of photojournalism and displaying more of an interest in the conditions of humanity than in snapshots of everyday life. The key message of the *New Topographics*, according to Britt Salvesen, was not “revelation” but rather “responsibility”<sup>22</sup>. And it can prove very useful to follow her judgments and to find in this 1970s exhibition project, reaction patterns for the ecological problems of our time. Long before Edward Burtynsky experienced his oil epiphany, the dilemma of the road-trip photographer was already resolved: for these pictures, shot in the 1970s, do not depict the obvious temptations of mobility, but rather the ambivalent promise of standing still. Fewer icons emerge from this tradition, fewer heroic legends, yet a much more nuanced sense of American exceptionalism.

Translated from the German by Jennifer Taylor-Gaida and Christoph Ribbat.

## Notes

1. Stephen Shore, *Road Trip Journal*, London 2008, n. p.
2. Linda Gordon, *Dorothea Lange. A Life beyond Limits*, New York 2009, p. 237.
3. Belinda Rathbone: *Walker Evans. A Biography*, New York 2000, p. 123.
4. *Reiseaufzeichnungen von Hilla Becher*, in: Susanne Lange, *Was wir tun ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen. Bernd und Hilla Becher. Einführung in Leben und Werk*, Munich 2005, pp. 179-183, 181.
5. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, New York 2004, pp. 23-76, p. 71.
6. Whitman 2004, *Leaves of Grass*, pp. 123-133, p. 124.
7. Edward Burtynsky, *Oil*, Göttingen 2009, n. p.
8. Raimar Stange, *ClimART Change. Zur Ästhetik einer 'Klimawandel-Kunst'*, in: *Kunstforum International*, 199, 2009, pp. 63-77.
9. Lawrence Buell, *Toxic Discourse*, in: *Critical Inquiry*, 24, 3, 1998, pp. 639-665.
10. For a very useful overview see the chapter *On the Road* in: Gerry Badger, *The Genius of Photography. How Photography Has Changed Our Lives*, London 2007, pp. 129-166.
11. James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations. The United States. 1945-1974*, New York 1996, pp. 333-336.
12. John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle, *Motoring. The Highway Experience of America*, Athens 2008. See also the even more critical viewpoint of Jane Holtz Kay in *Asphalt Nation. How the Automobile Took Over America and How We Can Take It Back*, Berkeley 1997. Cf. by contrast, for an interpretation of driving as democratic practice: Rudy J. Koshar, *Driving Cultures and the Meaning of Roads. Some Comparative Examples*, in: *The World beyond the Windshield: Roads and Landscapes in the United States and Europe*, ed. by Christof Mauch and Thomas Zeller, Athens 2008, pp. 14-34.
13. McLuhan also predicted, though, that the car would be replaced by electronic vehicles by about 1974 – so we can only believe him to a certain extent. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man. Critical Edition*, ed. by W. Terrence Gordon, Corte Madera 2003 [1964], pp. 293-301.
14. Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool. Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Consumerism*, Chicago 1997. See also David Dyer Burnett, *From Hitler to Hippies. The Volkswagen Bus in America*, Austin 2002. Online: Social Science Research Network. [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=950575](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=950575), 15 August 2013.
15. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, Greenwich (Conn.) 1963 [1955], pp. 144-152.
16. Ulrich Keller, *The Highway as Habitat. A Roy Stryker Documentation*, Seattle 1986, pp. 22-23.
17. Literary historians define the (anonymously written) novel *Lazarillo de Tormes* published that year as the first novel in the genre (M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Boston 2005, p. 198).
18. At some point you can't help noticing that it's mostly white men driving through the supposedly empty landscape. This inspires us, as the Americanist Alexandra Ganser has shown, to imagine other travelers who drive these roads with other concepts in mind, other ways of seeing things and other life stories, splitting the standard myth of the 'open road' up into many diverse fictions with different gender and ethnic accents (Alexandra Ganser, *Roads of Her Own. Gendered Space and Mobility in American Women's Road Narratives. 1970-2000*, Amsterdam 2009). On the question of perception see also Afro-American road authors: Kris Lackey, *Road Frames. The American Highway Narrative*, Lincoln 1997. For further studies on the literature of the road see Roger N. Casey, *Textual Vehicles. The Automobile in American Literature*, New York 1997; Jens Peter Becker, *Das Automobil und die amerikanische Kultur*, Trier 1989; Cynthia Golomb Dettelbach, *In the Driver's Seat. The Automobile in American Literature and Popular Culture*, Westport (Conn.) 1976.
19. Edward Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal. Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, ed. by Alexandra Schwartz, Cambridge (Mass.) 2004, p. 53.
20. Christy Lange, *Stephen Shore*, London 2007, pp. 39-111, p. 47.
21. Lange 2007, *Stephen Shore*, p. 87.
22. Britt Salvesen, *New Topographics*, in: Rochester, George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, *New Topographics: Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott*,

*Stephen Shore, Henry Wessel, Jr., Britt Salvesen et al., Göttingen 2009, pp. 11-67, p. 58. See also Kelly Dennis, Landscape and the West: Irony and Critique in New Topographic Photography. Cultural Landscapes in the 21st Century, Newcastle 2005; Online: [www.ncl.ac.uk/unescolandscapes](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/unescolandscapes), 15 August 2013.*

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Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass*, New York 2004.

### Abstract

The essay explores the American road trip as a central element of photography's history. It investigates the close connection between driving and camera work – and particularly the artistic and personal enthusiasm produced by this combination. Canonical photographic oeuvres of the twentieth century have emerged from extensive driving. Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, the Bechers, and others come to mind. Based on these examples and observations, the essay opens ecocritical perspectives on the Age of the Automobile. These readings emphasize the toxic nature of car travel and processes of standardization that complicate the legends of the road. Photographer Edward Burtynsky's twenty-first century mediations on the "oil epiphany" prove particularly interesting in this context. As this essays shows, however, the relationship between photography and the automobile was transformed much earlier. 1970s artists such as Stephen Shore and Ed Ruscha and the exhibition *New Topographics* developed new interpretations of mobility and more nuanced versions of the Great American Road Trip, concepts more concerned with the act of standing still.

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### Title

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