

## The Myth of the Road

### Journeying 66

#### THE ROAD

*a sentimental journey*

Morning in Tulsa, Oklahoma, August 2010. My 66th birthday. The plan was to rent a car. Next to the steering wheel is the map of Route 66, which I travelled in 1966 riding on a Greyhound bus all the way to Santa Monica, CA. Parts of the road still exist, some sections are restored as a historic route, others have been replaced by interstate highways. The hope of still finding traces of memories and what it felt like to be alive back then.

With the idea of stretching time beyond September – with the sun westward through three time zones and five states from Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Amarillo, Texas, to Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Flagstaff, Arizona, to Santa Monica, California.

#### THE HYPE OF A MYTH

*recalculating 2844 point 6 miles – turn left, then turn right, end of destination. recalculating...*

From the very beginning this question: is it possible to subvert a myth without ironically breaking it, to modify it with one's own insertions? This myth – long an element of our collective memory – holds in our subconscious the images from the socially critical novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) woven together into the all-American going on the road – there is always something to find that is better, there is something new down the road, around the bend. The moments, too, of reliving that first trip. Fear of staying in motels because of the horror scenes in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). The déjà-vu scenes in films by Wim Wenders and Rosa von Praunheim, the photos of Robert Frank, Robert Adams, Stephen Shore and others, all of these contributing to the fascination of this road, to the images of decay and transience, of failure and transfiguration. Also, I was reminded of and moved by the natural world changing and shifting according to its own laws and thereby staying the same in its equanimity and sublimity. Its great, terrifying beauty.

And at the same time the desire – urgent and precarious – to free oneself and experience “the now” in that Ford Escape: the idea to go west on Route 66 to the California beaches. That is about freedom, the freedom to make choices, and the ability to just go.

#### THE IMAGES

*closed little words or open free worlds*

The experiment – by recalling/repeating/travelling to connect with how it felt to be alive in the 1960s, with the spirit of euphoric optimism in a time of change. With the absolute belief that everything is possible. The individualized forms of protest, resistance and emancipation. That in any case is what I sense from reading my travel journal entries from 1966. With lines written in the margins from folk/blues/country songs as they began to become political. By Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Harry Belafonte and Joni Mitchell. Musicians creating from the sources of world music. Converging in the Rock 'n' Roll music with its program of political, sexual and spiritual liberation.

With these, extracts from John Steinbeck's travelogue *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*, published in 1962. Even then bringing together all the concerns of the time: racism and exploitation of nature, self-exploitation and self-destruction, followed by the civil rights movement and outrage at political murders. At the Cold War and the proxy wars, at violence against Women, African Americans, Native Americans, Jews and Homosexuals. Counter-culture dreams. And the temptation to yield to a certain escapism, to yearn for comic relief or dissipate oneself into images – not to disappear into somewhere – anywhere, but to recharge with vital energy.

And thus the use of the camera, which can perhaps capture more than the naked eye. Details, closed little worlds or open free worlds. Movements forward as well as backward. Driven by the eternal search for cohesion in confrontation with the world and oneself and the images from the road like the rolling stones on the lost highway. On the “hunt for images” between conquest and discovery. With the help of a GPS for finding accommodation and the conventional map for finding my place on the long stretches. And registering that most of the PCs in the scattered internet cafés are occupied for clicking here and there, zooming the scale by sliding the bar up and down, between Google Earth and Google Maps.

*the endless highway providing another escape*

The sequence of photos has a fixed beginning, it is true, but the end is left open for variations. What determines the order? What effect would other arrangements, ways of viewing and suggestions have? As to fill in the cracks and potholes with tar that is shining and sticky in the sun. What kind of coloring and retouching? And what kind of straightening and smoothing the frayed edges? Abrasion. Being at the mercy of one's surroundings. Resistance to extreme heat, frost and wind. Instead of oil rigs, now wind turbines and cattle farms with abattoirs for miles in every direction. Amid all this the Cadillac Ranch. Ten car wrecks cemented into the ground and sprayed with oil paint. The challenge. Do-it-yourself art elevated to pop art.

Defying the odds, taming the moment, the circumstances. By perceiving the wind, the cars driving past and the music I am hearing. The people I meet. Linear and simultaneous time in the spaces of the landscape. And by making photos transforming their multi-dimensionality into two-dimensionality in energy-charged takes. How can the structures that impress themselves into my consciousness be made visible, how can their interweavings and ambivalences from which emotions are aligned be revealed? What gains new meaning and how? Surprise and pause for breath, movement and stillness. Mystery. The sense of being lost. There is the line, the frame, the boundary. Contrast, abstraction, the image. For the seductive light and the never-ending sky.

After travelling for days along the hilly roads of Oklahoma, following the lines in the road toward the shimmering horizon that keeps receding further and further. Villages and small towns, then as now – prospering and decaying. Past meadows and prairies, shrub landscapes, deserts, mountains, bare and inviting, forbidding and calming. Extended cross-country trips. “I oft times feel pity and regret for those who never knew that wide and open space which lies between the sunset and the dawn; the Prairie,” noted the American landscape painter Olaf C. Seltzer. Across the Great Plains from Texas and New Mexico, the foothills of the Rocky Mountains in Arizona, through the Californian Mojave Desert to the Pacific Ocean. The road as a river meeting the sea there. The flow, intoxication, dissolution of boundaries: I am the road.

*always take the long way home*

Accompanied by Santa Fe Trailways loaded with containers from China and goods trucks with the names Dynamic Express, Rockstar Energy Drink, Let's roll – from the goodness of milk, Jesus God, You Will Kneel Before Him – and at intervals the signs at the roadside: Report Drunken Drivers. “When the wind is homesickness,” writes Bei Dao, “the road is its speech.” And then, at last, the smell of algae, salt and sea.

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