ON AND OFF THE ROAD:
CREATIVE INTERSECTIONS
BETWEEN CARS AND ART

Ursula K. Frederick

June 2013

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of
The Australian National University.
Statement of original ownership

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at any other higher education institution. The work is my own accept where otherwise acknowledged.

Signed: [Signature]

Date: April 17, 2014
Abstract

Over the past decade there has emerged a growing body of scholarship concerned with the impacts and influences of automobility. Its purpose has been to understand the dominance of the car not simply as a technology of transport but as a system of actors, materials, objects, ideas and infrastructure. While much of this research recognises the pervasive presence of the car in our lives in terms of different representational formats, relatively little consideration has been given to what creative artists can contribute to this research. Adopting an interdisciplinary framework incorporating contemporary art, visual anthropology and the archaeology of the contemporary past, this study explores the intersection of car cultures and creative practice to consider how cars can operate as a form of art. In doing so the author proposes that artistic engagements with the car provide unique insight into the experiences of contemporary life. This argument follows from the understanding that art is not simply a mirror of or response to the socio-cultural and political context in which it is manifest. Art is also a conceptual tool for thinking about the very substance and conditions of contemporary existence. Incorporating research undertaken across numerous car culture sites and communities along with a detailed analysis of six case studies, the project makes extensive use of photography as a mode of research.
FOR MY PARENTS, ROGER AND JEANETTE
FOR GIVING ME THE LOVE, SUPPORT AND FREEDOM TO FIND MY OWN WAY IN THE WORLD
Acknowledgments

I have been fortunate to be the recipient of several grants and awards, throughout my candidature, including an Australian Postgraduate Award, EASS Patrons Graduate Scholarship, ANU - IARU Travel Grant, ANU National Institute Grant as well as additional fieldwork funding from the College of Arts and Social Sciences. I also received conference attendance support from the Australian Archaeological Association and the Theoretical Archaeology Group, USA. I gratefully acknowledge this financial assistance.

Chaitanya Sambrani was instrumental in helping me to understand that in getting to where I wanted to be would depend on where I started. I thank him for that wisdom and other valuable insights throughout this project. Chaitanya saw the value in my research interests right from the very start and I am enormously grateful to him, Martyn Jolly and Heather Burness for supporting my entry into the School of Art. I must also thank Mandy Thomas and Howard Morphy for their encouragement to undertake a PhD in the first place, as well as Jack and Natalie Lessinger and Ian Lilley for their friendship and ongoing support of my life in academia. No doubt there were others who helped from behind the scenes and for that I am grateful.

Annie Clarke deserves special mention for putting up with many years of indecision and in helping me to see what I really want to do and be (which she seemed to know — in swami style — long before I did). As well as thanks for reading some of this thesis, I also owe her a debt of gratitude for the last one!

I am also grateful to my work colleagues and friends at the Research School of Humanities and the Arts, particularly those at the Hub. They have always shown an interest in the art and research that I’m doing, and have allowed me considerable flexibility in my working schedule. Pip Deveson, Alison French, and Kylie Message deserve a special mention for the enormous support they have shown me, in different ways, over the years. During the course of my time at the RSHA (formerly CCR) I have developed many valuable friendships. Thanks to Celia, Mar, Sophie, Silke, Michelle, Christine, Nicholas, Jasmine, Christiane and Olwen especially.

I would also like to thank my colleagues and fellow students in the School of Art, especially Photomedia and Art Theory, for sharing ideas and conversations as well as technical know-how. Particularly Martyn and Denise, Jason, Peter, Robert, Lisa, Clem, Alex, Carolyn, Lee, Tim, Cathy, Maxe, Cindy and Kaoru. I am also grateful for my friendship and collaborations with
Lisa Stefanoff and Lee Grant. Caren also deserves a massive thanks for introducing me to the gorgeous world of letterpress and artist books.

Various individuals and organisations within the Canberra arts community have been supportive of my arts practice over the years – Photoaccess, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, and in particular Megalo Print Studio and the School of Art. I thank the various individuals I’ve worked with in those places over the last few years. Sharing ideas and time with other artists has been both enjoyable and productive.

And then there are of course all of the Canberra friends I have gathered during the years, who I hope will forgive me for not naming them all individually.

Several friends willingly read portions or whole drafts of this manuscript and I am enormously grateful to Megan Poore, Matthew Thomas, Katie Hayne, Alison French and Kylie Message for their contributions towards the shaping and realisation of this dissertation.

There are several furry friends who have brought me companionship, levity and great joy over the years. I am grateful for their presence, and for urging me to get out of the car once and awhile and go for a walk! As well as those I met during my fieldwork, I thank Zeke, Bonnie, DogDog, Stevie, Xjila, and most of all pretty boy Scruffs and my beloved Calli.

Over the course of this project I have been graced with considerable kindness and generosity from people I barely know, from the random strangers helping me to fix my car to the many individuals who welcomed me into their homes. Many of these people supported me at various stages of my fieldwork, and I am thankful to them for their kindness. I am grateful to my dad for lending me Lupe the van and my best bro Kev, who was willing to do a road trip across America at short notice. I particularly want to thank those individuals who gave me a place to stay, Anna in Newcastle; Laurel’s mom in Detroit; Jeannette and Mala in Sydney; Aunt Millie in San Francisco; Mala, Kevin, Maria, Paul and Josie in Seattle, Jacq in San Diego and of course the always hospitable Texans I’ve come to know. Thanks in particular to Bill and Connelly and Farrell. I also wish to thank the Bishops, John and David in particular, for sharing their very special property at the last bend of the Murray River. I am also especially grateful to Brian, Connie and Victoria Parkinson for seemingly endless opportunities to escape to the coast.

At the risk of sounding flippant I am also appreciative of the many vehicles to which I have had access over the course of my travels and the mechanics that kept them moving. My old Datsun station wagon, Mazz always inspires me, Lupe for issuing me safely along vast
stretches of American interstate, despite being a 'death trap', Georgia long may she be remembered, and Kenny Yoda the Camry who keeps me rolling presently.

Of course this study would be nothing without the vast number of individuals and communities who have contributed to its intellectual capital. I am grateful to all of the people I interviewed and who otherwise participated in this project. My ideas and observations have developed as a consequence of many many interactions and conversations, and whether short or long they have all fuelled my thinking. Particular mention must be given to the many members of the art car community and other car enthusiasts in Australia, Japan and America with whom I have spoken. I am particularly grateful to Mark Bradford, W.T. Burge, Emily Duffy and Amy Lynch for the detailed discussions that formed the basis of selected case studies.

I have had a great panel of supervisors/advisors during the course of my candidature: Helen Ennis, Denise Ferris, Melinda Hinkson, Martyn Jolly, Howard Morphy, and Chaitanya Sambrani. Their comments on my research design, art practice and writing have been invaluable. The chair of my panel, Helen Ennis, deserves a special mention for her creative thinking, stimulating conversation and wisdom in guiding me through this process.

For the love and good times and, simply, for keeping it real I will always be thankful for my closest friends in Australia and America, they know who they are, or at least they should by now! I am also grateful to the Hayne family for welcoming me into their lives. I also wish to thank my own extended family, scattered as they are, for always showing an interest in what I am doing.

My parents have been a constant source of love and support throughout my life. As well as providing me with a strong intellectual and emotional compass, they have always encouraged me in whatever I pursue. They have helped me to develop a great respect for the natural world and other species, and in funny little ways it was they who first introduced me to loving art and archaeology.

Finally, much love and appreciation goes to Katerina Zocalo, for all of the practical assistance, creativity and calm that she brings, and for her openness and support for my crazy ideas. Most of all I am grateful for her willingness, fortitude and quiet enthusiasm for sharing the journey, wherever it went, with or without a map, beginning to end.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Statement of original ownership ................................................................. iii
Abstract .......................................................................................................... v
Acknowledgments ........................................................................................ vii
List of Figures .............................................................................................. xiii

### INTRODUCTION

- At World's End ............................................................................................. 1
- Exploring the Wreckage ............................................................................. 3
- The Cobra that Swallows Its Tail ............................................................ 7
- Chapter Outline .......................................................................................... 10

### PART A

#### CHAPTER ONE CARS AND CULTURES

- Pole Positions ............................................................................................ 19
- From Histories to Futures .......................................................................... 19
- A New Kind of Car .................................................................................... 22
- At the Cross-Roads .................................................................................. 25
- Automobilities ........................................................................................... 27
- Automotive Anxieties ............................................................................... 29

#### CHAPTER TWO CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND APPROACH

- Making Special, Making Strange ............................................................ 42
  - Section One - Visual Art: Theories, Practices And Histories ............. 46
  - Section Two - Material Culture and Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past .... 61
  - Section Three - The Visual in Anthropology ................................... 72
- An Interdisciplinary Approach ................................................................. 82

### PART B

#### CHAPTER THREE HITTING THE ROAD

- Choosing a Destination ............................................................................ 88
- Surveying the Scene ................................................................................ 90
- Visual Essays .......................................................................................... 92

#### VISUAL ESSAYS .................................................................................... 95

### PART C

..................................................................................................................... 141
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expressions of Car Culture in Contemporary Art</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Culture of Art Cars</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR MORTALITY AND REJUVENATION</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study 1 Inopportune: Stage One (2004), Cai Guo-Qiang</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study 2 Thomson (2009), Mark Bradford</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortality and Rejuvenation</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FIVE BODIES AND IDENTITY IN MOTION</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study 3 VainVan (1998 – ongoing), Emily Duffy</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study 4 Fat Car (2006), Erwin Wurm</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bodies and Identity in Motion</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER SIX SENSE AND TIME</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study 5 Phantoms (2007), W.T. Burge</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study 6 Your mobile expectations (BMW H2R project) (2007), Olafur Eliasson</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense and Time</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking Both Ways</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art as Car Culture and Contemporary Art</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications of Research</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Directions</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filmography</td>
<td>284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAR SHOWS/EVENTS</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Figure 1 Abandoned drive-in movie theatre, Nevada, USA. Photograph: U.K. Frederick 2009.

Figure 2 A car bomb explosion in Iraq. Retrieved from http://www.insideiraqthemovie.com/presskit.html.

Figure 1.1 *Detroit Industry Mural* (detail), Diego Rivera. Photograph U.K. Frederick 2009.

Figure 1.2 *Detroit Industry Mural* (detail), Diego Rivera. Photograph U.K. Frederick 2009.

Figure 2.1 Holden drawing. http://nationaltreasures.nla.gov.au/3E/Treasures/item/nla.intex8-s29

Figure 2.2 Working sketch # A *story of cars in art (1900 – 1980)*. Image: U.K. Frederick 2013.

Figure 2.3 Carhenge. Photographer Jill Ruskamp. From the *Through the Viewfinder* series.

Figure 2.4 *Pachuco style*, Los Angeles, California, 2005. Photography © Martin Hoyem. “The teenagers in front of this car, dressed in the style of 1940 pachuco’s, are attending a quinceanera. They will be chauffeured to church, and other ceremonial locations, in cars from Lifestyle Car Club. This tangerine 1966 Buick Riviera is named ‘Sun Goddess.’”

Figure 3.1 Research as Play: drawing on the road with the oilstick from my station wagon. Photograph: UK Frederick.

Figure 3.2 Holden and Ford day in Newcastle of the many car events I attended. Photograph: UK Frederick 2009.


Figure 4.3 The theatre across the street from the Seattle Art Museum. Photograph: U.K. Frederick, 2008.


Figure 4.6 Jeremy Deller’s *It is what it is*, on its USA tour. Retrieved from http://www.theartblog.org/2009/03/iraq-conversation-without-jeremy-deller/.

Figure 4.7 Green Car Crash (Green Burning Car I), Andy Warhol. Retrieved from http://www.today.com/id/18722871/ns/today-today_entertainment/t/warhol-painting-sells-record-million/. 

Figure 4.8 Details of *Inopportune: Stage Two* installed at MASS MOCA. Retrieved from http://www.caiguoqiang.com/projects/inopportune-stage-two-2004-north-adams-ma-usa.

Figure 4.9 Cai Guo-Qiang *Illusion II* (2006), fireworks performance, Berlin.

Figure 4.11 Detail of Thomson’s copper scutes and wiry sprouting ‘hair’. Photograph: U.K. Frederick 2009.

Figure 4.12 Ooja, Art Car by Visker. Photograph U.K.Frederick.

Figure 4.13 One of several Mega Mutant Metal Mammal art cars made by Marc Bradford. Photograph: U.K. Frederick 2009.

Figure 4.14 Different scalar and plated surfaces developed by Marc Bradford for his creatures. Photograph: U.K. Frederick 2009.

Figure 4.15 A hot rod with window glass specially made in honour of Tom Jones, with paint work by legendary Texan pinstriper Sony Keeton. Photograph: U.K. Frederick 2009.

Figure 4.16 Detail and context view (inset) of a custom airbrushed hydraulic cylinder ‘memorial’ in the boot of a Lowrider car shown in Australia. Photograph: U.K. Frederick 2009.

Figure 5.1 Emily Duffy with her VainVan. Photograph by Harrod Blank.

Figure 5.2a (left) The author’s reflection in a car bonnet. Figure 5.2b (right) A car bonnet with airbrushed mural of woman amidst jack-o-lanterns. Photographs: U.K. Frederick 2009.

Figure 5.3 Screengrab of my reflection caught in the mirrors of VainVan. Photograph: U.K. Frederick 2009.

Figure 5.4 Detail of VainVan’s front end: bras glued to the vehicle with silicone. Photograph: U.K. Frederick 2009.

Figure 5.5a Detail of VainVan interior. Figure 5.5b VainVan’s Beauty comment board. Photographs: U.K. Frederick 2009.

Figure 5.6 A customised street machine with crocodile theme, note the faux skin upholstery. Photograph: U.K. Frederick.

Figure 5.7 ‘Black Death’ tableau exhibited at Summernats 2013, Canberra. Photograph: U.K. Frederick. Note the brain-eating zombie automaton in the foreground, multiple screens, speakers and dance floor attached to the vehicle. A faux skeleton and the ‘blood-splatter’ background, roof-surfing ghoul and a demonic clown automaton (out of frame) complement the grotesque ‘black death’ theme.

Figure 5.8 Barbara Kruger, You are not yourself, reproduced from Mitchell and Kruger.

Figure 5.9 Detail of mirrored dragon on the Ram Charger owned by art car artist and teacher Rebecca Bass. Photograph: U.K. Frederick 2009.

Figure 10 Detail of Shattered Vanity by Nicole Strine. Photograph: U.K. Frederick 2009.

Figure 5.11 Hannah Höch Das schöne Mädchen 1920, photomontage.

Figure 5.12 Fat Car (2006) on display at the Museum of Old and New Art, Tasmania. Photograph: U.K. Frederick.

Figure 5.13 Me/Me Fat (1993), Erwin Wurm.

Figure 5.14 59 Positions (1992), Erwin Wurm. Retrieved from http://www.xing.it/opera/489/59_positions_flightsimulator_memory.
Figure 5.15 Detail of *Fat Car* (2006), Erwin Wurm. Photograph: Katie Hayne.

Figure 5.16 Airflow Radiator and Fanbelt, Claes Oldenburg drawing.


Figure 6.1 W.T. Burge with his creation, *Phantoms*. Photograph: Harrod Blank.

Figure 6.2 A photograph of W.T. Burge and Phantoms beside the grave of Howard Hughes. Photograph courtesy of the W.T. Burge.

Figure 6.3 Photograph of W.T. Burge with Phantoms at Glenwood Cemetery, Houston. Photograph courtesy of the W.T. Burge.

Figure 6.4 Car in front of church. Framed photograph found in an opportunity shop.

Figure 6.5 Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture*, p 135.

Figure 6.7 The Bugatti Atlantic, designed by Jean Bugatti. Retrieved from http://www.complex.com/rides/2012/08/25-stunning-art-deco-cars/1938-bugatti

Figures 6.8 and 6.9 The construction of *Phantoms*.

Figure 6.10 Examples of how cars have been modified for human smuggling. Retrieved from “How to become one with your car”, *Colors magazine*, http://www.coloursmagazine.com/stories/magazine/81/story/people-smuggling


Figure 6.12 Olafur Eliasson’s *Your mobile expectations*. Retrieved from http://www.olafureliasson.net/works/your_mobile_expectations_3.html.


Figure 6.14 Production stage of *Your mobile expectations*. Retrieved from http://www.bmwartcarcollection.com/2011/05/16-olafur-eliasson-bmw-art-car/.

Figure 6.15 Water is applied to the exterior of *Your mobile expectations* (BMW H2R project). Retrieved from http://www.bmwartcarcollection.com/2011/05/16-olafur-eliasson-bmw-art-car/.

Figure 6.16 *Cadillac Ranch* as it appears today. Photograph: U.K. Frederick 2009.

Figure 6.17 One of ten half-buried Cadillacs (note the small bump of a tail fin). Photograph: U.K. Frederick 2009.

Figure 6.18 Cadillac tail-fins by year. Basham, et al, *Car Culture*.

Figure 7.1. Odometer reading. Photograph U.K. Frederick.
INTRODUCTION

“... the threatened vector, the threatened vehicle, is really that of terrestrial, aquatic, and aerial automotility.” – Paul Virilio

“The way man sees the world is the ways he sees himself; the way he conceives himself is the way he conceives the world. Alterations in his view of the world lead to alterations in the view of himself and vice versa.” – Christoph Wulf

“It’s the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)” – REM

At World’s End

Students of archaeology are often set the task of imagining themselves as extraterrestrials arriving at a post-apocalyptic earth. With no humans left to explain the planet of objects on which they find themselves the aliens are urged to interpret what remains. What is this, what is that, how was it used, what does it mean?

Left to our offworld imaginations what would we humans make of the earth after the end of oil, at the end of ‘our time’? Surely the archaeology of the automotive system would be amongst the most tangible and prolific of ruins. A tangle of freeways, a mass of asphalt and a sprawl of metallic carapaces are just some of the many automotive traces to be found.

Perhaps it is no coincidence then that a similar exercise, Looking Back on the End of the World, closes with Paul Virilio’s rumination on the last vehicle and the future engine. This millennial-inspired fiction is only one of a great number of texts which situate automobility in apocalyptic terms. Significantly, this parallels an expanded body of literature concerned with

---

4 Thierry de Duve proposes a similar task as a way of reflecting upon “the field of pertinence of the human word ‘art’”, ultimately concluding, through his guise as an extraterrestrial anthropologist, that the name ‘art’ “has no other generality than to signify that meaning is possible.” Thierry de Duve, 1996. Kant after Duchamp. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press.
5 It is intriguing to note that in his poem Autogedden, the British poet Heathcoate Williams notes how an alien observing life on earth might conclude that the dominant lifeform was in fact the car. Heathcoate Williams Whole Earth Review Fall 1987: 26-29.
7 Examples of film include George Miller (dir.) 1981. Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior (Australia) and Peter Weir (dir.) 1974. The Cars that Ate Paris (Australia) and Scholarly examples include Kingsley Dennis and
critically examining the normative status of the car in Western society and which invariably question whether the age of the automobile is nearing its close.\(^8\)

By introducing this methodological fantasy – of the world as we know it ending – I am adopting something of the cyclical tone I have found to be embedded in the art and materiality of the automobile. Themes of crash, ruin, entropy, aspiration and renewal follow the car wherever it travels. These are emotive themes that link to larger questions of meaning, identity and value-creation. To that extent they are well placed within this study. This project is, after all, shaped by the disciplines of art, anthropology and archaeology and the core questions that frame their pursuit: ‘Who are we? Where did we come from?, Where are we going?\(^9\) What makes people the same and how are people different? These philosophical undertones often feature in specific investigations into artists, places and movements and are answered through the study of particular paintings and objects as well as through localised communities and cultural groups. In the broadest sense then this research is concerned with the human subjects that make and re-make the world and the worlds that make them what they are.

Tackling such a gargantuan body of ideas requires refinement and focus. In this thesis, I take this to be the role that the car plays in the dynamic of human/environment relations outlined above. Informed by the disciplinary interests of art theory, visual anthropology, contemporary archaeology and material culture studies this project may be framed as a three-part enquiry: an exploration of people/object relations; an examination of automobile subjectivities and how they are constituted; and as a study of creative practice and value-creation operating at the intersection of high art and popular expression. More precisely still, my aim is to examine the intersection of car cultures and creative practice to consider how cars can operate as a form of art. In doing so I propose the central argument of this thesis: that artistic engagements with the car provide unique insight into the experiences of contemporary life.

---


My argument follows from the understanding that art is not simply a mirror of or response to the socio-cultural and political context in which it is manifest. It is also a conceptual tool for thinking about the very substance and conditions of contemporary existence. By conjoining the work of art with the subject of automobility, I am drawing attention to two of the most powerful technologies of the late modern period. Individuals, corporations, communities and nation-states have all sought to harness their energies and their influence. As devices of communication and transport, respectively, art and automobility have both popular appeal and the potential for wielding personal and symbolic power. While the potency of each has been considered independently, there has been little investigation of their convergence. This thesis is an innovation insofar as it embraces both—taking a close examination of the ways in which artists and car enthusiasts use the car as raw material for creative expression. In this respect I am looking at ways in which perceiving and inhabiting the world is mediated through art and through automobility.

In the chapters that follow I detail the transformative power of these engagements. I consider the projective capacities of the automobile as a device that allows individuals to travel, not only with their bodies but in their minds. It is for all of these reasons that I begin with a fantasy and a quest for knowledge wrapped in an allusion to time travel, an activity in which we all participate when we remember and when we imagine. Reflecting on the past and dreaming of the future are instrumental to artistic processes and are pathways shared with contemporary car cultures.

Exploring the Wreckage

The apocalyptic tone with which I open this dissertation also makes reference to the temporal scope of this study, as post-millennial. Although I take into consideration the last century of modern art, and alongside it the origins of the car and various technological, social and political developments in automotive history, the setting of my research is specifically contemporary. I take this to mean the beginning of the 21st century. I am aware that the term ‘contemporary’ may be regarded as amorphous and indefinite. By invoking it here I pay heed to the many scholars who wrestle to define it. One observation I would make is that the contemporary is often posited in relation to that which it follows. The art historian Terry Smith, for example, speaks of contemporary art in terms of “the aftermath of modernity”10 whereas archaeologist Alfredo González-Ruibal, following Auge, identifies an accentuated

state of hyper or supermodernity.\textsuperscript{11} For many scholars, the contemporary is a means of distancing or even denying modernity.\textsuperscript{12} Often cited as a symbol of both the 20\textsuperscript{th} century and modernity,\textsuperscript{13} it is little wonder that the car in the current age has been figuratively positioned on the edge of a precipice.

The contemporary may also appeal to a state of futurity. Dennis and Urry apply this usage when, in After the Car, they argue that “the car will end”,\textsuperscript{14} within the decades to come. Because the last one hundred years is regarded as the age of the automobile,\textsuperscript{15} the present is rendered as a transitional or intermediary phase, in which hindsight and foresight flourish. For now we are stuck in the in-between-ness of a present in which automobility’s pasts and futures collide. The doomsday sentiment with which I jump-started this text, is also intended to reflect something of the atmosphere that held sway during the year I conducted much of my field research. Towards the end of 2008 and in 2009 it was not uncommon to see headlines of an impending collapse in both the global economy and climate.\textsuperscript{16} Combined with ongoing confusion and concerns about war, nuclear armaments, terrorism and diminishing resources, the threat to life (and lifestyle) seemed depressingly real. This gloom was evidenced directly, in my personal encounters within the car sector and with the material fabric of automotive infrastructure. As one car enthusiast put it to me, “The good days are gone, the bad days are coming fast, so we’ve got to enjoy what we have while it lasts”.\textsuperscript{17} His words seemed truthfully spoken and I couldn’t help but notice the signs—car yards are empty and the road is cracking underfoot. The drive-in theatre is a field of weeds (Figure 1).

\textsuperscript{12} See for example Shannon Lee Dawdy 2010 ‘Clockpunk Anthropology and the Ruins of Modernity’ Current Anthropology 51 (6): 761–793.
\textsuperscript{14} Dennis and Urry, After the Car, pp 1-26. Here, the authors refer to the car as a complete system that is based on 19th century technology, which they argue will be surpassed by a new technology of flexible mobility before the end of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century.
\textsuperscript{17} ManCave salesman at Greenwood Car show, Seattle, USA (personal communication 28 June, 2009).
At first gasp these greater global anxieties may seem tangential to a study of car cultures, particularly one with an aesthetic directive. Yet you only need glimpse the nightly news in to understand the force of the automobility system within Western societies. Here, on a daily basis, car culture and its social and material effects are actualised. Television viewers can watch the price of petrol spark a protest in Burma, hear the latest efforts to plug an oil well in the ocean and witness the smouldering remains of a car bomb being extinguished (Figure 1.2). These tensions are of further relevance because the automobility system is so often implicated in the potential outcome of such dilemmas.

But it would be wrong to suggest that this publicity is always negative. Just as quickly the dramatic tone of current events can turn celebratory. Headlines testify: “China opens up”, “Green engines are the future”, and “GM begins to rehire workers”. What such media moments demonstrate is how the car is a pivotal symbol in narratives of local, national and global success as well as in foretelling their decline. In short, car culture is represented as both

a source of woes and a solution for all manner of problems. Which is to say, “the ruin is as much a part of the condition of modernity as it is its antidote.” In Chapter One I demonstrate how this contestable quality has trailed the car from its origins and continues to pervade the literature and public culture. The power of this paradox is readily apparent in the various scrappage programs instigated by European and North American nations and recently Australia, to stimulate the automotive industry. ‘Cash for Clunkers’, ‘Retire your Ride’ and similar plans provide consumers financial incentives to trade in their old car and purchase a new ‘greener’ alternative. Citizens of these countries are advised that their purchase will benefit the national economy and the health of the planet. Perhaps more importantly than the boost to auto manufacturing, or reduction in carbon emissions, these programs administer a powerful psychological tonic. In exchanging something old for something new the consumer is buying not only a car, but also the promise of a reversal in fortune.

Yet for many individuals, the catastrophe of the car is as real as Virilio suggests: an accident of global proportions. This particular coupling, of the car to the end of the world, is an especially dramatic and dystopian view of the future. It is a view reiterated throughout the discourse of the car, but it is only one in a series of momentous shifts with which automobility has been aligned. The discourse is virtually littered with accounts of the automobile as a trigger for

---

19 Haidy Geismar cited in comments to Dawdy ‘Clockpunk Anthropology’, p 782.
20 These programs are not without their critics, many of whom point out that such stimulus packages actively hamper environmental reduction targets and discourage recycling of cars.
change: in the conduct of religion, technology, politics and economics; and with implications at multiple scales: for individuals, societies, cultures, nations and global governance. Some historians, for example, have paralleled the growth in the number of female motorists with the emergence of the Women’s emancipation movement in America. In Australia, the opening of the outback to automobility is concurrent with the widespread arrival of colonial administration of Indigenous lands and people. Whether it’s the rise of consumption, the demise of communism, or the advent of the anthropocene, such narratives highlight another feature of the discourse of automobility: the car as a hallmark of change.

While recognising that the system of automobility has brought actual change, for bad and good, proper attention to such histories is best served through the work done by others. It is not my intention to consider the vast terrain of consequences the car has cut out. Nor do I aim to chart the course of the car’s future trajectory by assessing the many educated prophecies put forward. Who can say with certainty whether the car is an endangered species or a phoenix in the making? I am suggesting rather that the car has always appeared mutually, in a state of ruin and rebirth. It is this flux and the car’s capacity as a symbol of transition that underpins its multivalency as an artwork.

In the chapters that follow I will demonstrate how the transformative potential of the automobile has been put to use as contemporary art. It is this meeting ground that motivates my research, what Hal Foster refers to as an encounter between “different economies of the object.” When the car and art become one, what emerges is a work that exists at the interstices of the “mundane realm of commodities and the hermetic realm of autonomous art.”

The Cobra that Swallows Its Tail

Unlike the slow decline I witnessed on the ruined highways of my fieldwork, hope springs swiftly. Even in the short span of my doctoral program change again feels imminent. Writing

---

25 Ibid.
now, only a short distance from the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), the industrialised world seems to have turned a corner. The mood is marginally optimistic.\textsuperscript{26} The car isn’t quite dead. There is hope of resuscitation, if only it can be reinvented.

This image of the car as a dying body with a machinic spirit is significant for two reasons. It emphasises first that technologies and metaphors of renewal underpin automobility’s endurance. Second, it alludes to the complexity of the human – object/technology relations that the car system affords. These points will be examined more closely in Chapter One. But together the notion of renewal and the human/car body indicate the importance of cycles, and circuits, in the system of automobility. The life cycle of the car, and the complex ways in which it relates to the biography of an individual, is discussed in the case studies presented in Chapters Four through Six.

As I have noted, there is a certain propensity for cyclic motion within the very structures of the automobility system. So that change, with regard to car culture, is never quite final. Rather, like the Ouroboros, the change is perpetual. The car eats itself. The histories of the automobile demonstrate this especially well. The industry advances then declines, it retreats and then it rises.\textsuperscript{27} It is propelled by ruin and the renewal of life that decay offers. This is apparent in the very landscapes of automotive capital in motor cities like Detroit and Los Angeles. It is observable in the technology itself, as components are shed and new ones developed. Similarly, the principle of design obsolescence first advanced by General Motor’s Harley Earl enforces that one model gives way to another (more fashionable) version.\textsuperscript{28} It is also perceptible at a corporate scale when marqueses are bought out and consolidated. BMW consumes Rover and a new creature emerges in the form of a revamped Mini Cooper. Even the paths of dependency associated with the automobile are circular.\textsuperscript{29} But it is in the materiality of the car that this principle is most apparent. Swapmeets and auto wreckers offer

\textsuperscript{26} However, such a ‘recovery’ is fragile, complex and geographically uneven as recent events in Australia demonstrate. On May 23, 2013 Ford decided to close its entire Australian manufacturing operations by 2016.

\textsuperscript{27} It is worth noting a parallel in the way some scholars theorise automotive history. David Gartman for example, argues “the emergence of the cultural logic of a particular automotive age is influenced by the exigencies of auto production and use. However, as this cultural logic grows and intensifies its effects on society, it ultimately comes into contradiction with itself and its concomitant practices of production and use, giving rise to a new configuration of automobility.” David Gartman 1994. \textit{Auto Opium}. London and New York: Routledge, p 169.

\textsuperscript{28} For a detailed account of Earl’s influence on automotive aesthetics including the principle of design obsolescence see David Gartman, \textit{Auto Opium}, 1994.

\textsuperscript{29} For example, the argument that building better roads will lead to more intensive car use, see Seiler, \textit{Republic of Drivers}; Paterson, \textit{Automobile Politics}. I also refer here to the relationship between consumption and production, and how obsolescence gives rise to new models.
one perspective on the rotational quality of the car as pieces. However, the image of a Chevy returning to molten steel turns the process into a spectacle.\(^30\)

The destruction of the car is also a popular theatrical event scheduled into major car shows and it epitomises the success of the Demolition Derby and Monster Truck ‘sports’. Less common, though perhaps more violent, is seeing a solid metal car reduced to liquid. This foundry effect is used in popular films such as \textit{Terminator}, to create climax and signal relief from the threat of the machine (and as such the shackles of labour production). It can also serve to recuperate the value of the car, as in the TV show \textit{Monster Garage} where a Camaro (rather than a Cobra) is melted down after a failed build. In this way the destruction of the car is naturalised as part of its ‘life cycle’.\(^31\) By turning in upon itself the automotive industry ensures its survival. And so the cobra swallows its tail.

The car system is both figuratively, and literally, an assemblage of moving parts. I purposely apply this rhetoric of the car – as a project endlessly open to reconfiguration – because I intend to argue that a process of transformation resides at the heart of the art-automobile dynamic. This process involves remembering and forgetting, of actively reconstructing the past and re-envisioning the future. It is for this final reason that I began with the end of the world, a point which allows us to look back \textit{and} to contemplate the horizon ahead.

In conceptualising the last vehicle at the end of the world, Virilio captures the capacity of the automobile, with its “accessories, furniture, hi-fi chain...” and so on to turn “the means of long-haul transport into a means of transport in place”.\(^32\) From his vantage point Virilio proposes that the vehicle of the future is “less and less a vector of change in physical location”\(^33\) than a device for a different kind of travel, teleportation. In making this point he highlights the creative powers of the automobile, not simply to take one from a to b, but to offer projective possibilities: other world-views, other self-images, other vantage points. It is my proposition that this sense of possibility is doubled through automobility’s intersection with art. This is due in part to the liberatory power with which the car is attributed across so many cultural forms. Art, along with song, poetry, film, fiction, and advertising are

\(^30\) I use the term spectacle here because the motif of the car being picked up with a magnet and dropped into a yard of metal or otherwise crushed, battered, and turned into a bale is a familiar trope in films and reality TV.

\(^31\) In some situations this process of destroying may even be read as cleansing, as at the Houston Art Car ball where sledgehammer swings at a pickup truck were auctioned in honour of a recently deceased member of the community and where proceeds would flow to his widow.


\(^33\) Ibid.
instrumental channels in the production and dissemination of car culture. As a collective media and their forums, they demonstrate the rich source of material upon which the car, as a cultural symbol, is produced. It is outside the scope of this thesis to canvas the many expressive modes I have mentioned. The focus I take, on contemporary art, however, does offer some indication of how these other cultural channels might be explored by others.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One outlines the scope of the car culture literature that I have used to situate this research. It introduces the scholarship of automobilities, a developing interdisciplinary field that has emerged out of a growing interest in the "significant flows, movements and mobilities" of contemporary social life. Identifying a lacunae in critical studies of the car and its paradoxical nature, automobility scholars seek to explore the various anxieties and subjectivities that car culture generates. I present a brief account of these concerns and the oppositional framework within which car discourse is placed.

In Chapter Two I outline the genesis and conceptual framework of my interdisciplinary approach. I give a synopsis of three disciplinary agendas: contemporary art theory; visual anthropology and the archaeology of the contemporary past, and discuss what each has to offer a study of this kind. All three, I suggest, are acutely attuned to the power of the visual, as a subject and as a way of doing research, but also in its capacity to produce and disseminate knowledge. Importantly, they also emphasise reflexivity and the value of an empirical and direct sensory engagement with the people, things and places that motivate one's research. Adopting a methodology that is conducive to process and experimentation is all the more pressing in a project which is, in part, art practice-driven.

Each of these conceptual frameworks informs my approach to the topic and form the crux of my methodology. The tools and techniques of visual anthropology were employed largely during the data gathering stages of fieldwork and in the subsequent analysis of my notes, photographs, interviews and film footage. Art theory provided me with a frame of reference for evaluating the various sites and modes of production, reception, exchange, and display through which contemporary art circulates. Archaeologies of the contemporary past facilitated my desire to understand the complex set of relationships between people and the

---

material realities of the car. It also provides a lens through which I can discuss my inspiration as an artist, which I address in the associated exegesis. Together Chapters One and Two form the first section of this thesis, Part A.

Chapter Three stands alone as Part B, the second section of this dissertation. The foundations of the argument that I present within this thesis were forged during an extended period of primary and secondary research I refer to as fieldwork. This research included an extended period of broader survey in Australia, USA and Japan and two intensive stages of fieldwork in Newcastle, New South Wales (Australia) and Houston, Texas (USA). As well as representing an account of my interactions with artists, car enthusiasts, curators, car salesmen, museum professionals and others Chapter Three provides an outline of the methods I used to engage with different car enthusiasms. This field research resulted in a significant photographic survey and laid the groundwork for a selection of case studies analysed in subsequent chapters.

At the core of Chapter Three I present a series of visual essays comprising a selection of photographs made during the course of my fieldwork. Rather than present a comprehensive picture of fieldwork in its entirety, these images are directed at communicating two key threads that run through car culture and which have informed both the dissertation and art practice components of my research. These two specific threads concern practices of looking and showing; and the practices of embodied engagement between humans and cars.

Throughout this project I have made extensive use of photography and video to conduct my research. This has ranged from interviewing people on camera, documenting objects and practices, and using the camera for note taking. A slightly different way of working involved both a more ‘constructed’ photographic practice (e.g. studio work) as well as playful free-form experiments. I see all of these techniques as collectively constituting the breadth of my practice-based research, and as such it is difficult to distinguish them or separate them out.36 Hence, while my arts practice contributed to the thinking behind this dissertation, it is described more fully in the exegesis adjoining this dissertation.

The final component of the thesis, Part C, incorporates Chapters Four, Five and Six. In these chapters I present the case studies which give proof to my argument that creative

---

36 Although I sometimes find it difficult to draw a distinction between these categories, under certain circumstances they do present particular modes of working that entail different contingencies. As we shall see in Chapter Three, the distinctions between such categories, as social documentary, visual art and ethnography can be somewhat slippery.
engagements with the car provide engaging insights into the experience of contemporary life. Integral to the meaning of these artworks (and emergence of these insights) is the process of transformation by which they occur. Namely, the transformation of the car, as a symbolically powerful raw material, into a different kind of material object – that of art.

Unsurprisingly due to its ubiquity, the car and indeed the broader system of automobility, feature in many artworks of the last century. It is not my intention to provide an exhaustive survey of the numerous artworks that might fall under this subject, nevertheless many of these artworks reside in the intellectual background of my research. Some of these works are one-off representations in an artist’s broader oeuvre, e.g. John Brack, whereas for other artists automobility appears as a persistent though varied subject, as in the work of Chris Burden or Patricia Piccinini. Likewise, there are many iterations of modified car culture that demonstrate a creative energy which in turn give thrust to the ideas underpinning this project. However, in selecting case studies I elected to focus on artworks that re-make rather than represent the car. As such, all six case studies demonstrate the use of cars as raw material that has been transformed through a variety of creative actions. Three of these artworks were made by internationally-established artists: Cai Guo-Qiang, Olafur Eliasson and Erwin Wurm. Another three were made by artists associated with the art car enthusiasm of the United States: Mark Bradford, W.T. Burge and Emily Duffy. Each of the six artworks is examined in detail and explicate issues of contemporary relevance.

I begin each chapter by describing my direct encounters with a specific artwork, because as Meskimmon maintains “exploring affectivity is part of engaging with the agency of art.” To “open a dialogue with art” in this manner is also an attempt to convey the work in its immediacy “as it happened, to evoke the sites and spaces of its occurrence, the aura of its occurrence.

---


38 An art car may be defined loosely as a car that has been modified through creative expression. For example, a car that has been “arted out” is distinct from a car that is perceived as art due to good design. A discussion of the art car enthusiasm is presented in Part C.


40 Ibid.
arrival, the qualities of its incipience, its present tension." That is, to exist with art in the present is to address its contemporaneity.

In the spirit of interdisciplinary research and in my desire to work at the interstices of the high and the low, the everyday and the institutional, I examine all six case studies in equal measure. Whereas one might feasibly approach these two groupings in comparative opposition, I view the distinction as a subtle one, rendered as a substitution of preposition: car culture as art and car culture in art. Hence, I have no intention of contrasting or positing one group (as the institutionally anointed) against another (as that which occurs outside the gallery). To construct such a comparison would be to give validity to long outdated distinctions, such as the ‘high’ and the ‘low’ and require that I overlook the significant slippages between them.

A more productive line of thinking is to consider the artworks in terms of the various possible publics they address and the conceptual work they undertake. This is not to ignore the assorted sites of reception and circulation via which an artwork comes into being and the implications this has for its ‘reading’. On the contrary, in selecting these two groups I am consciously addressing two modes via which automobility is experienced—as moving and as stationary. In bringing together the six case studies I am illustrating two different approaches to the car as art: one which is ostensibly sculpture positioned inside the gallery, the other is kinetic art which requires the space of the street. They are art on and off the road, so to speak.

After examining the motivation and meaning of the six cars transformed into artworks I will consider the implications of these re-makings. What exactly are these artists doing when they creatively intervene in the industrial manufacturing of automobility? What does it say about contemporary art and contemporary life? These are some of the questions discussed throughout these chapters. The case studies remain the groundwork on which this discussion follows. All six artworks utilise the car, in different ways, not simply to make a statement about automobility, but to convey something about the broader aspects and conditions of living in the 21st century. The issues they touch upon are many, but in the final conclusion I return to my overarching interest in the bigger picture, of what makes us what we are, by picking up the threads of freedom, death, memorialisation and embodied identity.

I conclude this dissertation by summarising my findings, and outlining its implications. I reiterate what creative engagements with the car tell us about contemporary life, and how they do so. By returning to specific artistic productions that involve art as practice and automobility as experience, I conclude we are able to think through the universal and the mundane conditions that affect us all, the profound transformations and everyday moments that collide in and make up contemporary life.
PART A

The first section of this dissertation presents an account of the ideas, concepts and methods that underpin my approach to the topic of car cultures and art. In the first instance I provide a context for existing scholarship. Chapter One outlines the scope of the background literature and identifies the key areas of research pertaining to the motor car. Importantly it locates this thesis as a humanities project that specifically explores the socio-cultural influences of the automobile, as viewed through the prism of contemporary art. Thus it discriminates between those disciplines that have been instrumental in grounding this work from those I have elected to skirt. This chapter establishes the tenor of the discourse that framed my reading, as well as introducing the new field of automobilities research that underpins my thinking.

In Chapter Two my focus is the interdisciplinary agenda that has shaped the dissertation’s conceptual and methodological framework. This chapter is particularly weighty because it examines, in equal measure, each of the three sub-disciplines – visual art theory, visual anthropology and the archaeology of the contemporary past – that inform this project. Along with a brief synopsis, I explore what each of these intellectual endeavours has to offer towards an understanding of car culture and art.
Serenity. This is my first sensation upon stepping into the light-filled atrium that is the Detroit Industry Murals. Illuminated softly through windows high above while lush lilies grow from marble planters at my feet, the space offers the majestic fertility of a Victorian garden and the sanctity of a small chapel. The murals seem simultaneously to emerge out of and meld into the architectural features of the room. This is not at all what I had expected. I had seen these paintings laid flat in books and studied them at high school. I had never really understood what all the fuss was about and, after all, I had seen plenty of other Rivera works in his home country of Mexico. I was here, in part, out of a sense of duty. A pilgrim of art and automobility must, I reasoned, visit Detroit and the gallery seemed like a good place to start.

Standing at the centre of the room I turn in place, making a full circumnavigation. I see the goddesses of the world watching over us while they guard the elements of the earth and the hands that work. I watch the global supply chain emerge from the walls: rubber from trees shipped from South America to become tyres moulded onto wheels. Liquid fire is poured, a monstrous metal stamper presses menacingly. I glimpse the onlooker, the boss, the worker, the tonal grays of payday. I see warfare brewing and biotechnology first harnessed. Finally my eyes settle on the embryonic child that is the keystone of the composition. The sheer force of
power and beauty and life that radiates through the room overcomes me emotionally. Somehow Rivera has managed to forge stone into steel and make a factory into an oasis. This feels like the work of a genius.

Gradually the awe glides into awareness. Not only am I enveloped in art but I am at the molten core of the automotive industry. The brilliance of Rivera’s factory is that he places the viewer, the human, at the heart of this enormous machine. We are the engine, the motor, the life that fuels its production. Within this allegory is a deeper narrative, a story without an ending, a question with no definitive answer. This is a statement of philosophy: birth and death, how we make the world and how the world makes us. A cycle of transformation.

![Detroit Industry Mural (detail), Diego Rivera. Photograph: U.K. Frederick.](image)

When I realised that Diego Rivera had placed me, the viewer, as the centrifugal force of the murals, and therefore the industry, I felt an enormous sense of discovery. Rivera had found a solution to the dilemma I, myself, had been facing. Grasping this was an important moment in my research. Up until this point I had grappled with my own ambivalence towards the car and read many scholarly and popular opinions for and against it. The Detroit Industry (DI) murals (Figure 1.1 and 1.2) would seem to epitomise the tensions that bedevil this theme. How could Diego Rivera, a devout socialist actively promoting the rights of workers take up the cause of an industrial capitalist? And why would Edsel Ford engage a foreign artist with communist sympathies to celebrate his company’s achievements? These questions speak to the conundrum that vexes many scholars, artists and car enthusiasts alike. What I take from these
questions – and the fact that these men did realise something quite profound through their collaboration – is that car culture is a site for the exploration of possibility. This is the first awareness that the art of automobility brings.

**Pole Positions**

Both in its genesis and resolution the DI murals provide an illustration of the contradictory impulses at the core of car culture discourse. Rivera used this ambiguity productively to create a work with tension that is both insightful and poignant. This is not unlike a new wave of automotive scholarship which clearly recognises the contested character of the automobile and seeks to engage with its contradictions. One aim of this chapter is to examine this and other aspects of recent car culture research. I begin by outlining the literature and the dominant directions it has set. My second aim is to consider the culture that the car generates. By this I mean the cultural products that take the car as some kind of inspiration, as well as those specific communities that have emerged in automobility’s wake.

The two components of this chapter are related lines of thinking, though their source material and disciplinary tack varies. Perhaps most importantly their inflection is different. One component is about the car *in* culture and one is about the car *as* culture. In the language of car racing they are the ‘pole positions’ of my starting line. At the same time I imagine them as two sides of the same road cutting a path through a field of literature that is otherwise too vast to negotiate.

My overall purpose is to provide a general sense of the car’s significance in contemporary Western cultures. To reveal how the car is considered within our societies, how it is used, what are its issues and potential. While it is not an historical treatment this chapter provides some indication of how these values have developed over time. Finally, it is intended as a background for the chapters that follow. For if we are to understand how and why the car is remade, then we must grasp some idea of what it can mean in the first place.

**From Histories to Futures**

Scholarship addressing the car embraces a vast body of literature. As Peter Wollen accurately surmises: “The universality of automobile culture seems capable of dredging almost anything into its net”.⁴³ In this piecemeal manner then, like flotsam and jetsam, the car bobs in and out across the surface of many varied schools of thought. Yet as a discrete subject of study the field is much more limited. For much of the 20th century car research was shaped by the

---

disciplinary interests of history, politics, design, transport, planning and economics. Within these studies, there is a discernible emphasis on the car as a technology, a commodity, and an industry. There is a notable gap in the research of cultural, social and artistic forms, what Miller might call the "humanity of the car". Moreover, the analyses that do exist disproportionately favour auto-manufacturing over automobile use. Moorehouse argues "that the car has been woefully neglected outside the moment of its production" because of a scholarly tradition that "emphasizes 'work' as the crucial sphere of being" where 'work' is viewed "as equivalent to employment, paid labour".

The writing of Antonio Gramsci is notable because of his consideration of the ultra-modern production methods and new mode of living that accompanied the industry practices of Henry Ford. His seminal essay 'Americanism and Fordism' had a significant influence on the Regulation School whose economic model holds that "every form of capitalist production requires a complementary form of consumption." The critical theorists of the Frankfurt School extend the production/consumption dynamic further by addressing the role of the individual and their needs and the cultural function of mass consumption. A central insight of Horkheimer and Adorno's thinking, through their text on the culture industry in particular, is that "the things of mass consumption must obscure the social relations of production from which they originate". As such, consumers experience products as things independent of the humans who made them. Though initially motivated by the mass production processes associated with the auto industry these schools of thought, and their subsequent critiques, are no longer tethered specifically to the manufacturing of motor vehicles.

The iconic status of production is also clearly evident in the type of automotive histories that have been written. As well as tracing the car's invention, the stages of technological development and changing manufacturing techniques, there are also accounts of labour union defeats and victories. In a related accent on 'work', other histories centre upon the functionality of cars as a technology of transport. As is common in histories of technology and

46 Moorhouse, Driving Ambitions, 5-6.
49 Gartman, Auto Opium, p7.
50 For a detailed analysis of these theories, and their critique, in the context of automobile aesthetics see Gartman, Auto Opium.
science, many of these narratives revolve around particular identities or innovations and are influenced by notions of origin and genius. In the case of the automotive genre this is manifest through the publication of corporate histories, object biographies, and life-writing narratives.\(^{51}\) Despite the fact that so much ‘automotive’ literature is directed towards key events and legendary individuals in a lineage of technological evolution, “sociotechnical change cannot be understood as the product of one prominent actor, whether an inventor, a product champion, a firm, or a governmental body”.\(^{52}\)

Hence, with few exceptions, the cultures of the car are surprisingly under theorised. This is particularly remarkable considering its ubiquity in the Western world. Certainly cultural theorists have noted the car’s efficacy as an object of desire and motif of modernity. Barthes, for instance, famously ruminates on the Citroen as the modernist ideal of function as beauty.\(^{53}\) Baudrillard observes the Cadillac’s tail fins in his treatise on distinction and taste.\(^{54}\) Even Virilio’s concern with the car is part of a broader interrogation of speed, technology, vision machines and their ‘accidents’. While deCerteau’s omission of the car in everyday life is quite extraordinary.\(^{55}\)

In short, most cultural theorists of the 20\(^{th}\) century have offered very little in the way of concerted attention to the automobile as a site for thinking. Instead, they have deployed the automobile for symbolic purposes, as an illustrative device to illuminate particular aspects of their theories. While each of these characterisations provide some insight into what the car means, or how the car functions (socially and culturally), they are not intrinsically about the automotive sector or the significant ways in which the car is mobilised in contemporary life.

By way of contrast, this thesis does not use images and artworks as mere illustration. Rather, it will demonstrate that important insights into automobility can be made through a detailed investigation of particular art practices and other creative modes of making meaning. That is,

---


\(^{55}\) For a discussion of de Certeau’s ideas with regard to how they may be applied to automobility see Nigel Thrift 2004. ‘Driving in the City’ *Theory Culture Society*, 21(4/5): 41–59.
a significant contribution to scholarship can be made by examining the very kinds of artwork that automobilised cultures generate.

In recent decades there has been a surge in automotive scholarship and a change in the way it is conceptualised and conducted. I suggest that this new era of scholarship may be characterised in three ways by:

- the entry of new disciplinary perspectives and localised studies;
- a critical awareness of the car’s inherent ambiguities; and
- the emergence of the ‘automobilities’ concept as a field of inquiry.

Together these lines of conjecture represent a renewed interest in the way cars and their cultures are studied. The birth of this new era of car culture research, at the cusp of the 21st century, may well reflect the changing nature of the driving experience. As Thrift observes, the automobility of today “is no longer the same knot of steely practices that it was in the 20th century.”56

It is within this new era of car culture research that the present study operates and contributes. Through a unique multidisciplinary approach focussed on specific artworks this research aims to rectify a notable gap in the discourse and knowledge of car cultures. Quite apart from those investigations that overlook or dismiss aesthetic engagements with the car as surface representations or simplified symbolism, this thesis sets out to examine the powerful relationships between automobility and creative art.

**A New Kind of Car**

One of the surest criticisms of automotive scholarship is that much of the research is too generalised and lacks empirical insight.57 The last two decades have offered some corrective to this failure. There is evidence for a new kind of car study, characterised by the application of different concepts, disciplinary methods, and theories. Much of this work is represented in collections and compendiums as well as theses.58 The nature of the work, insofar as it

---

56 Thrift, ‘Driving in the City’, p 48.
57 Moorhouse, **Driving Ambitions**, is particularly vocal in this criticism.
examines car use and consumption, overcomes the previous emphasis on production that Moorehouse cites. In addition to exploring car culture subjectivities and driving practices, and as a leisure pursuit, it is also more specifically orientated. Clarsen, for example, looks at particular events of female participation in Australian reliability trials.\textsuperscript{60} Chappell and Bright examine low-rider cultures,\textsuperscript{61} and Davison undertakes a social history of Melbourne’s postwar automobility,\textsuperscript{62} while other scholars explore the role of cars in youth culture.\textsuperscript{63}

Social histories are a strong element of this new era of car research, with scholars paying particular attention to the local conditions of automobile sales and use. These studies not only reflect an interest in the way a place embraces the car but in the way the cultures of automobility make a place.\textsuperscript{64} Numerous scholars have, for instance, turned their attention to the ruin and renewal of Detroit.\textsuperscript{65} Many of these place and ‘non-place’-based studies are directly informed by sociology and cultural geography perspectives.\textsuperscript{66}

Cultural studies have also contributed to recent car scholarship, most prominently through the interrogation of cars in visual media formats such as advertising, gaming, and especially the cinema. The road film is a well-recognised branch of film and TV studies, often viewed as an extension of ‘the western’ both aesthetically and conceptually.\textsuperscript{67} The Mad Max trilogy in

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}


\textsuperscript{66} For example, Peter Merriman 2006. “Mirror, Signal, Manoeuvre”: assembling and governing the motorway driver in late 1950s Britain’, The Sociological Review 54 (s1): 75–92.

\textsuperscript{67} Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (eds) 1997. The Road Movie Book. London and New York: Routledge.
particular has been a source of significant interest, as it underscores themes of ‘whiteness’ in an arguably post-colonial Australia.\(^6\)

A different mode of interrogation again is offered by anthropological studies of specific car cultures and cars in specific cultures. These scholars bring to their work an attentiveness to the role of the car in terms of particular social and economic structures and with regard to cultural beliefs and conceptions of the world (e.g. Indigenous notions of country).\(^6\) Like several of the social histories these researchers often incorporate interviews with members of the car culture under investigation.\(^7\)

Under the ambit of material culture studies and with the rise of the contemporary archaeology paradigm, archaeologists and other heritage professionals have become involved in the study of car cultures.\(^1\) One project has even applied archaeological methods, and other collaborative techniques, to the excavation and interpretation of a used Transit van.\(^2\) Art curators and scholars have also recently begun to consider the car as a theme of art more carefully, as witnessed for example by a number of recent exhibitions in Australia.\(^3\)

---


scholarship, and more importantly the work itself bears closer inspection in the following chapters.

The majority of this research addresses industrialised nations and comes out of a Western intellectual tradition. Scholars in Europe and America are at the forefront of these studies and although they continue to reflect on the car in America and Europe, they are also actively engaging new geographical arenas of enquiry. 74

**At the Cross-Roads**

In the century since Henry Ford introduced the world’s first mass-produced automobile, the idea of the car as a dominating force has become pervasive. This dominance is often represented as either singularly good or singularly bad in its influence upon humanity. In both academic and popular writing this contestation has often been reproduced as a dualism, with commentators weighing in on both sides of the axis. The mood of this literature is perhaps best surmised by John Ballard whose query “Autopia or Autogedden?” 75 poses the penultimate polemic. Whereas in the past scholars raged against this machine or openly advocated its virtues, the last decade has seen a more circumspect tone emerge. Statements like: “Cars are simultaneously experienced as autonomy-enhancing and at times autonomy-limiting” 76 are becoming commonplace. While contemporary scholars have come to realise the limitations of oppositional frameworks, they have also come to accept that contradiction is embedded within car discourse. The paradox of the car has become a topic of study in its own right. 77

In one respect this turn seeks to problematise the ubiquity of the car and its normalisation as a ‘necessary evil’. But it is also a reflective stance presented as a way forward. As Lutz and Fernandez put it: “taking a new look at the problems of our car system will reveal some surprising solutions”. 78 In other words, if we come to understand our reliance on the car we may hope for a departure from it. Yet other writers argue there is no escape from the paths of...

---


74 China and India are amongst the most prominent examples. The emergence of car industries and motoring populations are discussed in the media and the academic literature. See Paterson, *Automobile Politics*; Cotton Seiler 2012. ‘Welcoming China to Modernity: US Fantasies of Chinese Automobility’, *Public Culture* 24 (2): 357–384.


76 Paterson, *Automobile Politics*, p. 89.


25
dependency the auto system demands. In their collective view the conundrum of the car is a simple consequence of its inherent implausibility.\textsuperscript{79}

The different car industries and actors, their interests and obligations, cannot be neatly separated let alone juxtaposed. Just as these entities and influences do not exist in isolation, nor can their effects be rendered static. As Paterson argues, “it is the aggregated, iterated, cumulative, systemic, nature of ‘the car’ which generates both the benefits and disbenefits of cars to individuals, and to society.”\textsuperscript{80} It is on this understanding that the conceptual framework of automobilities has emerged. The rejection of a binary framework is not to suggest that individual scholars no longer argue ‘for’ or ‘against’ the car and the uses to which it is put.\textsuperscript{81} It is simply that they do so with a critical awareness of the enmeshed nature of the broader infrastructure, affordances, politics and cultural values at stake.

Here it is worth noting that the term affordance appears frequently in the automobilities literature. Its usage refers to a concept first developed by American psychologist James J. Gibson in an effort to understand “how animals, including humans, relate to their material environment.”\textsuperscript{82} Although some scholars use affordance to refer to a perceived attribute of an artefact that suggests how it might be used, e.g. a chair affords sitting, Dant argues that an “object does not have affordance as a general property ... but affords particular things to the materiality of particular species.” Importantly objects “can be designed to make the user act in certain ways.”\textsuperscript{83} Hence, the car may be said to afford driving, particular driving tendencies or sensibilities such as road rage. In terms of this thesis one might suggest that I am proposing that the car also affords the making of art.

21\textsuperscript{st} century readings and the turn to automobility indicate that to understand the culture of the car we must be prepared to revisit the longstanding polemic as an intersection of opposites. In an attempt to understand the paradox of the car scholars have necessarily focused on where the issues are. In the section that follows I outline the automobilities discourse before tracing key threads across the debate.

\textsuperscript{79} In contrast to Lutz and Fernandez, Böhm, \textit{et al} argue that there is no ‘technological fix’ to the car problem as it is inherently unsustainable, moreover they argue that automobility itself is conceptually “impossible”.
\textsuperscript{80} Paterson, \textit{Automobile Politics}, 25.
\textsuperscript{81} In fact scholars appreciate that the car entails a heady mix of love and hate, liberation and dependence and their emotive titles reflect this: \textit{Car Wars, Auto Opium, Automania, Carjacked, Autophobia, Auto-mania, Car Troubles, Autopia}.
\textsuperscript{83} ibid.
Automobilities

In attempting to grapple with incongruities of automobility, scholars have become increasingly mindful of the car’s antagonisms and crises. A significant proportion of recent research coalesces around the concept of ‘automobilities’, a cross-disciplinary field of study that arises in conjunction with an emergent ‘mobilities’ paradigm. Mobilities research spans a broader field of social sciences, from the technologies of transport to the global flows of tourism, trade and migration. The concept embraces both the everyday movements and large-scale exchanges of people, things, services, information and capital. Despite the breadth of scope, scholars share significant terrain with regard to interrogating “how movement is made meaningful, and how the resulting ideologies of mobility become implicated in the production of mobile practices”. Informed by this new paradigm automobility studies aim to delve beneath the car itself to examine a vast network of agents, actions and infrastructure within which the car culture is embedded. Urry and others refer to this as a structured ‘machinic complex’ and by all accounts one need not be auto-mobile to be effected by the system of automobility. Reinforcing this position, it is often explicitly stated that the concept of automobility cannot be reduced to the car object, even though the car is clearly a contemporary signifier of automobility. Nor, I might add, does automobility account for the full gamut of practices that constitute car cultures.

According to Sheller and Urry, automobility comprises six component features which combine to give it a “specific character of domination” within Western societies. It is:

- The quintessential manufactured object ...
- The major item of individual consumption after housing ...
- An extraordinarily powerful machinic complex ...
- The predominate global form of ‘quasi private’ mobility ...
- The dominant

---

culture that sustains major discourses of what constitutes the good life ...

The single most important cause of environmental resource-use.\textsuperscript{89}

What they make clear in this assessment is that automobility comprises materials and objects, technological processes and industrial complexes, places and customs, and practices of production and consumption existing at varying scales. When they first introduced these ideas (as a manifesto) Sheller and Urry were particularly focused on how the automobility matrix is transforming contemporary cities, especially in Europe. The spatio-temporal dimension of this work, evident in their reference to ‘scapes’ and ‘movement spaces’, is a distinctive feature of automobilities research. In part, this reflects their academic origins and wider interests in geography, urban sociology and ‘place’ studies. Yet it could be argued that this attentiveness to the deeper implications of the automobile in the ordering of space is long overdue. After all, as Thrift notes “Around a relatively simple mechanical entity, then, a whole new civilisation has been built.”\textsuperscript{90}

In the process of examining how social space has been shaped Sheller and Urry look to the kinds of practices and agencies that automobility fosters. One outcome of this they argue is a civil society in which citizens and civic space is dominated by the auto-mobile. This has generated new kinds of social inequalities arising from the fragmentation of space and differential access to transport. This unfairness taxes many people, on the basis of age, gender, race and class. Arguably, this is inevitable according to Beckmann, because mobility and immobility are mutually dependent: “Only because certain cultures, objects, informations are immobilised others can travel.”\textsuperscript{91} Indeed, many writers demonstrate how automobility has grid-locked other ways of moving. Even though the privileging of the car has hampered alternative modes of mobility, automobility is often cast as a democratising force. This irony is not lost on contemporary scholars, several of whom urge us to reconsider the car’s emblematic association with freedom. A stated aim of automobilities research is to interrogate such symbolisms.

Despite the enormity of the automobility system, most researchers return to the fact that human practices and experiences are fundamentally entwined in automobility’s momentum. This presents itself in two interrelated ways within the literature. The first is evident in an emphasis on the phenomenological. The second is through the discussion of the car-human

\textsuperscript{90} Thrift, ‘Driving in the City’, p 46.
\textsuperscript{91} Beckmann, ‘Heavy Traffic’, p 17.
hybrid. In the civil society that Sheller and Urry picture the car-driver is a hybrid assemblage comprising not only human and machine bodies but also a larger apparatus of rules, roadways and practices by which the hybrid subject is governed. These cyborg subjectivities are examined largely in terms of ‘affordances’ and through the sensations and emotions embodied in automotive experiences.

It is largely via the car-driver hybrid that researchers have sought to address automobility as it is encountered at the personal level. Conceptualising the car-driver hybrid is integral to understanding the embodied practices of automobility as well as the new states of being that automobility entails. By way of example, Deborah Lupton studied the phenomenon of road rage by first considering the “embodied ontology of the car-human relationship”. 92 She argues that road rage occurs when our ontological security is threatened, that is “when the illusion of the inviolable space provided for us by the body of the car is shattered.” 93 For Lupton, the cyborg subjectivity of the car-driver provided significant insights into a growing social problem. In a related way, other accounts of driver experience 94 have been extrapolated to expose “technologies of government” and their political rationale. 95 Such approaches are imperative to a critical automobilities research.

In their formulation of the field, Böhm, et al insist that automobility must be conceived as a political project. 96 Accordingly, they suggest more attention be paid to the “antagonisms of automobility”. This raft of consequences, they argue, make the present regime of automobility impossible. Despite claims to the contrary, Böhm, et al are not alone in recognising the political dimensions of automobility. Their stance is a radical version of a developing 21st century discourse: car culture is in need of a major overhaul.

Automotive Anxieties

The paradox of automobility is often realised as crisis. If we examine automotive literature through this lens we soon realise how much controversy has afflicted the discourse. The car has always been a contentious subject. It is only that the focus and gravity of the controversy shifts and swings throughout the century. Paterson identifies these discontents along seven

---

92 Deborah Lupton 1999 ‘Monsters in Metal Cocoons: “Road Rage” and Cyborg Bodies’, Body & Society 5: 70.
93 Ibid.
95 Peter Merriman 2006, “Mirror, Signal, Manoeuvre': assembling and governing the motorway driver in late 1950s Britain', The Sociological Review 54(s1): 76.
96 As such, they prefer the term ‘regime’ over the oft-cited ‘system’ invoked by Sheller and Urry, ‘The new mobilities paradigm’, and Urry ‘The ‘System’ of Automobility'.

lines: social inequalities, road building, safety, speed, individualism, consumerist geopolitics, and technocratic environmentalism. Others identify ‘antagonisms’ such as congestion, accidents, the domination of space, and environmental degradation. As the following section illustrates these anxieties overlap and it is difficult to separate them out. Speed, for example, is clearly entwined with safety, road building is tied to environmental degradation and social inequality. Taking my cue from Paterson, I discuss eight key anxieties that dominate the literature.

Safety

The first opposition to the car came soon after it was developed. Noise, speed and danger were the thrust of early arguments. Initially, concern was directed at the safety of pedestrians and livestock in rural areas of America and Europe. Farmers and other rural residents resented the hazards posed by weekend motorists. Furthermore it was considered that cars despoiled the country air with their fumes and dust. Meanwhile, the conditions of the city were seen to exacerbate the pollution and congestion. Protests erupted over early automobile casualties and citizens decried the changing dynamic of urban streets. Before long, however, these dangers were normalised as O’Connell’s social history from the United Kingdom (UK) demonstrates.

Nevertheless, concerns about safety endure. While fears for pedestrians and other non-motorists (e.g. cyclists) remain, general anxiety has been redirected towards the motorist. As the population of drivers has expanded throughout the world safety issues have increasingly focused on the fragilities of the car and its inhabitants. Consequently, there have been numerous campaigns to improve car safety and driver responsibility. Governments and car manufacturers, along with lobby groups, continue to implement new standards and regulations aimed at curbing the alarming mortality statistics. Davidson has argued that Australia leads the world in combating the ‘road toll’ problem by implementing “preventative

97 Matthew Paterson, Automobile Politics.
99 Paterson, Automobile Politics, pp 36–58.
101 Much of this concern has become focused on child safety, at home and beyond. Witness the implementation of school zoning, speed traps, and reversing cameras on SUVs.
102 These campaigns have ranged from grass-roots movements, such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), to celebrity debates and books. Ralph Nader’s well-known critique of the Corvair, Unsafe at Any Speed, transformed the legal ramifications of automotive manufacturing.
measures such as compulsory seatbelts and random breath testing. whereas in America these very regulations have been contested as an infringement of civil liberties.

Ladd reveals how human behaviour has always been implicated in the cause of accidents, however, there is now considerable onus on the manufacturer to produce a safer vehicle, a better product. Today, much of the design, technological development and promotion of a car is directed at easing concerns over safety. These safety features, as well as those extended to the road (lighting, speed bumps, etc) have not only shaped the embedded experiences of inhabiting the car, they have directly shaped the environments in which we dwell.

In a related argument, the health impacts of driving have come into focus. It is now suggested that automobility exposes us to a raft of other unhealthy habits, stressful conditions and 'obsegenic' settings. Poor dietary practices and a proliferation of takeaway outlets are now considered to be a consequence of a fast-paced, mobile style of living. However, at one time motor vehicles were also applauded for the health benefits of fresh air and for calming nerves. They also assisted doctors in reaching the sick more quickly than previously. Ladd points out that some American observers went so far as to suggest that automobility offered eugenic advantages "since young men might range more widely in their courting, it would be possible to break dangerous patterns of rural inbreeding." 

Automobile spaces: road building, the driving experience and suburban sprawl

A second tension operating within car cultures is the concern over automobile spaces. This mode of opposition works on two fronts. One is the amount of space car-related activities subsume the other is the kind of spaces they occupy or engender. There can be no doubt that in industrialised economies enormous areas of land are devoted to car-related activities. Critics have argued that these spaces could be put to better use, such as food production.

103 Davison, Car Wars, p 143.
104 See for example Jane Dixon, Catherine Banwell and Sarah Hinde 2007. 'Car-centred diets, social distinction and cultural mobility: food system research directions', Food, Culture, and Society: An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research 10 (1): 131–147. It is unclear whether car enthusiasts recognise these linkages, as they are the result of fairly recent health studies. However, it is clear that many car cultures celebrate the experience and aesthetics of fast food. Based on my observations autoshows operate a standard fare of hot chips, hamburgers, hot dogs, soft drinks, ice-cream, and often doughnuts. In one respect this is just generally present in public event food stalls. However, in some cases I believe it also represents a conscious attempt to mirror the traditions of the postwar American car culture boom. The 2010 Mooneyes Annual Car show opening dinner in Yokohama Japan is a case in point. Hamburgers and soft drink, not sushi and saki, were served.
105 Ladd, Autophobia, p 30.
106 Freund and Martin, cited in Paterson, reveal that 10 per cent of arable land in the United States is taken up roads and parking places. Paterson, Automobile Politics, p 42.
Moreover, automobile infrastructure is seen to fracture space, creating physical and social
distance between people and communities.\textsuperscript{107} At the heart of the debate over dislocation lie
important philosophical questions regarding how we choose to live. As Jane Jacobs argued in
1961, "instead of planning motor cars and motorways to fit our life, we are rapidly planning
our life to fit the motor car".\textsuperscript{108}

However rather than the car itself, Jacob’s disapproval was rooted in the spaces that
automobiles were seen to facilitate. A modernist sensibility of expressways and urban renewal
was considered by many to be a threat to the traditions of urban community, as well as the
very fabric of the city. Historic preservationists in Europe and the USA resisted the destruction
of pre-twentieth century buildings and neighbourhoods in favour of the new automobile
metropolis. Concerns over the ‘future city’ echo the sentiments first expressed by rural
preservationists, many of whom resented the encroachment of city life upon the character of
the country. This remains a source of contestation, with some groups arguing that cars should
not be allowed in certain parts of the world altogether, such as particularly sensitive ecological
zones, parks and conservation areas. Yet as Flink points out, the provision of automobile
access to National Parks greatly facilitated their visitation and ‘success’.\textsuperscript{109} Debates about 4WD
vehicles and ‘off-road’ automobility are a contemporary expression of this discontent.\textsuperscript{110}

Although the physical features of the auto world are an enduring bone of contention, another
aspect of this debate is the experiential quality of auto spaces. As Edensor has observed:

\begin{quote}
The routine daily commute by car has become a popular signifier of
contemporary alienation connoting work-bound single drivers detached
from community and alienated from their own nature, dulled by the
compulsion to move swiftly and uneventfully toward their destination.\textsuperscript{111}
\end{quote}

Some theorists lament that the spaces and corridors of automobility export the sterile
alienating spaces of the factory to the wider world. They speak of driving as ‘desocialised’ and
‘numbing’, while the environment in and outside of the car is presented as a flattened

\textsuperscript{107} Urry, ‘The ‘System’ of Automobility’.
\textsuperscript{108} Jane Jacobs cited in Ladd, \textit{Autophobia}, p 96.
\textsuperscript{109} Flink makes an important point by aligning personal automobile use and the history of the US
National Park system. By highlighting that access to and preservation of scenic wilderness areas (as
exemplified by National Parks) was seen as a democratic right he alerts us to the other kinds of
‘freedoms’ associated with the automobile. James J. Flink 1990. \textit{The Automobile Age}. London and
Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.
\textsuperscript{110} Silva Larson and Alexander Herr 2008. ‘Sustainable tourism development in remote regions?
Questions arising from research in the north Kimberley, Australia’, \textit{Regional Environmental Change} 8
\textsuperscript{111} Tim Edensor 2003. ‘Defamiliarizing the Mundane Roadscape’ \textit{Space and Culture} 6 (2) May: 152.
featureless ‘non-place’ in which we are ‘cocooned’. Others have questioned this perception, arguing instead that mundane driving and everyday automobility may invite unique sensations and may be productive sites for thinking.\textsuperscript{112}

Opposition to the experiential qualities (or lack thereof) of driving find their greatest expression in the “tedium of the freeway”.\textsuperscript{113} Yet in the early decades of automobility the freeway was proposed as a means of ‘escape’ from the congested traffic of urban centres. The idea of fast unfettered automobility chimed with early 20\textsuperscript{th} century visions of planned cities as utopias. Le Corbusier, Buckminster Fuller and Frank Lloyd Wright all advocated new cities in which the automobile featured prominently, and today suburbanisation is directly linked to the success of the car.

The construction of limited access roads (freeways, motorways, etc) began in Europe during the 1920s and 30s and boomed in America during the 1950s-70s. Freeways have dramatically altered these landscapes and they have also effected the movements and habits of its peoples. Roads are a source of contestation on several counts. For the most part, freeway revolts have been caused by concerns over land use rather than the car itself. The usurping of public land, razing of poor neighbourhoods and the destruction of natural settings are the key drivers of road building protests. In contrast, others have called for more roads to be constructed in order to ensure equal access to towns and cities. Tensions over social inequality and resource use are often embroiled in road construction debates. With the roads themselves may be seen as divisive to community, they are also perceived as facilitating certain anti-social behaviours.\textsuperscript{114}

**Environmentalism**

The third resistance to the car comes through its direct and indirect impacts on the environment. This critique has several facets.\textsuperscript{115} The first involves the depletion of resources. Auto manufacturing consumes a significant amount of steel, plastics, rubber and other non-renewable or non-recyclable materials. The internal combustion engine uses petroleum-based fuels while oil and steel is required to build roads. Arguments of this nature first surfaced in

\textsuperscript{112} For example, Edensor, ‘Defamiliarizing the Mundane Roadscape’; Mimi Sheller 2004 ‘Automotive Emotions: Feeling the Car’, *Theory, Culture and Society* 21: 221–42.

\textsuperscript{113} Ladd, *Autophobia*, p 93.


the 1960s and peaked during the 1970s oil crisis. In recent years resource supply and depletion has acquired a fresh awareness as the source and methods of resource extraction have been linked to pollution and war. Americans in particular have grown wary of the links between US foreign policy, military strategy/deployment and the control of oil.\textsuperscript{116}

A second aspect of this critique is the problem of waste production, including pollution. As previously noted pollution, of noise and air, was amongst the first criticisms of the car to emerge. Automobile use alone is a major contributor to carbon emissions, which are responsible for greenhouses gases attributed to global warming. At the local level, land and groundwater contamination has been linked to auto manufacturing and fuel processing. Car use is also a principal cause of poor air quality and acid rain, which has been connected to a range of human health issues as well as damage to crops, buildings, and ecosystems.\textsuperscript{117}

Recently, it has been suggested that the ‘Greening’ of cars and behavioural changes towards car ownership\textsuperscript{118} may offer a solution to some of these dilemmas. However, it has been also pointed out that growth in car use outstrips any potential technological improvements.

The third line of the environmentalism opposition concerns the use of land for automotive purposes, a point that is related to road building. It expresses a concern for the quarrying and mining of materials\textsuperscript{119} used in car and road construction and includes the destruction of habitat, arable land and pristine environments caused by auto-related activities and the toxic waste they produce.

\textbf{Social Inequalities}

The forth movement against automobility focuses on the inequalities that it perpetuates. Class-based hostilities first arose in response to the car during the early decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. At this time car ownership was a privilege of the wealthy and upper-class elite. The mass production of the Model T went some way towards alleviating this class division in Europe and America. Ever since that time the car has been celebrated as a democratizing agent. The proposition that mass motorisation can lead to social equality and cohesion was famously advanced by Ford. Yet it was a rhetoric taken up by others, most notably Hitler, who

\textsuperscript{116} Lutz and Fernandez, \textit{Carjacked}, pp 96-7.
\textsuperscript{117} Paterson, \textit{Automobile Politics}, p 37.
proclaimed that "it must cease to be a luxury and become a practical device".\textsuperscript{120} The Volkswagen (People's Wagon) and the autobahn are both products of Hitler's passionate embrace of the motor car.\textsuperscript{121} For both Hitler and Ford equality of car ownership concerned the issue of class. However, discriminatory car access was also based on gender and race.\textsuperscript{122} Social inequality is directly evident in car ownership analyses but it also appears in related auto activities. In the United States many motels denied African Americans lodging at their facilities.\textsuperscript{123} In Britain female autoworkers were paid half the wage of men occupying the same task on the assembly line.

Access to automobility is a particularly notable form of protest because automobility is strongly tied up in definitions of citizenship. In America fears over illegal immigration from Mexico is at the core of recent debates over the issuing of driver's licenses. Some would argue that the automobile industry is inherently divisive in the way it affords individualism and promotes the status value of cars. Following Gorz, Paterson argues that the symbolic politics of the car "depend on a continual attempt to recreate (varied) forms of inequality within car consumption."\textsuperscript{124} The automotive industry exploits this differential access through car design, promotion and pricing. General Motor's Alfred Sloan and Harley Earl were the first to implement a tiered model and price structure and annual model changes aimed at appealing to driver status compounded by differential access. In their promotion of planned obsolescence and its related aspirational thinking, auto manufacturers have been blamed for re-creating social tensions and duping consumers.\textsuperscript{125}

Car ownership continues to act as a mark of status and identity formation. In some places, like emerging economies, where the car is prohibitively expensive, the presence of a car is enough. In others it is the type of vehicle that matters. Some would suggest that it is not only issues of equality that dictate these choices (where choice exists) but that practices of identity formation play a part.

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{120} Adolf Hitler cited in Ladd, \textit{Autophobia}, p 36.
\textsuperscript{122} I am not including here those people whose restricted access to the motor vehicle is self-imposed, some of whom avoid the car out of religious beliefs (e.g. the Amish).
\textsuperscript{124} Paterson, \textit{Automobile Politics}, 45–6.
\textsuperscript{125} For an exposition of the way car aesthetics were manipulated by the car industry to feed workers' desires for better vehicles, and by association a sense of achievement see David Gartman 1994. \textit{Auto Opium}. London and New York: Routledge.
\end{footnotesize}
Speed & Acceleration

A fifth response to car culture focuses on the concepts of speed. This is evident in the first decades of car use in Europe and the USA, when efforts to regulate speed were first implemented. Speed is clearly then related to concerns over safety. The myth of speed is a common thread within this critique, for despite the promise of rapid movement, mass automobility has actually caused congestion and gridlock.

Some might argue that the mythology of speed is essentially experiential. Speed is attributed with sensorial affects which correspond with symbolic allusion of freedom and power. The question of accelerated speed lies at the core of Virilio’s radical critiques of technology. Interrogating the history of speed Virilio argues that it has played a crucial role in the distribution of wealth and power. He conceptualises the shift to modernity as a transition to an age of acceleration in which speed overcomes barriers of time and space to create new social, political, and economic forms. A faster pace of living is precisely the kind of social form that critics of the car denounce. The manner in which the sociality of the car “continuously accelerates – work rates, distances travelled, volumes consumed – and plays a central role in compelling people to adopt this accelerated way of life.” The physical effects of this pace are registered in accidents, stress, health effects and the limitations of the body. More than this an accelerated life is ripe with symbolic associations. Consequently, speed is also a cause for concern because it reminds us of the assembly line, and the spectre of alienation that haunts it.

Individualism

A fifth opposition is directed at the ideology of the car as the promotion of individual freedom. This is connected to the critique of automotive spaces and the alienation they are perceived to cause. In this view, the atomistic individualism symbolised by the car comes at the cost of community. Although emerging relatively recently this concern has gained traction as an explanation for any number of automotive subjectivities and practices. For example, road rage and other driving behaviours have been attributed to the ‘selfishness’ of drivers and their detachment from others. Beyond this cocooning effect, automobility has been blamed for a pronounced disengagement from civic life in America. At the same time, Edensor

127 Paterson, Automobile Politics, p 50.
128 Putnam cited in Paterson, Automobile Politics, p 52.
argues that car cultures may also exhibit distinct 'national' flavours. Certainly, auto companies and governments have used the car in the rhetoric of nation-building and many corporations promote the national identity of their brands, Holden being an obvious example in Australia.

Some critics take issue with the way in which individual identity is expressed through the car. The agency of the individual and their personal choice of make, model, colour and so on, is seen as an expression of selfishness that undermines bonds to community. Such a critique positions individualism against community. One might easily argue that this is a false dichotomy. Individualism of this kind need not isolate others, instead inviting exchange and may even be regarded as dependent upon them. Instead, the vast network of car clubs, online forums and other media outlets is testament to community's various modes of expression.

Of course the freedom of personal mobility is a celebrated feature of cars. This mobility may also be seen to foster the maintenance of social networks and other forms of community. Counter-critics might also argue that cycling, horse riding and other technologies of movement are no less solitary than the automobile. What is more at issue is the extent to which automobility has been pressed into the "ideological service of liberalism". Cotton Seiler's historical study of driving in America is a case in point. In it he neatly demonstrates the importance of driving to conceptions of the sovereign self and the figure of the American citizen. He argues, as do others, that the fusion of automobility and liberalism has exerted a powerful political influence that goes beyond the corporeal practices of driving.

Consumerist Geopolitics

A seventh movement against cars is identified by Paterson as consumerist geopolitics: that is social movements which oppose the car because of its links to oil imperialism and warfare. Campaigns such as 'What Would Jesus Drive' raise awareness of the moral obligation of consumers to consider the impacts of their driving, particularly with regard to resource use and its effect on foreign policy. In recent years much of this critique revolves around the popularity of the sports utility vehicle (SUV). Critics argue that the mass uptake of SUVs, with

---

130 Cars are one of many mobile or telematic devices that are instrumental in restructuring the sites and modes whereby community is manifest.
132 See Rajan, ‘Automobility and the liberal disposition’ for example.
133 See http://www.whatwouldjesusdrive.info/intro.php
their poor fuel economy, effectively shortens supply. Dependency on oil and the threat of its shortage has a direct impact on foreign policy, including military intervention in the Middle East. Due to its mass ownership and high proportion of SUVs the USA is commonly cited as the key site of the problem and the protest. However, because the argument implicates oil production and consumption, the issue may be regarded as global. Furthermore the current nature of political alliances has meant that nations and economies around the world are affected.

What is of further interest is the extent to which these geopolitics have and have not actually shaped consumption choices. The adventure and triumphant patriotism of war rhetoric and reportage has contributed to the status of certain vehicles. The success of the Hummer offers the most striking example, although the Jeep is the most enduring. Jeep was explicitly sold on its combat role following World War II, and it continues to be sold for its “terrain conquering” abilities.

Morality & Crime

Finally, the automobile is a source of moral anxiety. Ladd attributes the initial suspicion of the motor car as an aura of vice. First the car brought havoc into the countryside and then people used it to leave for a life in “the big smoke.” More significantly, the automobile literally carried young people away. O’Connell’s social history records how the thrill of new found mobility enticed many young men to ‘borrow’ cars they could not afford themselves. In pre-war Britain joyriding was a relatively innocuous past time. Today the enhanced performance capabilities of the car, coupled with police pursuit tactics, make car theft a potentially deadly activity.

From an early start cars were also associated with gangsters and getaways. While speed was a concern in this regard, the mobility and privacy of the car was considered more dangerous still. A major apprehension to the car was that it that led to the loosening of morals. This concern peaked in the immediate postwar years with the heady convergence of expanded automobile ownership, rock ‘n’ roll and other aspects of an emergent ‘teen’ culture.

134 Ladd, Autophobia, 29–30.
136 In testimony to this association the Henry Ford Motor Museum in Detroit displays a letter (ID: 64.167.285.3) said to be from Clyde Barrow of the infamous Bonnie and Clyde duo. The letter sings the praises of the power of Ford’s V8 engine: “For sustained speed and freedom from trouble the Ford has got ever [sic] other car skinned” For a transcript see: http://www.thehenryford.org/museum/automobile.aspx
An alternative reading suggests that the car enabled family outings and holidays. Just as they are distilled in the artworks of Norman Rockwell and John Brack, such moments of family togetherness today form some of our earliest memories of life. For many people such recollections are formative and endearing. Yet the idea that “life begins in the back seat” meant something quite different to early moralists. Nevertheless it is this notion of being born into automobility - the car as *fait accompli* - that is the philosophical nub of what troubles critics the most.
In 2005 the National Library of Australia (NLA), in conjunction with its state and territory affiliates, mounted an exhibition designed to showcase the gems of the nation’s library collections. Like other exhibitions of this kind its contents were presented as a treasure house of images and cultural objects deemed to be of particular relevance to Australian life. Following in the wake of the enormously successful Treasures from the World’s Great Libraries, it seemed only natural to expect great things and, at the same time, expect to be disappointed. After all, I knew even before entering the gallery that there would be no original manuscripts of Mozart’s Requiem, Einstein’s formula for relativity or even the illustrated dust jacket for J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Hobbit. These were treasures of the world and could hardly

---

speak to any peculiarly Australian sensibility. However, knowing what I would not find is not the same as knowing what might be there. All I can recall now is being utterly startled by one exhibit in particular: the framed dyeline drawings of the 1963 Holden EH Special (Figure 2.1).

Perhaps the Holden’s presence surprised me because it seemed so out of context. What was a car, or rather a ‘blueprint’ for a car doing in a display of national treasures? I presume it was the drawing itself and the concept of an Australian car that made this item worthy of display. But a part of me wasn’t convinced. Certainly the Holden was a manufacturing achievement and a brand of great symbolic appeal but why then choose the 1963 Special model instead of the iconic FJ or the earlier FX?

Discussing the inclusion of the Holden drawings as a hallmark of Australian innovation and industry, curator Margaret Dent observed the economic and historical significance of the Holden to Australian society. Importantly, she also described the objects as “beautiful ... detailed drawings ... works of art in themselves, although they were not intended to be”. It is this transposition that Dent describes that first sparked my interest. And it is the ongoing interchangeability of the car’s image – from the garage to the gallery and the design studio to the street – that has kindled my curiosity ever since.

This account of how the Special became special, of how a set of engineering specifications came to be viewed as art, offers an example of how meanings are ascribed to objects and how something ostensibly everyday may come to be regarded as extraordinary. In this respect it provides an engaging example of the subject I have set out to explore in this thesis: the relationship between cars and art and how social, cultural and aesthetic values are invested and communicated through them. More specifically it signals the need for a way of looking, thinking and discussing art and car cultures in the same sentence and a strategy for registering the intersections between them. In short, it requires a methodology that can accommodate the slippages between and across disciplinary boundaries and institutional domains.

Making Special, Making Strange

One might relate my encounter with the Holden in the National Library through Viktor Shklovsky’s idea of ostranenie, or ‘to make strange that which is familiar’. According to

---

138 Margaret Dent (personal communication, 17 August, 2007)
139 In recognising the appreciation of the Holden blueprint as art, we must not ignore its value as an artefact – linked to the historical development of a car industry in Australia – which played a role in its selection and display.
Shklovsky once we have seen an object several times we begin to recognise it: “it is in front of us and we know about it, but we do not see it – hence we cannot say anything significant about it.”\(^{141}\) His concept of ostranenie explains how the technique of art, through a process of defamiliarisation, works to recuperate the “artfulness’ of an object”\(^ {142}\) by making it difficult, and prolonging perception. In terms of my own experience I was struck by the sudden strangeness of encountering something ordinary presented as precious. Using this illustration I have pointed to how the car and its representation may become a kind of art. This happens not simply through its entry into the gallery space or museum as an institutional theory might suggest,\(^ {143}\) but by causing the viewer to think and look twice. Or, as Shklovsky might have it, we look longer because the “device of estrangement of things” enhances “the difficulty and duration of perception.”\(^ {144}\) As Frank Kessler explains Shklovsky’s concept of ostranenie works “to explain mechanisms of perception and attention as well as the functioning of art with regard to everyday experience”. It is a conceptualisation of art that, Kessler suggests, “stresses aspects such as formal complexity, prolonged perception and the foregrounding of materiality.”\(^ {145}\) Ostranenie, in other words resides both in the artwork itself and in the act of reception, or viewer.

Watney’s analysis of the theorisation and application of the concept ‘making strange,’ points to the artistic desire “to show familiar objects in unfamiliar ways.”\(^ {146}\) Such strategies threaten any kind of absolute distinction between artistic and everyday modes of perception and representation. Barthes has suggested that it is because of their quotidian nature and because they are used and ‘consumed in image’ by the whole population, that cars should be seen as the “exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals.”\(^ {147}\) The tension that operates between the familiar and the monumental, the outstanding and the everyday, is what I am seeking to get at.

\(^{141}\) Shklovsky, ‘Art as Technique’, p 18.
\(^{142}\) Ibid.
\(^{144}\) Viktor Shklovsky cited in Caryl Emerson 2005 ‘Shklovsky’s ostranenie, Bakhtin’s vnenakhodimost’ (How Distance Serves an Aesthetics of Arousal Differently from an Aesthetics Based on Pain)’, Poetics Today 26 (4): 640.
Philosopher Ellen Dissanayake makes a similar point when she develops the notion of 'making special'. In broader terms making special refers to a range of mark-making practices and socio-cultural activities of elaboration that broadens the idea of creativity to "the faculty for making and expressing specialness." As Dissanayake proposes, the process of making special involves creating, conferring and recognising specialness by apprehending an activity or artefact as an "extra-ordinary dimension of experience". That is, by redirecting "ordinary elements into a configuration in which they become more than ordinary." Specialness thus construed is of an order that is different from the everyday and may also be, for example, "strangeness, outrageousness, or extravagance".

Arguing from a perspective of evolutionary biology Dissanayake suggests that this human capacity for creativity (e.g. making special) functions to enhance human life and facilitate survival. Thus art is regarded, not as an object or quality, but as "a behavioural tendency, a way of doing things." Accordingly, "The artist isolates and complicates what is presented to us so that we must see it, not merely recognise it in the routine habitual way of ordinary experience." Dissanayake draws our attention to the need for a broader understanding of art, beyond the Western categories of "fine" or "high" art. As Howard Morphy argues "art is a form of intentional human action ... a way of acting meaningfully in the world."

In keeping with this broad conceptualisation of art, Morphy suggests that the core questions we ask are no different "than for any other material culture object." In methodological

---

148 This concept is first developed in Ellen Dissanayake 1988. What Is Art For? Seattle and London: University of Washington Press. To distinguish art as a particular kind of making special, as distinct from other forms of marking or appreciation, Dissanayake later refines her notion of making special more specifically to one of "aesthetic specialness". While not synonymous with art, "aesthetic making special" attends more closely to that which we call art. For further discussion see Ellen Dissanayake 1992. HomoAestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why New York and Toronto: The Free Press, Maxwell Macmillan.
149 Dissanayake, HomoAestheticus, p 53.
150 Ibid. p 58.
151 Dissanayake, What Is Art For?, p 90.
152 Dissanayake, HomoAestheticus, p 59.
154 Dissanayake, HomoAestheticus, p 34.
155 Dissanayake, What Is Art For?, pp 69–70.
157 Ibid. p 280.
terms this means that we “analyse material culture and connect that analysis to contexts of use in order to approach the ‘how’ of meaning and the ‘how’ of affect.” Our analysis and interpretation must concern itself with “the use of artworks in context, the effect the work has on the observer, and the ways in which it is meaningful” to others.

The chief strength of Dissanayake’s thinking, for the purposes of this study, resides in the embrace of art as a diversity of activities and in the recognition of the human ability “to see and treat something as something else.” The concept of making special allows for the incorporation of utilitarian objects and everyday actions to be incorporated within aesthetic realms, a point which is clearly reiterated in the Western art of the 20th century. Moreover, through her emphasis on creativity as complex behaviour Dissanayake shifts the accent from the outcomes of art practice (i.e. artworks) to the activity of art itself, and offers a way of thinking about art that foregrounds intentionality and impetus, deliberateness and care.

While I hope to have made it clear that I aim to use an encompassing conception of art I want to draw a note of caution in the way I understand making special and making strange as terms. I am not suggesting, for example, that alterity will be my criteria or focus. Nor do I mean that artworks that lie outside the Western art framework are somehow strange or ‘other’. What I mean to suggest is that difference can lead us to challenge established categories and help us to see in new ways. Having said this I feel it is also important to acknowledge that difference has an aesthetic presence and is also a practice. Whether difference is perceived as a marker of taste, status, rarity, or individualism, difference is also a value that is discussed in car culture communities. Creating or owning ‘something different’ is something that many car enthusiasts strive to accomplish, and in many cases motivates their passion.

Diverging from the bio-evolutionary philosophy of the theory’s origins, making special, alongside making strange, may serve as a useful starting point for the examination of the art/car dynamic as a contextualised local process, and as a means of aesthetic production strongly influenced by cultural concerns. By drawing upon the concepts of making special and making strange, from philosophy and literary theory respectively, I am invoking an interdisciplinary methodology at the outset. Simply put, in order that I consider the range of

---

158 Ibid. p 283.
159 Ibid. p 278.
160 Ibid. p 129.
ways in which individual, community, and culturally driven aesthetics are expressed through the lens of automobility I require more than one vantage point. At the same time the ubiquity of car culture and the breadth of its influence demands a resolutely selective approach. Faced with the potential enormity of this topic and an expansive literature to accompany it, a key methodological task has been to constantly edit out in order to bring into focus.

Notwithstanding this editorial resolve, I have found that almost from the start my research has been inflected with the insights of many and varied scholars. However, in thinking about what art can tell us about our relationships with automobility my research has been directed along two main lines of inquiry. One approach entails investigating the place of art and aesthetics within car cultures broadly; the other seeks to examine how visual arts practitioners use the car in their creative endeavours. Both modes of expression necessitate creativity and both offer insight into how individual, social, cultural and aesthetic values are invested and communicated through the material object of the motor vehicle. To this end I have found three distinct spheres of scholarship, or disciplinary subfields, to be most useful: visual anthropology, the archaeology of the contemporary past, and 20th century art theory, specifically as it relates to the art of the everyday (e.g. the readymade). As a way of discussing the mechanics of my methodology in detail, I address each of these fields in turn, providing a summary of their conceptual and methodological underpinnings and why they are of relevance to my investigation.

Section One – Visual Art: Theories, Practices And Histories

The Mechanics of Cars as Art

The study of contemporary art draws upon a vast corpus of research and what we now understand as art theory enfolds a diverse suite of intellectual legacies, concepts and methodologies that have shaped 20th and 21st century thinking. We may trace in some of art theory’s practices and ideas obvious links to other disciplines (e.g. philosophy, art history, psychology and literary theory) as well as more specific fields of interest such as semiotics and feminism. At the same time, ideas specific to the practice and criticism of art theoretical models have been generated internally. Installation, for example, has raised new questions about the nature of the art medium and together with the concepts of participatory practice and relational aesthetics has reignited the enduring question of what is art? But just as there is no universal story of art, there is no singular art theory that guides how we may

interpret and understand the art of the world today. This realisation underpins the contemporary status of art. As Terry Smith observes art in the contemporary world is “self-defining, constraining on practice and constantly inviting its own self-representation ... Its inclination is to insist on complicity with itself.”\(^{164}\) It answers the art question in bold but in simple terms “it is what we say it is, it is what we do.”\(^{165}\)

In setting out to examine the car as art I draw upon a constellation of ideas, artworks, movements and thinkers. To tease out possible connections that may exist between these influences and to consolidate them into a guiding framework I adopt a method employed by the art historian James Elkins. Observing that art histories take many different forms, Elkins encourages us to think about the shape of art history by rendering it as a map or drawing.\(^{166}\) These “thought experiments” allow us to free-associate, plot linkages and discover connections that we may not have consciously realised or otherwise given serious attention. The unique and personal tone of each individually rendered drawing reveals just how varied in shape the stories of art can be.\(^{167}\) Above all, this novel exercise is a process of thinking through that allows us to step outside the rigid models and conventionally linear timelines that often dictate art discourse.

In developing this methodology, Elkins is critiquing the notion of art history as a singular, indivisible and authoritative narrative. This perspective is shared by other art scholars,\(^{168}\) and appeals to a model of art history as contingent on positions of viewing that are defined on the “grounds called place, gender, class, race, ideology, nationhood, age.”\(^{169}\) Pollock has argued that art history is paradigmatic, and that to understand the ways in which it has been mapped is to account for the ways it has been written: “To expose its underlying assumptions, its prejudices and silences” that is, to recognise the absences and gaps that are “crucial to the concepts of art and artists created by art history.”\(^{170}\)

\(^{164}\) Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?*, p 243.
\(^{165}\) Ibid.
\(^{167}\) Although Elkins, *Stories of Art*, argues that they also reveal how certain art historical models, figures and lineages have come to dominate the discipline of art history.
Whereas Elkins' cartographic impulse concentrates on the formulation of art histories, I focus my drawing specifically on what the collusion of art and car cultures might look like. In thinking about how automobility might fit within the stories of art I have made various sketches incorporating the individuals, ideas, movements and images that have occupied my mind. My particular schematics, however personal, have been helpful as a hermeneutic manoeuvre because they collate a seemingly disparate set of influences. In electing to focus my drawing on a story of art as it relates to the car, I have kept my timeframe quite specific. It broadly follows the span of the car's history commencing in the late 19th century and finishing towards the end of the 20th century. It is outside the scope of this thesis to develop this idea further, however the sketch in Figure 2.2 gives some indication of this working process, and some of the artworks, individuals and movements that have influenced my understanding of cars as they appear as modern art history.

One thing this image demonstrates is that the reading of the image and the 'story' itself will depend on the viewer's familiarity with how a car operates, as well as their knowledge of modern art. The diagram shows modern art history as an integrated whole, a system of components in which the linkages are as significant as the workings of the individual parts themselves. As I made this diagram names shifted around a lot as I allowed the function of car components to guide me in determining who was what (Figure 2.2). For example, I decided that the steering wheel was best represented by Duchamp (and Dada) because he/they set a new course for art along which other artists would move forward, a direction that proceeds onwards as Conceptual Art, Pop, and ultimately to the collaborative ideas of relational aesthetics and installation art. What was especially interesting for me to note, in undertaking this exercise, was how I tried but struggled to find a place for women, folk arts and other cultures. I became aware, despite my inclinations to cross-fertilise the high and the low, that in the structure I was constructing "art was still a category to be discussed in terms of greatness". In this respect the process urged me to focus on the contemporary, where the conception of art holds the prospect of being transformed. Nevertheless in order to begin speaking of the present, I feel obliged to address a few key influences that led us to where we are.

---

171 Elkins’ approach to art shares certain parallels with visual anthropology in that he is interested in the way that text and images work together. He is also interested in a broader “domain of images” than those that are strictly defined as art. Within his view of art we may find schematic drawings, molecular photography, and much more. James Elkins 1999. The Domain of Images. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

172 Pollock, Vision and Difference, p 35.
The Duchampian Drive - This is Art

Throughout my attempts to draw the relationship of cars to art a consistent and essential component appeared in the form of Duchamp. It is recognised in both the histories and theories of Western art that a defining moment in modern art was arrived at through this artist. This ‘moment’ was the realisation of the readymade as art.¹⁷³ But what is the relevance

¹⁷³Although several authors have pointed to the work of Braque and Picasso (especially Still Life with Chair Caning, 1907) as a kind of proto-history to the readymade, Duchamp is credited with its realisation. Varnedoe and Gopnik suggest the first readymade was Bicycle Wheel of 1913 by Marcel
of this turning point to a study of cars and contemporary art? And we might ask, to follow Thierry de Duve, “What is “Duchamp”? Is that the name of a great artist? A genius? Or is it the name for a set of conditions? What does "Duchamp" refer to?”

de Duve rightly suggests that Duchamp has become a touchstone for such a diversity of ideas, artworks, directions and developments in art discourse that the very term Duchamp or Duchampian is difficult to define. I make no attempt to characterise the contribution of Duchamp (and his Dada colleagues) to art but I do want to explain why he is at the core of my motor schematic.

In the first instance, the readymade “pointed at the conditions of art-making”, that is, its distribution, institutions, and framework. The particular significance of the Duchampian readymade, according to Hal Foster, is that it “allowed him to leap past old aesthetic questions of craft, medium, and taste (‘is it good or bad painting or sculpture?’) to new questions” that challenged the ontological status of art. By presenting a signed, although otherwise ordinary, urinal as an object of art, Duchamp provoked debate. Is it enough for the artist to say “this is a work of art” in order for it to be valued as such? Is an object defined as art simply because it is situated in an art context? If so, who has the authority to determine an artwork’s acceptance? These are the kinds of questions that Duchamp’s radical gesture unleashed and continue to resonate well into the current day. Importantly, Duchamp determined the “norm of exclusion on which the modern establishment is based” and drew our attention to museographical issues that concern the institutional reception, communication and evaluation of art. In short, his action questioned who or what determines “what can enter and what cannot”.

Duchamp (though arguably it is an “assisted” readymade), however the first to be on public view is the more famous urinal attributed to Duchamp under the pseudonym R. Mutt and submitted to the 1917 Society of Independent Artists’ in New York under the title ‘Fountain’ (1917). Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik 1990 High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture. Museum of Modern Art New York: New York, pp 273-7.


175 By invoking the aesthetics of the car diagram in this way I am intentionally reflecting upon both Duchamp’s interest in schematics and the machine aesthetics enjoyed by both Duchamp and Picabia.


178 Krauss and De Duve speak of this as a “baptismal act”, declarative aesthetics, and performative statement.


180 Ibid.
A further clue to the readymade’s revolutionary cachet is found in the materiality of the object itself. Duchamp’s readymades were manufactured items chosen from the inventory of everyday life. Each of these objects had a utilitarian purpose, and by dislocating them from that functionality, the artist blurred the contextual boundaries between the art world and daily existence. Duchamp states that he selected the objects on the basis of “visual indifference”.\(^\text{181}\) Which is to say the objects themselves neither harnessed nor appealed to any “aesthetic emotion”\(^\text{182}\) on the part of the viewer. In fact their distinctive material entity was that they lacked the distinguishing attributes conventionally associated with art, instead they were multiples mass-produced by industrial means. Even the ‘assisted readymades’, and the term readymade itself, had their precedent in merchandise catalogues and industrial wares.\(^\text{183}\) As Varnedoe and Gopnik demonstrate, in a very real sense Duchamp presaged Pop in its attention to consumption as an act of contemporary life. Drawing objects and imagery from the aesthetics of product catalogs and shopfront windows Duchamp drew a relationship between commodification and consumption as ways of being in the world and as ways of making art.\(^\text{184}\) Dada compatriot Hannah Hoch provides further insight on Dada’s unconventional aesthetics: “our whole purpose was to integrate objects from the world of machines and industry in the world of art.”\(^\text{185}\) Hoch’s statement would seem to support Molesworth’s contention that the rejection of artistic labour, conceived as “the production of objects with traditional artistic skills”\(^\text{186}\) was at the core of Dada’s ambition.

**Art in Masses**

Not long before Duchamp began introducing the mass-produced object into the gallery space, the process of mechanical reproduction was reconfiguring the context in which art might be encountered. The arrival of photographic reproduction technology, around the turn of the 20\(^{th}\) century, allowed for the mass dissemination of art – as copied image – thereby removing its authority and ushering it into the mainstream. The appreciation of art no longer necessitated a visit to the gallery. An image could now “meet the beholder ... in his own

---


\(^\text{182}\) Ibid. Of course Duchamp’s remarks on the choice of objects for readymades as they relate to visual indifference and “the total absence of good or bad taste” may not be shared by others.

\(^\text{183}\) Varnedoe and Gopnik, *High and Low*, p 273.

\(^\text{184}\) Varnedoe and Gopnik, *High and Low*.


\(^\text{186}\) Helen Molesworth 2003. ‘From Dada to Neo-Dada and Back Again’, *October* 105, Dada (Summer): (emphasis original).
particular situation."  

The development of mechanical means of image reproduction revolutionised the reception of images and objects and, consequently, the meanings of art. For the first time ever, images of art became “ephemeral, ubiquitous, insubstantial, available, valueless, free.”

The repercussions for art were momentous. In effect both the readymade and the mechanical reproduction of art, disrupted the traditional definitions of objects and categories of art, and the hierarchies of culture to which they were attributed. The condition of art as commodity, made evident through its mass reproducibility, disavows the ideological authority of art in maintaining an elitist “system of production consecrated around inequality.” By way of an inverse movement, Duchamp’s readymade was an act of similar consequence. Displaying mass-produced objects as artworks, Duchamp drew attention to the “conventions of taste that layer and divide society” and the divisions within the institutions of art.

Both developments chart, albeit from opposite directions, an exchange of objects and images between the institutions of art and the everyday public sphere. In doing so they illuminate the relations between art and “the commodification of everything.” Adorno argues that art is produced under the condition of commodification, and shares with popular culture “the stigmata of capitalism.” But as a “self-conscious form of production”, and “as a bearer of meaning the independent work of art may enable reflection upon that condition.” The legacies of the readymade and “the formation of masses” have continued to impart their influence on art, particularly in their relation to the commodity and the everyday. But as alluded to above, one of the most enduring contributions made was to the ‘high and low’ debate.

**High and Low**

The boundary dividing high and low culture has been a persistent topic in art discourse over the last century. Varnedoe and Gopnik succinctly describe it as a “major fault line of anxiety

---

190 Varnedoe and Gopnik, High and Low, p 286.
192 Ibid. p 398.
193 Ibid. p 399.
and a meeting point for otherwise opposite ideologies."\textsuperscript{194} It has become a focus for critique because it appeals to a limited set of categories, that provide the basis for accepting certain forms of art while disregarding others. Such a hierarchical system, it is argued, ultimately "perpetuates domination and subjugates difference."\textsuperscript{195}

In the context of this project, I take the high and low as a general concept that enfolds a number of specific divisions or perceived dichotomies. By this I include such distinctions as those maintained between the hand-crafted and the machine-made, the bespoke and the mass-produced, the rare and the commonplace, the professional artist and the ‘naïve outsider’ and perhaps most evident of all the presumed separation of the fine arts and the folk/ethnic/popular arts. The question of high and low, and other ‘defining’ attributes of art continue to be brokered throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} and into the 21\textsuperscript{st} century\textsuperscript{196} yet many scholars note that high and low cultures have been inextricably intertwined since the beginning of modern society."\textsuperscript{197} One of the precedents set by the readymade, along with the work of Cubism, collage and Dada, was that it made working with the materials and methods of commerce and industry a valid option for artists.\textsuperscript{198} As we can observe in the subject matter of Pop art or the materials of John Chamberlain’s and Slyvie Fleury’s sculptures, the car is a redolent motif in the discussion.\textsuperscript{199}

By now the readymade’s significance to this study should be apparent. Not least because this intervention in the canon of high art had to occur for the automobile to enter the gallery as art. In making this point I am aware that objects of the everyday, as subject, made an appearance in much earlier artworks, such as in the Dutch still life tradition (prank) and

\textsuperscript{194} Varndoe and Gopnik, \textit{High and Low}.
\textsuperscript{196} The legacies of the readymade and the mass-reproduced image continue to flourish, such that the amalgam of high and low has become a commonplace. Their echo may be heard in Warhol’s brillo boxes and the \textit{Dead Ends} of Damien Hirst. By isolating kitsch ornaments from the context of popular culture in which they are normally encountered, Jeff Koons re-incarnates Duchamp. The reformulations and extensions of the readymade are seemingly endless. In each of these we see the ramifications of the commodity and the everyday.
\textsuperscript{198} Jackson Pollock’s use of automotive enamels in his paintings is one example.
\textsuperscript{199} The artist Chris Burden explicitly raises Duchamp’s ghost when he asks “How many people think that functional objects buildings, furniture, cars can be art?” Chris Burden. \textit{The Rise and Fall of Western Industrialism as Seen Through the Automobile}. 1975. Felt-tip pen, pencil and chalk on six pieces of notebook paper.
through the work of painters who depicted modern life.\footnote{Demonstrated for example, by Manet's \textit{A Bar at the Floies-Bergère} (1882) and in the extent to which Toulouse-Lautrec's posters operate at the interstices of advertising and art.} Yet arguably, it is largely \textit{after} Duchamp that a space for the art of the \textit{everyday}, the \textit{commodity} and the \textit{mass-produced} becomes a reality. It is under the auspices of this holy trinity that the car finds its most prominent position in the recent history of art.

\textit{Objects of Desire}

Almost as soon as it entered the orbit of art, the presence of the car became associated with desire. In large part this may be attributed to the impact of the Futurists, who embraced the automobile with an unabashed mechanophilia. As the first major movement to explore the motor car as a subject matter for art, Futurist paintings, poetry and specific tenets of their thought were directly determined by the experiential qualities of automobility. The sensation of speeding in a motor car affirmed their "belief that dynamic, simultaneous sensations were among the basic forces of reality."\footnote{Gerald Silk 1984. \textit{Automobile and Culture. The Museum of Contemporary Art}, Los Angeles and Harry N. Abrams, Inc: New York, p 57.} And as a result of their sensibility for speed and flux the automobile is almost always pictured in motion. Indeed, Futurism's endowment to Modern art was in 'transforming the canvas into "the dynamic sensation" itself'.\footnote{Gerald Silk quoting Apollonio, Futurist Manifestos, in Gerald D. Silk 1981 'Fu Balla e Balla Futurista', \textit{Art Journal}, 41 (4) Futurism (Winter), p 332.} Giacomo Balla, in particular sought to express the effects of velocity, virtually erasing the car's recognisable form.\footnote{Balla produced over 100 works that incorporate the automobile or its effects. For an analysis of Balla's work see Silk, 'Fu Balla e Balla Futurista', pp. 328–336.} Stressing the sensory qualities of motoring, conflating the thrill of speed with beauty and sexual potency, it is the language of the Futurists more than their art, that make their adoration for this new technology so explicit. Marinetti speaks of "laying amorous hands" on the "scorching breasts" of "snorting beasts" while Balla's images spin with the energy and exhilaration of forward motion.

There is no doubt that other artists of the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century were similarly compelled by the look and power of the machine. Nor were the Futurists alone in drawing upon "mechanical analogies for sexual behaviour".\footnote{Silk 'The Image of the Automobile in American Art', p 207.} Picabia's witty object portraits are implicitly sexual.\footnote{For a detailed analysis of Picabia's imagery and process see Marlea Caudill Dennison 2001, 'Automobile Parts and Accessories In Picabia's Machinist Works of 1915-17', \textit{The Burlington Magazine}, 143 (1178) May: 276–283.} It is likely that these early examples set the tone for subsequent interpretive frameworks, only to be exacerbated by the postwar boom in commodity fetishism, the rise of youth culture and
1960s sexual liberation. From Ed Keinholz’s Backseat Dodge to Kenneth Anger’s Kustom Kar Kommandos, many artists have explicitly ‘fleshed out’ the bond between cars and sex. While the thread of desire runs through much of the art (and visual culture) of automobility, the framework of the fetish is made abundantly clear in the interpretive and curatorial process.

**Frameworks of Fetish**

It is not hard to see why the art of the automobile is modelled along the lines of the fetish. As an object and an idea that constitutes a projective act, the automobile readily enfolds the three dominant forms of fetishism – sexual, commodity, and religious – simultaneously. In each iteration the car becomes an emblem for value in its absence. That is the car stands in for sex, for status, as something to worship – as ‘sites of displaced lack’. According to Wetzel, it is the fetish, in its various analytical capacities, that affords the automobile consideration as a ‘complex thing’. In each of the primary models of fetishism (anthropological, Marxist, Freudian), the object’s irreducible materiality is an essential characteristic: “The truth of the fetish resides in its status as a material embodiment.” Thus, the thingness of the automobile is central to its interpretation in art. However, one incongruity with this construction, in its emphasis on the discrete object, is that it renders the car as unduly static.

In a departure from object-centred formulations, Charissa Terranova employs the automotive artworks of Richard Prince to argue for a fetish ‘rethink’; suggesting that the fetish be redefined as ‘a mobile component, a flow in fact, in an intermeshing network.’ Regarded anew, the fetish may be conceived “as something that connects and layers rather than sits disparately and singly as a longed-for object.” In a related emphasis on the mutability of the fetish, Apter suggests that it is precisely as a result of so much fixing that a destabilisation and

---

206 Kenneth Anger’s Kustom Kar Kommandos, Ed Keinholz’ Backseat Dodge and Margaret Dodd’s film This woman is not a car (1982) and the latter’s various ceramics (e.g. Holden with lipstick surfboards 1977) are all pressing illustrations of this analogy.
displacement of reference can occur. “Fetishism, in spite of itself, unfixes representation even as it enables them to become monolithic ‘signs’ of culture.”211

It is perhaps “in the clash of this incommensurable difference”212 that the fetish has become such a familiar and productive construct for analysing car culture in art. As Hal Foster points out, in a different context, no other model can grasp “such a symbolic figuration of conflict and contradiction” except for “one based on an expanded concept of fetishism.”213 Thus, the relevance of the fetish as an analytical framework for addressing the art of car culture may be attributed to the ambiguities inherent to automobility itself. The contradictory impulses at the nexus of the automobile when viewed through the frameworks of fetish, become “the site of both the formation and the revelation of ideology and value-consciousness.”214

Automobility in the Institution of Art

It would be impractical to propose a world-wide survey of art that incorporates cars and other aspects of automobility. The breadth of such a collection would be overwhelming and the risk would be that any analysis would be too general to offer meaningful conclusions. Nor would this approach necessarily tell us much about the way the car is used as a mode of creative practice. A more workable model within the framework of art theory or the history of 20th century art is to focus on a particular movement (e.g. Futurism), artist (e.g. John Chamberlain),215 selection of artworks (e.g. Warhol’s Disaster Series), or mode of working practice (e.g. documentary photography). This tack allows one to draw upon the methodological tools of art history and criticism while also employing key ideas in a theoretical armature.

A survey of museums, exhibitions and related art discourse indicates that there are various means by which automobility has entered the institutional art space. The dominant interest concerns how cars and car cultures have influenced the practice of particular artists or where they feature in an artwork. Ed Ruscha’s Standard gas station paintings or Wolf Vostell’s installations are appropriate examples. Automobilities have also become a source of interest when interrogating a particular aesthetic or when examining the cultural context in which an

artist was operating. The utopian ideals of the machine age and Precisionism, for example, are refracted through Charles Scheeler’s series on Ford’s River Rouge Plant. These approaches are foremost directed to the development of specific works, artists’ oeuvres or movements. But this angle also points to the notion of art as an individual articulation or response to culture, an outlook which finds expression through a ‘thematic’ approach to art.216

On the one hand automotive themed exhibitions display a curatorial intrigue in how culture may be captured or communicated through art, with the dominance of the automobile in American culture often an inherent subtext. In other instances, curators and art scholars are interested in how the car as an everyday object becomes a focus, motif or motivation for the practice of non-Western ‘folk arts’. An evocative case in point is the Ghanian funerary tradition of customising coffins in the image of everyday objects, including cars. In the case of the latter, it is tempting to suggest that the car’s role as a vehicle of transport is significant in marking the passage from life to death. However, Roberta Bonneti emphasises that the abebuu adeka or “fantasy coffin” “are not vehicles of escape to a fantasy reality” but rather a “a sign of identity” by which “people can differentiate themselves from their neighbors, rivals, and even predecessors.” As suggested by the choice of Mercedes Benz and other luxury cars, the choice of object is a “strategy for objectifying and negotiating their prestige, or simply for fulfilling their desire.”217

The Car as Artefact

Of the approaches discussed thus far automobility is experienced in image, as a representation218 or reference of some kind or another. A different strategy that may be discerned is in the display of actual cars. Automobiles have been deployed in thematic exhibitions, world fairs and expositions from the late 19th century, and are also a common feature in museums of social history and technology. Here they are generally used to signify some innovation or aspect of a past or future society. In the Detroit Historical Museum, for example, a Cadillac is displayed as a tangible symbol of the automotive assembly line on which so many early migrants to the city worked. Other displays invoke the automobile to illustrate

216 An example of this would be the exhibition Automobile and Culture, but is not necessarily tied only to the theme of the car. The exhibition High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture (MOMA), for example, reveals how some artists were drawing upon the idea and image of the car cast as a consumable product through advertising.
218 I use the term representation here quite loosely, to include artworks that are not strictly representational, (eg abstract or conceptual) such as the car bonnets of Richard Prince.
an idea or subject, like transport, the machine aesthetic, popular culture, or advertising. As these examples demonstrate the incorporation of actual cars within the gallery is not confined to the institutions of art. However, it is generally within these latter contexts that the car is appreciated foremost as an aesthetic object or artwork in its own right.

The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) began showing cars in the 1950s, and in 1972 was the first institution of its kind to produce a show “dealing with the esthetics of automobile design.” The 8 automobiles exhibition was essentially a celebration of industrial design, that highlighted both the formal qualities and functionality of select vehicles. Chosen for “their excellence as works of art and for their relevance to contemporary problems of passenger car design” the cars were displayed on a specially designed elevated roadway “paved with white pebbles.” This event set the stage for subsequent automotive themed displays and the ongoing acquisition of cars and car components in the permanent collection of MOMA.

While something of a vanguard in the context of the modern art museum, MOMA’s curatorial model for exhibiting cars is not dissimilar to that of the dedicated automotive institution. Many large car museums house dedicated displays or whole gallery spaces exhibiting art that incorporates cars. By way of contrast, smaller car museums tend to present visual arrangements comprising motifs from automobile pop culture and/or photographic displays of cars. A mutual appreciation of the car’s utility and its potential for beauty is a shared

---

219 Such deployments mirror a tack adopted by key 20th century theorists (e.g. Barthes, Bourdieu, Baudrillard, deBord) who often used automobiles or particular car features as a departure point for musing upon certain concepts or traits in Western society (e.g. commerce and advertising, taste, the spectacle).


221 Of the eight vehicles exhibited, five were of European design (1931 Mercedes SS; 1939 Bentley; 1939 Talbot-Lago coupe; 1949 Morris MG; 1949 Cisitalia) and three were American (1937 Cord, 1941 Lincoln Continental; 1951 Willys-Overland Jeep). Photographs of other cars were also displayed. The Museum of Modern Art ‘Museum to Open First Exhibition’, p 1.

222 In fact the roadway extended from the first floor galleries and into the Museum garden, thus linking the external space of the Museum with its interior. The Museum of Modern Art, ‘Museum to Open First Exhibition’, p 3.

223 MOMA has a large collection of automotive design objects ranging from upholstery swatches to door handles and entire vehicles. It has held several automotive exhibitions including: Designed for Speed: Three Automobiles by Ferrari, November 4, 1993–April 5, 1994; Different Roads: Automobiles for the Next Century, July 22–September 21, 1999, AUTObodies: speed, sport, transport” June 29–September 16, 2002.

224 By this I include some of the large car museums, automotive corporation and factory galleries and, to a lesser extent, flagship showrooms I visited over the course of this project. Despite differences between these institutions, various crossovers occur. For a detailed study of the automotive museum see Rob Pilgrim 2005. The Blokes’ Museum: The Role of the Automobile Museum in Australian Culture. Unpublished PhD thesis, Flinders University.
theme amongst such displays. As conveyed in the original *8 Automobiles* catalogue, this often results in a celebratory tone:

> Automobiles are hollow, rolling sculpture ... We have selected cars whose details and basic design suggest that automobiles, besides being America’s most useful Useful Objects, could be a source of visual experience.\(^{225}\)

In the 60 years since MOMA’s initiative, there have been numerous art exhibitions worldwide that feature automobiles as art.\(^{226}\) The most prominent and enduring example is the BMW Art Car collection, constituents of which regularly tour the major art institutions of the globe.\(^{227}\)

A more recent museological campaign has seen art institutions welcome auto enthusiasts and car club activities in association with car themed exhibitions. In recent years exhibition programming has seen the integration of educational programs and outreach activities with the aim of increasing visitor attendance and reaching new audiences with art.\(^{228}\) Insofar as it works to unite the spaces within and immediately outside of the museum, this approach serves to bridge the rarefied atmosphere of the gallery and the everyday air of the public sphere. By integrating activities and enthusiasts from ‘outside’ the art arena within the exhibition calendar these events broaden the spectrum of public art and align gallery practice within a participatory agenda that is indicative of contemporary art.

Within each of these curatorial delineations we can identify the ongoing work of the readymade. By bringing the car into the gallery whether as a design object, artwork or cultural expression artists and institutions continue to challenge the slippery distinctions between high/low, mass-produced/hand-crafted, artefact/artwork that Duchamp’s actions posed.\(^{229}\)

As this section has demonstrated, a contemporary art theory approach implicitly acknowledges that the practices and discourses of art are perpetually changing. There is no single authoritative narrative, nor, has the definition of art remained static. By exploring a


\(^{226}\) Examples include Hot Rods and Customs (September 1996) Oakland Museum; Kustom Kulture organised in 1993 by the Laguna Art Museum Speed: The Art of the Performance Automobile, Utah Museum of Fine Art (June 2 - September 16, 2012); Warhol and Cars, Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale (November 10, 2012 – February 10, 2013);

\(^{227}\) I visited an iteration of this display at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney in 2007.

\(^{228}\) One example is the Cars in the Park event – held in association with the Allure of the Automobile at the Portland Art Museum. Every Friday night a different car club representing different affiliations and enthusiasms were invited to display their cars.

\(^{229}\) This is not to suggest however that the contemporary art space is beyond critique in the way it mediates the modes of address and language in how it courts this transgression.
number of trajectories in art theory, I am able to consider how the art of automobility has developed in dialogue with changing concepts of art. Moreover, by tracking the shifts and challenges to art discourse over the last century I am able to question the relevance today of distinctions between high and low, public and private, mass-manufactured and handmade.

Finally, by situating this study within a rubric of contemporary art theory I am recognising that art must be considered contextually. Importantly such an approach urges an awareness of the conditions underlying art making, exhibiting and viewing and how they in turn are contingent upon specificities like gender, class, place and race as well as dramatic changes occurring on the global stage. A comprehensive, nuanced and deep understanding of art, therefore, requires close attentiveness to individual works. This has shaped the direction of my research towards the selection of specific case studies for detailed analysis and discussion.

![Carhenge](image)

Figure 2.3 Carhenge. Photographer Jill Ruskamp. From the Through the Viewfinder series.
Section Two – Material Culture and Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past

Archaeology and the Study of the Contemporary World

Archaeology has been associated with the study of humanity and deep time since it first emerged as a discipline in the 19th century.\(^{230}\) Over recent years, however, many of its practitioners have come to recognise that archaeology is less defined by any particular time period than by the methods, concepts, data and materials that constitute its research.\(^{231}\) This realisation found expression in the 1960s and later became the impetus for a number of groundbreaking archaeological projects exploring the material culture of modern life.\(^{232}\) Central to the thinking and approach of this early endeavour was the idea that the sites and materials of contemporary life could be used as a test-bed for training students. Sites of automobility such as dead-end roads and used car lots were amongst some of these early student exercises.\(^{233}\) Revisiting the contributions of this work some twenty years later, Buchli and Lucas suggest that many of these exploratory investigations now appear overly determined by a pedagogical and/or ethno-archaeological agenda and how this might inform conventional archaeological research. In short, the archaeology of today, as it was formulated then, was rarely seen as an end in itself but used as a basis for developing insights about the deep past.

Most notable amongst this first generation of modern material culture studies is The Garbage Project, which applied archaeological methods of sorting, classification, quantification and analysis to recently disposed garbage.\(^{234}\) An important outcome of this longitudinal study of refuse discard patterns was the identification of a “disjuncture between what people do and what they say they do”.\(^{235}\) As such, it demonstrates what can be learned about human behaviour from studying material culture directly. It also reveals how a better understanding


of resource waste, gleaned through archaeology, can be mobilised through channels as varied as popular media and legislation to create change in consumer actions. According to project instigator William Rathje the goal of *The Garbage Project* was always to 'intervene' in contemporary society and its future. In a similar sense Rathje and his American colleagues might be said to have laid the groundwork for a future archaeology. Despite this innovative outlook towards modern material culture and the ongoing interests of individual archaeologists, however, a critical momentum for 'the archaeology of us' took a further two decades to become established.

Over the intervening period between the first forays and the turn of the 21st century there has been a considerable shift in the way the archaeology of the contemporary world is perceived and practiced. To begin with, the very interface between past and present has become a source of exploration, as archaeologists come to understand the challenge of discussing the past "in any other terms than the present." Buchli and Lucas argue that in contesting the cleavage between that which is temporally proximal and that which is distant, the archaeology of today urges us to consider how our methods alienate our subject. This point encapsulates two key themes which have come to characterise this field of study.

The first concerns the idea of the absent present. The archaeology of now, it is proposed, tenders a path of critical and creative intervention in society because it offers a voice to those issues and narratives that are ignored or otherwise marginalised by discourse. This might include for example studying the "debris of globalization" as manifest in the logging of Amazonian forests or the archaeology of homelessness. A second theme that is consistently expressed echoes the process of defamiliarisation outlined by Shklovsky. By making the

---

familiar unfamiliar we may come to investigate the everyday experiences, practices and objects that shape the contemporary world. It is, after all, the everyday aspects of life that define “what it means to be ‘us’”. This emphasis on the quotidian highlights the impulse of contemporary archaeology to attend to the overlooked, and allows scope for the study of protest camps, housing estates, graffiti, theme parks and a vast number of other subjects not previously considered under archaeology’s remit.

Archaeologies of the contemporary past, as they have manifest to date, coalesce around the artefacts and assemblages of “late modernity” that emerge from or follow World War II. Investigations range from the large-scale remnants of cold war heritage and the signatures of the space race to the intimacies of the domestic sphere and localised memory. Yet Harrison and Schofield are right to remind us that the contemporary period cannot be chronologically fixed and as such the temporal and spatial parameters of this field, like the present itself, may best be conceived as emergent. Operating as it is in the potential of the present, ‘contemporary archaeology’ is concerned both with that which has ceased to function and that which continues to work. In short, it makes space for the ‘living and the dead, the operative and the defunct’. It is this, together with its stress upon the challenges of modernity and the matter of everyday, that invites an archaeology of automobility to take shape.

Archaeologies of Automobility

I have suggested that an investigation of automobility may be situated well within the remit of an archaeology of and in the present. In some respects the car embodies the materiality of the present directly, as a technology that continues to change and circulate ubiquitously but

244 See Harrison and Schofield, *After modernity*, on the use of this term to delineate the field.
247 I use this phrase following Harrison, ‘Surface assemblages’, though I do not agree with some aspects of the argument in which he introduced the term.
which through its specific material expression has a delimited life. It is this latter feature of car culture — its abandoned bodies, redundant designs, and symbols of death and transience — that has captured the avid attention of contemporary archaeology studies to date. In practical terms, as Myers points out, it is likely that “encounters between archaeologists and automobiles ... will only become more common.”

Because archaeologists tend to work with what is left from the past, it may be the sense that “the Age of the Car is already passing” that generates an attraction to the subject. This would seem to be the case for archaeologist Mats Burström, whose experience of an old car dump in southern Sweden awakened existential questions about the “the passage of time, the perishability of the material world, and the conditions of human existence.” Burström’s account touches on the public fascination with decaying wrecks and car cemeteries throughout Sweden. He observes that the mnemonic potential of old car bodies is both very personal and powerful. Reflecting upon his own engagement with the car cemetery at Kyrkö Mosse, Burström concludes that understanding what the objects of the past do to us today is an important part of the contemporary archaeology project.

After researching the accumulation of transport and agricultural machinery on farming properties in Australia and Canada, Diana Smith came to a similar conclusion as Burström. Namely, that vehicle ‘dumps’ become both a source and investment of local knowledge, community tradition and family memory. Smith conducted interviews with landowners and carried out archaeological surveys of rural properties to determine how machinery comes to be abandoned, gathered and valued. She further determined that farm graveyards provide a wealth of diagnostic information about the machinery itself and the activities associated with it. It also provides an indication of the broader history of the farm in which it is located, how it operated, whether it was successful and so on. Both Burström and Smith observe that such vehicle assemblages become a part of the landscape, both in the physical sense of erosion

248 Myers, ‘Contemporary Archaeology in Transit’.
251 This fascination is hardly restricted to Sweden, as car dumps and abandoned wrecks in both America and Australia are a popular subject for amateur and professional photographers alike.
banks or wind breaks but also in an intangible heritage sense acting as an anchorage for memories and connections to the cultural landscape. These assemblages may also operate as a marker of cultural landscape, as in the case of Smith, where farm graveyards “delineate agricultural spheres of occupation”.253

The complex relationships that people have with cars – as places of personal, public and professional inhabitation and use – was explored further by a team of UK archaeologists in 2006 when they excavated an actual vehicle.254 Approaching the Ford Transit Van as a site to be excavated and analysed, the archaeologists also used a collaborative and multi-media approach to gathering and sharing information. As well as revealing details of the van’s particular history, in a global context of automobility, this innovative application of archaeological method was auto-ethnographic and reflexive, generating discussion about how and why archaeological knowledge is produced and disseminated.

Unlike archaeological studies that consider particular loci of automotive refuse, Michael Shiffer’s investigations of American car culture largely utilise written documentation, visual records and statistical data.255 Nonetheless, Schiffer’s study focuses on human relations with the car as they occurred in the early decades of the 20th century. He specifically examines the life history of the electric car as a product by considering the car’s performance characteristics and the different ways people interacted with it. He then compares the results of his analysis alongside folk theories about the electric car’s demise. He found little correlation between the reasons the electric car failed to succeed and the explanations people generally offered. Once again, highlighting the disjuncture that the study of ‘contemporary’ material culture lays bare: between what people do and what they say.

Although similarly concerned with the relationships between material culture and society, Paul Graves-Brown adopts quite a different course when he argues that “the car is both habitat and at the same time part of the person”.256 In discussing the inherent dualism of the car – as both the private domain of the human body and the skin of the socially bound individual – Graves-Brown reiterates the paradoxical status of the car which I touched on earlier.

253 Smith, ‘The Memory Machines’.
Whereas the four examples I have outlined focus directly on the relationships forged between people and cars, other archaeological studies draw attention to the physical traces that automobility has left in the landscape. Collins’ survey of some 1,500 car manufacturing plants within the UK gives an indication of the vast breadth of the industry’s archaeological footprint. Of course car production facilities are just one of many potential ‘site types’ that might fall under the auspices of automotive archaeology. More prevalent still are those associated with car use: petrol stations, garages, car sales yards, parking lots, motorsports arenas and the vast network of roads themselves. Finally, museums, car wrecking yards, scrap recycling depots and abandoned car dumps are sites that represent the final stage in the use-life of the car.

We may appreciate even from the few studies described that the archaeology of automobility offers a diversity of theoretical accents, questions, scales and concepts. Accordingly, the car is envisaged variously as a site to be excavated and an assemblage to be mapped, as an artefact with a life history, and as a landscape, a locus of memory, a technology and an extension of self. Whether it is an abandoned drive-in, a used car yard or the ‘non-places’ of the motorway an archaeology of the contemporary past is uniquely positioned to interrogate the material cultures of automobility.

Methods of Contemporary Archaeology

As is evident from the studies outlined there is a range of methods that guide the practice of contemporary archaeology. Indeed, as Harrison and Schofield indicate “it is difficult to see a unitary approach to the methodology that is applied across the discipline”. Yet it is on the basis of its methods, that contemporary archaeology is validated as archaeology and considered distinguishable from material culture studies more broadly. What then are the ways of doing contemporary archaeology?

In many instances the study of the contemporary past utilises the conventional methods of archaeological research including field survey, artefact identification and analysis, excavation, site recording and mapping. Additionally, it is often informed by contemporary sources such as documents, media, living memories and oral accounts. A notable feature of contemporary archaeology texts is a general flexibility and openness in how these techniques are put to use. Some scholars transfer archaeological skills and interpretive techniques

---

257 Collins cited in Harrison and Schofield, After modernity, p 196.
258 Harrison and Schofield, After modernity, p 51.
259 Harrison and Schofield, After modernity.
systematically to new kinds of ‘sites’: an artist’s studio; a suburban backyard, an office environment, an abandoned council flat. Other scholars might use archaeological principles metaphorically, treating excavation for example as a heuristic device for gathering data. As Harrison and Schofield explain, an appropriate “level of detail or rigour” will be determined by the questions and motivations underpinning the research. This non-rigid attitude and general level of acceptance and trust in the researcher’s choices and capabilities has allowed for more experimental modes of working to be embraced. To some extent archaeologists have always worked in an interdisciplinary framework, but now the methodological scope is augmented by drawing, photography, ‘storytelling’, psychogeography, performance and visual mash-ups to investigate the contemporary past and present.

Because it does not necessitate a systematic or procedural approach one might say that to work intuitively and in an exploratory manner is thus an acceptable method of contemporary archaeology. Central to this exploratory approach is the flow of impressions, emotions and memories such encounters stir in the researcher. This implies both reflexivity and a state of ‘being present’ in the world. Inherently, it is an acknowledgement of our affective engagements with the past in the present moment and what it is about these encounters (with empty buildings, lost objects, anonymous traces) that draw us to archaeology in the first place.

This experiential approach is one of the most liberating and stimulating aspects of doing contemporary archaeology. And to some extent such exploratory endeavours, and the new forms of knowledge and thinking they generate, parallel practices of making art. Indeed, the shifting language of archaeological discourse is increasingly leavened with references to the creative mind and calls to imagination. As archaeologists become more at ease with the

263 Harrison and Schofield, After modernity.
264 Although such ideas are developed and practiced in contemporary archaeology, it is important to note their genesis in post-processualism.
265 This term describes practices of walking, or dérive as discussed by Guy de Bord.
methods of artist practitioners so too have they come to acknowledge the inherent creativity in their own ways of working:

Unless we nurture the creative imagination ... there is no point in teaching archaeology at any level, and little pleasure in practising it at all. But we are strangely innocent about the creative process itself.266

While researchers are also investigating archaeological linkages with sculpture,267 painting and installation art,268 photography plays an increasingly significant role in contemporary archaeology practice. It is not simply a tool of documentation but a way of seeing, sensing and learning about the material or place under archaeological investigation.269 As Andrassen, Bjerck and Olsen insist, “photography was crucial” to their study of Pyramiden, an abandoned mining town in the Arctic:

At each moment, and at each place, one is exposed to a multitude of sensations that are hard to express or mediate through ordinary narrative accounts. In our work photography became essential to grasp and mediate our Pyramiden experience.270

What is clear from the studies that represent this subfield is that there is a concerted commitment to interdisciplinarity. This extends to a unique recognition of the mutual desires and practices of contemporary archaeology and art. Before turning to this relationship in greater detail it is worth considering how the methods of contemporary archaeology may have a bearing on other studies. Advocating interdisciplinary engagement, its practitioners clearly demonstrate that no single approach to the contemporary past is warranted or preferred. I would suggest that one way of framing this methodology is as an attentiveness to and of the material realities of the world. So that “to see the archaeology in everything”271 is to think of archaeology simply as a mode of being, seeing and thought.

267 Jones and Paul Bonaventura, ‘Introduction’
268 Harrison, ‘Surface assemblages’.
Archaeology and Contemporary Art

Archaeology has long concerned itself with the study of art, aesthetics and style, and its material expression, as an indicator of the cognitive developments, cultural behaviours and socialities specific to humanity. To make 'art' is to be human, one might say. But in keeping with the dominant concerns of the discipline much of this attention has been directed at the rock art, mobiliary art, earthworks, statuary and artefact assemblages of pre-history. Until fairly recently archaeological investigations into contemporary art have been confined to ethnographic analogy. In other words, insights gained from visual cultures made and used by contemporary Indigenous peoples are applied to cultures of the past.

There is no doubt that archaeology's grounding in the deep past provides some explanation for the few studies of contemporary art. But I would suggest that another significant barrier is the discipline's general discomfort with the concept of 'art'. Having for so long distinguished the images they study from Western categories of art, archaeologists face a significant reorientation in thinking to embrace the processes, practices and arenas that constitute contemporary contexts of 'making'. To some extent this realignment parallels the reorientation that the study of the contemporary past specifically demands of archaeology. That is, to become "a creative engagement with the present".

Having identified that contemporary archaeology and contemporary art intersect in their attention to the present, John Schofield outlines three areas through which their engagement may be explored. These include: art as an archaeological record, archaeological investigation as performance, and art as interpretation, narrative and characterisation. Increasingly, archaeologists are turning their attention to this latter point to consider the contribution that contemporary artists may bring to the interpretation and communication of the archaeological record. More than simply providing illustration of materials, sites and landscapes or imaginative renderings of the past, art practice is becoming regarded as a valid mode of investigation in its own right. As a method, art practice offers new pathways to documenting, representing and interpreting place and the recent past. And with the

---

272 This may also explain why, by contrast, graffiti has proved to be such a popular avenue of contemporary archaeology research. As a mark-making practice which is not generally accepted as art, contemporary graffiti offers archaeologists interpretive frameworks with which they are more at ease, for example as forms of group communication, territorial marking, and place-making behaviour. The excavation of Francis Bacon's studio offers a fruitful start to an archaeological investigation of making.
273 Harrison, 'Surface assemblages', p 141.
knowledge that it generates art has the potential to both complement and challenge archaeological thinking.275

Reflecting on the creative process of American artist Mark Dion, Flores Vilches has argued that "contemporary artwork can help materialise the very process of doing and theorising archaeology by making its contradictions and modus operandi visible."276 Through his acts of field excavation, lab analysis, classification and other curatorial procedures Dion observes, represents and performs archaeology as art. In doing so he urges us to consider where the boundary between these practices reside and how their differences might matter. Dion's interest in archaeology stems from a broader curiosity in how scientific knowledge is constructed. In the context of this thesis it is also worth noting his *Systema Metropolis Fieldwork 3* (2007). This artwork was developed to commemorate the 500th birthday of Carl Linnaeus and comprised an electric car modified with an adhesive screen to trap insect specimens while driving. The insect matter 'recorded' by Dion's modified vehicle was then analysed to identify a variety of insect species.277

Although Dion is most often cited he is but one of many artists to draw upon the archaeological metaphors of excavation, stratigraphy, classification and seriation, or who act out archaeology as a kind of performance art.278 Another is Patrick Nagatani, whose long-term photographic artwork *Ryoichi/Nagatani Excavations* (1985-2001) purports to document a series of excavations undertaken by a Japanese archaeologist named *Ryoichi*. At each of the excavated sites Ryoichi's team makes the astounding discovery of an automobile buried within the dirt: "A 1930 Bentley was unearthed at Stonehenge, a Ferrari Testarossa at Herculaneum, a Mercedes 500 SL in the Cahokia mounds of Illinois."279 Nagatani's photographs comprise artefact documentation, site recordings and representations of the excavation process itself. By deploying archaeology and photography, in a rhetoric of scientific 'proof', Nagatani questions how it is that we represent the past and come to understand our world. What is intriguing to note is the role of the car in this elaborate ruse. By placing the automobile as the central conundrum of the archaeological sequence, Nagatani reaffirms the ubiquity of the vehicle. He directly links its presence to archaeology's quest to understand the

---

275 For particular examples see Renfrew, *Figuring It Out*; Renfrew, Gosden and DeMarrais *Substance, memory, display*.
277 This artwork was one of four field assignments that Dion conducted as part of *Systema Metropolis*.
278 Other artists include the Boyle Family and Simon Fujiwara
human condition. Because the car is in itself such a distinctive temporal marker, it comes to represent time out of place, a material emblem of impossible histories.

While both Nagatani and Dion's creative processes are acutely archaeological in reference, less overtly mimetic modalities are also instructive. For example, some contemporary artworks may provoke an archaeological experience in the viewer without any direct allusion to archaeological concepts, knowledge or praxis. An artwork may strike an archaeological chord even when the artist has no intention of doing so. This may account for why Tracey Emin's prize-winning bed (My bed, 1998) was described as "essentially an archaeological experience" by eminent archaeologist Colin Renfrew, who likened his encounter with Emin's installation to entering a neolithic house at Skara Brae in Orkney. Renfrew's analogy is relevant here in two ways. First it draws attention to the prospect of thinking about the world archaeologically or possessing what one might call an archaeological gaze. Secondly, it illustrates the role that the viewer plays; what each of us might bring to an artwork and how our interpretations work to remake it.

By appreciating her own position within the complex dynamic of art production, reception and display the viewer may come to appreciate the multivocality of contemporary art. This approach has something to offer because it requires a sensitivity to the way we actively encounter the material world. In Renfrew's words it "pays to be an active viewer, acutely aware of one's own part in the interaction that is taking place." Understanding the role of the viewer then and "analyzing how artworks function in relation" to them is an important step in overcoming points of divergence in the dialogue between archaeology and art.

Art Practice as Archaeology

As the previous section made apparent, archaeology has been a source of inspiration for many artists. This includes the methods and principles of archaeological investigation, as well as the archaeological materials themselves. Even systems of artefact storage, presentation and display have proven fertile ground for the artist's imagination. As Vilches states "artworks continue visually to spark metaphors relevant to current archaeological approaches". But to

280 Renfrew, Figuring It Out, p 83; See also John Schofield's analogy between a cardigan left behind in an office and a necklace lost at Skara Brae. Schofield, 'Office Cultures and Corporate Memory'.
281 See Harrison and Schofield, After modernity.
282 Renfrew, Figuring It Out, p 49.
283 See Jones and Bonaventura for their reading of Gell, 'Introduction'.
what extent is it possible for an archaeologist to make art as part of her/his disciplinary practice? This question has been raised through the work of post-processual archaeologists and others, but for many archaeologists there remains a necessary distinction. A growing number of collaborations between archaeologists and artists might seem to suggest otherwise. I offer my own explorations of this prospect – of making art and archaeological knowledge mutually – in the exegetical account of my practice.

In addition to advocating the use of art practice as a mode of archaeological enquiry, a contemporary archaeology approach influences the course of this research in a number of ways. It provides a theoretical framework for examining the sites, assemblages, artefacts, and processes of production and consumption that characterise the material signatures of late modernity—a period in which the system of automobility and the car in particular has flourished. This approach is of further relevance to a study of this nature because it demands attention to the everyday and urges me to engage specifically with the substance or thingness of my subject – as an object, a ensemble of material practices and as a supply chain of resources. The kind of reading that archaeology brings to the study of material culture includes a detailed attention to fabric and its source, but also how objects can develop a biography and become sites for the attachment of memory and fantasy. These are useful analytical perspectives that can be applied in the investigation of specific cars and artworks.

Section Three – The Visual in Anthropology

The visual has been a productive force within the discipline of anthropology since its emergence in the mid-19th century, but it is only in recent decades that scholars have come to conceptualise the visual as a sub-field of anthropological enquiry.285 Some anthropologists argue that the study of the visual should not be separated out from the broader project of anthropology, because it is “inextricably threaded through most if not all areas of anthropological activity.”286 Taylor argues that an anthropology that is conducted through visual media, as distinct from the anthropological study of the visual, allows for the evocation of lived experience in a way that written or verbal modes of address cannot.287 Indeed some

---

285 Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson are credited with extolling the importance of visual methods despite a general disregard within the discipline.
have argued that it is the liminality of visual anthropology that allows it to challenge the assumptions of the broader discipline and make it a border-crossing field.  

Although scholars continue to redefine its parameters and purpose, visual anthropology is generally recognised as having two primary orientations. One concerns the application of visual methods and materials in the production of anthropological knowledge. The other involves “the study of visual systems and visible culture” within specific socio-cultural contexts. These two endeavours reflect a key distinction illuminated by Worth, between “using a medium and studying how a medium is used.” A chronological account of the development of visual anthropology, such as the three-phase model proposed by Banks and Ruby, might present these two branches (and their subsequent expansion) as progressive stages in a history that closely tracks the intellectual trajectory of anthropology itself. Another perspective, increasingly argued by visual anthropologists, is that this ‘field’ of study has the power to transform aspects of the broader discipline.

The earliest period in this history spans the first century of anthropology when researchers were the image-makers and when photography and film were largely used to document non-Western cultures and provide evidence for anthropological theories of the day. Grimshaw argues that initial inklings of an anthropological anxiety around the primacy of vision and its conflation with a knowledge of the world corresponds to a broader disenchantment with the sense of ‘sight’ that arose around the time of the First World War. The catastrophe of war, she


295 Morphy and Banks give a general account of this period but more detailed accounts of particular approaches, practitioners and photographs are offered in Edwards, ‘Tracing Photography’ and Anna Grimshaw 2001 The Ethnographer’s Eye: Ways of Seeing in Modern Anthropology. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
suggests, “was the graveyard of the eye” and ultimately undermined the European idea of evolutionary progress. Visual methods suffered in the wake of this paradigm shift. Not because they were no longer used (they were) but because their relevance was called into question. MacDougall aligns the eclipse in anthropological research conducted through visual media with the establishment of “participant-observation ... as the cornerstone of anthropological practice”. What followed was an anthropological discourse driven by experiences of fieldwork and text-based communication and a “systemic iconophobia”.

One might argue that the new uncertainties surrounding visual media methods in anthropology created a space for the field to regenerate, as researchers began to interrogate their own motivations for making images. We might link this emergent reflexivity to a second phase in Banks and Ruby’s history of visual anthropology. It is during the 1960s, 70s and 80s, as practitioners began to critique established modes of ethnographic representation, that filmmaking became a core tool, technique and theoretical platform for research. While ethnographic film became a dominant form within visual anthropology – and the work of various ethnographic filmmakers demonstrates that film possesses distinctive analytical and communicative capacities – it remains to be embraced by anthropology as a whole.

In advancing the idea that ethnographic film has created a new kind of vision, David MacDougall reminds us that film, like other visual media, employs principles that are unlike those of writing. This in itself provides a compelling rationale for why anthropologists might choose to research paintings, home videos, postcards, body decoration, or a range of other cultural forms. These studies – of how a particular medium or visual system is used – comprise the second branch of visual anthropology research. While anthropologists have long been aware of visual culture, attention to these cultural forms has expanded in recent decades, in part as a result of a “pictorial turn” in anthropology. This interest is one attribute that Banks and Ruby use to delineate the third phase in their chronology, which spans from the 1990s to the present. Other key interests in the visual anthropology of today

---

299 See for example films by Jean Rouch, John Marshall, Tim Asch and David and Judith MacDougall.
301 See Taylor, ‘Visual Anthropology Is Dead’.
302 See for example Pink (ed.), *Doing Visual Ethnography*.
303 Banks and Ruby, ‘Introduction’.
include the application of new media, an engagement with the sensory faculties of the body, and a commitment to interdisciplinarity, "boundary crossing and collaboration".

**Ways of Seeing in Anthropology**

What this historical synopsis demonstrates is that the scope of the visual in anthropology has expanded significantly over the course of the last century. Despite the shifts and fluctuations that characterise this diversity of scholarship, arguably one consistent thread underpins and unites the majority. This might best be described as a concern with ways of seeing. Over time and through a variety of theoretical lenses this interest has manifest differently. It is evident in early photographic practices where images were constructed to convey particular kinds of information, and it is apparent also in the rejection of those very same representational conventions decades later. An attention to ways of seeing is at the forefront of anthropological attempts to understand the visible cultural forms of individuals and communities. It is also present in the reflexivity with which anthropologists consider their own observational and representational practices.

More recently this anthropological interest in vision has expanded radically to embrace the notion of "corporeal images", "multi-sensoriality" and "skilled visions". These ideas reflect an explicit acknowledgement that vision cannot be isolated from the multi-sensory experience of the body and the embodied knowledge that it generates. Significantly, this

---

307 For example Grimshaw, *The Ethnographer’s Eye*.
308 See for example Edwards, 'Tracing Photography'
310 See for example Grimshaw, *The Ethnographer’s Eye*.
311 MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image*.
recognition extends to the image itself. Practices of looking, seeing and making photographs, as Pink points out, "involves the convergence of a range of different social, material, discursive and moral elements in a multisensory environment, rather than being a solely visual process."\(^\text{314}\) So that photographs, for example, have the capacity "to invoke experiences that we associate with other sensory categories".\(^\text{315}\) This has implications for the visual researcher, the participant(s), the viewer(s) and the overall potential of the research encounter. As MacDougall expresses it:

> We see with our bodies, and any image we make carries the imprint of our bodies; that is to say, of our being as well as the meanings we intend to convey ... when we look purposefully, and when we think, we complicate the process of seeing enormously ... The images we make become artifacts of this ... They are, in a sense, mirrors of our bodies, replicating the whole of the body's activity, with its physical movements, its shifting attention ... [they] are not just the images of other bodies; they are also images of the body behind the camera and its relations with the world.\(^\text{316}\)

MacDougall’s insightful comments demonstrate why image-making research is not simply a mode of documentation but a process of inquiry. Furthermore, film and photography potentially allow the viewer to follow the trajectory of the research practice through the researcher’s own body.\(^\text{317}\)

Parallel with an understanding that the researcher’s presence is implied within the image, is the realisation that the photographer cannot be edited out of the picture.\(^\text{318}\) This visual consciousness and self-recognition is related in some ways to what Willerslev describes as "depth reflexivity that is built into vision."\(^\text{319}\) Vision, she suggests (following Merleau-Ponty), allows us access to the world and access to ourselves because the act of looking involves both

\(^{315}\) Ibid.
\(^{317}\) Less commonly do we gain access to such visual accounts of the research process in still photography. Aside from the odd illustration to accompany text, there are few visual ethnographies in which the body of the researcher/photographer appears explicitly. This is in contrast to the presence of the anthropologist filmmaker whose body is often made explicit through vocal address, image reflection, and ‘shooting back’. It is also in contrast to the conventions of documentary photography as practiced by artists, who appear more willing to picture themselves (e.g. Carol Jerrems and William Yang).
\(^{318}\) This understanding is often made more explicit in film, where the voice or image of the filmmaker is captured or otherwise referred to by people in the film. I am unaware of any visual anthropology which uses photography quite so explicitly.
\(^{319}\) Rane Willerslev, ‘To have the world at a distance’, p 31.
seeing and being seen.\textsuperscript{320} Moreover, much may be learned by examining actual practices of looking, including those kinds of vision that are acquired through training. Such “skilled visions”\textsuperscript{321} not only convey “certain kinds of sociality, ideology and standards of practice ... they also configure them.”\textsuperscript{322} Thus an anthropology focused on vision may also be construed as an attempt to identify how people learn to see the world and how an “intent and skillful capacity for looking is learnt and taught.”\textsuperscript{323}

\textit{Anthropology and Art}

With its concerted emphasis on perception, images and the diversity of looking, seeing and imaging practices it is hardly surprising that in recent years visual anthropology has begun to explore the methodological potential of the creative arts. This new direction has emerged from “considering art and anthropology as analogous practices”\textsuperscript{324} and broadens the scope of visual anthropology markedly. For although anthropology and art history have long shared an interest in the contexts of production, circulation and reception of art there are general differences in how they have “put art objects to work for them.”\textsuperscript{325}

One difference in their approaches is that anthropology is somewhat less constrained by the categories that dominate Western art history and aesthetics, instead drawing its analysis from an understanding of the socio-cultural contexts in which art objects are produced and consumed. In short the anthropology of art is largely concerned with how art operates in the specific socio-cultural context in which it is construed. It is important to note, however, that while focusing on the specificities of the local anthropologists recognise that in the contemporary world any study of the local cannot be divorced from broader influences and issues played out globally. In this respect anthropology is accustomed to examining ‘art’ that sustains multiple functions and social uses. Within such a framework the emphasis shifts away from broadly Western determinants of taste and value, as evident in the debates over categorisation like art/craft, handmade/mass produced, high/low, etc. This approach has obvious benefits when a researcher aims to consider the various functions of an art object or when the subject of analysis falls outside the established conventions of art technique, media or form.

\textsuperscript{320} Rane Willerslev, ‘To have the world at a distance’.
\textsuperscript{321} Grasseni, ‘Skilled Visions’.
\textsuperscript{322} Grasseni ‘Introduction’, p 5.
\textsuperscript{323} Grasseni, ‘Skilled Visions’, p 20.
\textsuperscript{325} Westermann, \textit{Anthropologies of Art}, p xiv.
Another important contribution that anthropologists have brought to the understanding of art is in elucidating its capacity for mediation.\textsuperscript{326} As Morphy notes “the mediating role is fundamental to art objects. They mediate between domains of existence, they mediate between artist and audience, and they mediate between an object that they are an index of and the person interacting with that object.”\textsuperscript{327} It is perhaps for this reason – art’s capacity to intercede – that some anthropologists (along with art historians and artists) have identified the contemporary practice of art as fertile ground for an expanded visual anthropology. Grimshaw views such creative ventures as a reflexive project that involves “a fundamental reorientation of perspective.”\textsuperscript{328} By bringing art and ethnography into the same fold – as embodied empirical practices that lead to the production of knowledge – she aims to question how knowledge is made and legitimated. In an illuminating discussion of her “experiments in visual practice”\textsuperscript{329} she reveals how new perspectives on “research as a process of making” and “the process of ethnography as a process of working with found materials”\textsuperscript{330} emerge from the cross-disciplinary dialogue.

\textit{Anthropology and Documentary Photography}

Recent work by artists and anthropologists demonstrate how the visual may be the focus of anthropological inquiry as well as an outcome of the research. Evidence of this is also found in anthropology’s photographic legacy, which demonstrates a strong tendency towards cross-disciplinary engagement. Indeed Edwards suggests that the “excesses that made photography difficult to control” are also responsible for connecting “anthropology to other photographic practices and discourses.”\textsuperscript{331} Perhaps more than any other expressive medium, photography has transcended or blurred the boundary in contemporary art-anthropology relations.\textsuperscript{332} A perceived division between these two applications of photography is often framed as a tension between art and science. Early ‘border crossings’ may be found in the work of Franz Boas, Aby Warburg, and Arthur Haddon\textsuperscript{333} but they also appear less explicitly in some

\textsuperscript{327} Morphy, ‘Art as a Mode of Action’, p 8.
\textsuperscript{328} Grimshaw, ‘Reconfiguring the Ground’, p 199.
\textsuperscript{329} Ibid. p 201.
\textsuperscript{330} Ibid. p 204.
\textsuperscript{331} Edwards, ‘Tracing Photography’, p 168.
\textsuperscript{332} Film is another media that has pushed at the margins of the art/anthropology border. For Schneider’s argument on the artificiality of this boundary see Schneider, Arnd 2011. ‘Unfinished Dialogues: Alternative History of Art and Anthropology’, Banks and Ruby, \textit{Made to Be Seen}, pp 108-135.
\textsuperscript{333} Schneider, ‘Unfinished Dialogues’
photographic ethnographies of the early 20th century. For example, the images produced by Spencer and Gillen in Aboriginal Australia reveal how some anthropologists were “equally attuned to the artistic and scientific potential of photography.”

The photo essay is one example of the kind of stylistic parallels that anthropological photography and other arts and documentary practices have shared. Edwards refers to other cross-fertilisations which ultimately reflect the potential of anthropological photography to do more than simply set the scene or validate observations made ‘in the field’. We can certainly find synergies in the work of several artists and anthropologists even though they were produced within and for different disciplinary contexts, audiences and purposes. This shared terrain is the field of documentary photography. Despite similarities in certain imaging conventions and documentary genres, a notable difference in approach may be discerned in the subject of investigation. Reflecting a general tendency in the anthropology of art, anthropological photography has traditionally focussed on non-Western cultures. By contrast, artists working in a documentary mode have photographed both within and outside the societies and cultures they inhabit. One might go so far as to suggest that documentary photography as practiced by artists to some extent filled the gap left by anthropology’s disinterest. In recent years there has been an effort to redress this imbalance as visual anthropologists assert that “the ‘field’ must include the visual cultures of the West”. The measured pace of this anthropological turn towards a less exotic West, when coupled with the car’s perceived association with ‘Western’ progress, may go some way towards explaining the dearth of automobility in visual anthropology research.

**Visual Anthropology and Car Culture Research**

The historian of photography Elizabeth Edwards has suggested that photography’s potency as a focus of anthropological inquiry may be attributed in large part to photography’s ubiquity.

---

335 Edwards, Tracing Photography, p 169.
336 There are many photographers who worked within the domains of non-Western cultures and arguably contribute to the history of visual anthropology, even though they were not trained as anthropologists. Examples include Charles Mountford, Axel Poignant and Edward Weston.
337 Schneider and Grimshaw make this point generally about the anthropology of art.
338 Examples include Eugene Atget, Berenice Abbott, Brassai, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Walker Evans to name a few of the many earlier photographers who worked in a social documentary manner.
The same cannot be said for the automobile. For despite its sheer magnitude of presence, it would seem to be of little anthropological appeal. This is particularly evident in the case of the visual, even though the car and its culture(s) are exceedingly visualised and visible. There have been a small number of anthropological studies that have focussed attention on car cultures, and few still that employ visual methods or analysis.

Significantly, many anthropological approaches to the car remain focussed on non-Western cultures. Even those studies undertaken in Western countries have tended to direct their attention to distinct ethnic groups or Indigenous peoples. To take one example, the lowrider car culture has garnered the majority of anthropological attention in America and is consistently examined as an expression or representation of Mexican American identity.

Though the origins of lowriding are generally attributed to the Mexican American (Hispanic/Chicano/Latino) communities of the American southwest, this car culture now finds expression much wider in terms of both its geographical distribution and the ethnicity of its affiliates. A global lowrider culture now comprises individuals from a diversity of backgrounds, including for example Anglo-Australians, African-Americans, and Japanese nationals. Needless to say many Americans who identify as Latino or Hispanic make up the greatest proportion of the lowrider culture, where it is often a source of pride as “an icon of a barrio identity”. Moreover, the image of the lowrider and the visual lexicon that lowriders employ remains tethered to key identifiers of a Mexican imaginary.

In large part researchers have used the lowrider tradition as a prism for exploring the realities of life for Mexican Americans. In this respect the lowrider car operates as an image or representation that scholars have unpacked. Needless to say even where anthropologists fail to identify their projects as visual research, by virtue of its distinctive features the lowrider car demands a visual acuity on behalf of the researcher. Modifications that include lowering the car’s suspension, and the installation of hydraulics (that allow the car to bounce, jump,

---


‘dance’, or ‘hop’) are integral to understanding how the car functions within the lowrider community. Other custom features\textsuperscript{344} that characterise the lowrider style (e.g. wire-spoke wheel rims, chrome or gold-plated accessories, and multi-coloured paint work) equally communicate information about the values expressed through lowriding and the social, cultural and historical underpinnings of the culture.

Cultural anthropologist Martin Høyem explored the meaning and production of lowrider aesthetics and used photographic methods during his fieldwork.\textsuperscript{345} In a subsequent visual essay Hoyem responds directly to lowrider visuality, particularly the use of colour, by manipulating his images using post-production techniques (Figure 2.4). By selectively rendering most if not all but the car itself as a greyscale image, Høyem draws attention to the visual properties of the car and the performative value that underlies the use of custom painting. To my mind Hoyem’s visual essay is an example of the kind of amalgam of art and anthropological practice that lays the groundwork for future visual anthropology research. As well as conveying the visual cues and influences that characterise the culture of lowriding in Los Angeles, his images communicate something of his own practice as an ethnographer of lowrider culture. His photographs, like his text, are interpretations of his experiences.

Figure 2.4 Pachuco style, Los Angeles, California, 2005. Photography © Martin Høyem. “The teenagers in front of this car, dressed in the style of 1940 pachucos, are attending a quinceañera. They will be chauffeured to church,

\textsuperscript{344}For a more extensive list of features that typify lowrider style see Rubén Mendoza 2000. ‘Cruising Art and Culture in Azatlan: Lowriding in the Mexican American Southwest’ in Francisco A. Lomeli and Karin Ikas (eds) \textit{U.S. Latino Literatures and Cultures: Transnational Perspectives}. Heidelberg, pp 3-35.

and other ceremonial locations, in cars from Lifestyle Car Club. This tangerine 1966 Buick Riviera is named 'Sun Goddess'.

The example of the lowrider demonstrates how the visual permeates car cultures, and by this I mean the ‘visual’ as it is understood to be multisensory. It also provides an indication of three key ways in which an understanding of the visual in anthropology informs the present study. In the first instance, visual anthropology entails the application of visual methods, including photography and film, for conducting research in art and car culture communities. Secondly, it addresses efforts to understand the visible cultural forms of individuals, communities and institutions. Finally a visual anthropology approach takes into account the importance of vision as a set of embodied practices that generate and disseminate knowledge. Such a perspective acknowledges that vision may be learnt and trained and is thereby a source of scholarly investigation. A visual anthropology of car cultures that attends explicitly to the visual may use visual methods and it may also produce visual material. Furthermore, it may examine the visual materials produced within those cultures as a prism through which to explore their aesthetic worlds. Such an approach may also look to how vision is trained and how viewing practices develop within certain communities, and it may embrace the visual as an interconnected sense that brings us to an embodied experience and understanding of automobility.

An Interdisciplinary Approach

In this chapter I have described the conceptual and methodological structure that underpins this dissertation. Through a discussion of the three sub-disciplines of contemporary visual art theory, visual anthropology and the archaeology of the contemporary past, I have identified my methodological approach as explicitly interdisciplinary. While they operate through different modalities, what is apparent from my review is that each of these research trajectories share an interest in the ways that the conditions of contemporary life are experienced and communicated, visually and materially. It is of further relevance that each of these three fields of enquiry promote a practice that is cross-disciplinary. By enfolding contemporary art theory, visual anthropology and contemporary archaeology studies I have developed an approach that is directly in keeping with the knot of multidisciplinary influences that constitute the subject of car culture itself.

Contemporary art theory is tasked with examining how artists express their engagement with the present creatively. Through their exploratory practices with new issues, ideas and technologies, artists transform the very definition of what art can be. Contemporary art theory gains insight into these processes by examining the specificities of how art works; including the context for art’s production and reception, the particular media and manner of practice, the artist’s oeuvre, their influences, and so on. Yet it also operates at a larger scale, by examining the role(s) that art plays in the communication and negotiation of broader concerns. As a result, contemporary art theory allows me to reflect on the shifts and challenges to art discourse over the last century - transitions that have enabled artists to enter into a dialogue with significant global issues like automobility.

Archaeologists concerned with the study of contemporary existence examine human behaviours by identifying continuities and disjunctures in the material record. Through an examination of substances, technologies, events, places and processes generated in the recent past or present, such studies enable us to ask what it means to be alive in the 21st century. As a global phenomenon, the system of automobility is firmly situated in the 20th and 21st centuries. With its emphasis on how material realities are distributed across space and time, the archaeological lens offers valuable insight into both the differences and commonalities of automobility. The conventional methods of archaeological research bring different perspectives to bear on automobilities research, from the identification and analysis of individual artefacts (like engine parts) to the survey and recording of assemblages, collections and sites (such as auto graveyards). In addition to the analytical techniques of sorting, classification and sequencing, contemporary archaeology has also demonstrated the importance of photography as a tool of sensory engagement with place.

Like contemporary art theory and archaeologies of the contemporary past, visual anthropology also advocates visual attentiveness. This results in an approach which may include the analysis of visual materials and the socio-cultural context of their reception and genesis, as well as advancing the use of a visually oriented toolkit. Hence, filmmaking, photography, drawing and other modes of making and looking are considered to be important vehicles for the acquisition and transmission of knowledge. Visual anthropologists often work in an ethnographic manner, gaining insights through observation and speaking directly to people. Thus, through conversation, dialogue, reflection and an awareness of their own multisensory engagement with the present the visual anthropology researcher gains access to a deeper understanding of the relationships between people and their social, material and cultural settings. This approach offers the opportunity for gaining insight into the many
subjectivities generated around cars, as well as an appreciation for how cars and art are perceived, remembered, imagined and talked about. That is, an important contribution of visual anthropology to this study is the question of how we see and are seen, and how the very practices of looking can reveal meaning.

Each of the three disciplinary endeavours I have explored in this chapter has influenced my approach. The range of methodological tools and theoretical outlooks they provide has much to offer an investigation into the creative intersections between cars and art. It is of further significance, for a combined written and practice-based thesis such as this, that all three intellectual agendas recognise the importance of art making as a method of research in its own right.
PART B

The second component of this dissertation represents a single Chapter Three which outlines the practical dimensions of my research, the sites I visited, the methods I used and the various modes of investigation I explored. It describes how my research began as a broad survey of car culture, involving participant observation and interviews within a variety of car enthusiast communities. Photography and other embodied practices of looking, seeing and encountering are discussed as fundamental to my process of knowledge acquisition and interpretive strategy. These techniques were also instrumental in helping to narrow the focus of my study, and in determining the case studies that form the basis of my analysis as discussed in the following section (Part C). Chapter Three culminates in a series of visual essays that emerged as result of this fieldwork. Each essay is a discrete vignette, individually directed to an aspect of car culture that I encountered during my fieldwork and as such the images are arranged in groups accordingly. However, by presenting these essays in a sequence I am also intending to expose the reader/viewer to the connective threads that run between and through these photographs as a whole.
As outlined in the preceding chapter, my conceptual framework and methodological approach is informed by three disciplinary agendas: contemporary art theory, visual anthropology and the archaeology of the contemporary past. Narrowing my interdisciplinary approach in this manner has allowed me to focus on the visual and material aspects of car culture as an expression of art. Nevertheless, the potential scope remains immense. From the start it was necessary to define clear working parameters. Yet the exploratory nature of research – particularly where it incorporates an art practice-based component that demands a degree of play, experimentation, openness, and trial and effort – made this a difficult balance to strike (Figure 3.1). A tightening of scope was gradually achieved, through a see-sawing process of contraction to expansion and back again.
Choosing a Destination

In determining my project focus, it was necessary to exclude many cultures of vehicle decoration that occur throughout the world. These include for example, decorated rickshaws in Bangladesh, the chivas of Colombia, painted oxcarts of Costa Rica, decorated trucks of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the painted buses of Panama and India, the customised Jeepneys of the Phillipines, tuk tuk of China and the raggare of Sweden. Clearly any of these vehicle cultures might be suitable candidates for study but were all ultimately dismissed in part because of my inability to converse in the foreign language. Foremost, however, I wanted to zero in on personal vehicles rather than public transport. Narrowing my enquiry in this way necessarily inclined me towards first-world nations, where the personal vehicle is commonplace. It is important to note that a general reading of other largely non-Western cultures of automobility have, nonetheless, informed my thinking.

In keeping with my interdisciplinary approach, my research comprised a mosaic of methodologies including participant observation, informal and semi-structured interviews, photographic enquiry, museum and archival studies, literature analysis, art practice and the study of artworks. A less traditional, albeit meaningful method of my research was driving. Site visits to art institutions were an important aspect of my approach as was my attendance at numerous car-related events and automotive sites, including factories, garages and museums. The latter, in particular, introduced me to a diversity of geographically widespread car cultures manifest in local forms. Visiting art galleries and museums, searching catalogues, books and artists’ websites and attending exhibitions gave me the opportunity to

---

349 Ibid.
354 Indeed some have been the subject of art projects or exhibitions as well as academic research.
355 I discuss this in more detail in my exegesis. Suffice to say here that I consider driving to be a valid tool for both learning and thinking about car culture and particular geographies in which they occur. Driving is not celebrated as a method, in the same way as the ramblings of the flâneur. However, I would suggest from my own experience that insights garnered while driving may be significant.
356 For a selection of car-related sites visited during the course of this study please see Appendices.
compare the various ways in which artists have represented and responded to automobility and its attendant issues and impacts.

Field research was undertaken in two parts: first through a general survey of various car cultures and car-related artworks; secondly as a targeted engagement with a particular car culture and a select group of contemporary artworks. The case studies I explore in Chapters Four, Five and Six are a result of this two-fold process. It is worth noting that the survey was conducted first and allowed me to refine my inquiry, yet I continued to maintain this approach throughout the course of the project. My desire to continue in ‘surveying’ the field was propelled by the realisation that my knowledge of cars in general, and the sociality of car enthusiasms specifically, accumulated with my ongoing attendance at these events (Figure 3.2). One might say that over time I became increasingly conversant rather than simply questioning.357

Figure 3.2 Holden and Ford day in Newcastle - one of the many car events I attended.
Photograph: UK Frederick 2009.

357 In using the term conversant I do not mean to suggest that I have developed an expertise with regard to any particular vehicle or the mechanics of cars in general. I mean to suggest that I have acquired sufficient knowledge to carry a conversation beyond asking questions. This was a liberating point to reach, as I realised at the Perth Motor Show, because car enthusiasts quickly recognise different levels of knowledge and talk to you differently.
Surveying the Scene

The first phase of my fieldwork was undertaken in Australia, followed by visits to the USA and Japan. Australia was chosen because I live here and because it is a nation that has invested considerable symbolic and economic capital in maintaining an automotive industry.\(^{358}\) Australia shares with the USA and Japan a similar postwar pride and commitment to car manufacturing, if not the same success. Like the United States, and other geographically large nations,\(^{359}\) Australia's size has meant that it has come to rely heavily upon the road transport network to service large tracts of the country.

In 2009 I spent three months based in the port city of Newcastle, New South Wales. Because this city was only a five hour drive from my home in Canberra, it was relatively accessible yet sufficiently distant to allow me to become absorbed in my study. Importantly, Newcastle is a hub for the Hunter and Central Coast regions and as the world's biggest coal port it has a strong industrial history and character. I also chose this site because, like many industrial cities, car enthusiasm is openly and habitually expressed.\(^{360}\) It is also the home of Autofetish,\(^{361}\) one of the few exhibitions thus far held in Australia to adopt the automobile as a curatorial agenda.\(^{362}\)

Importantly, I was in Newcastle during the summer months, when car enthusiasm is at its peak.\(^{363}\) Consequently, I attended numerous car events in the city and the surrounding regions and was exposed to a range of different car enthusiasms. In addition to attending formal events hosted by car clubs and other organisations, I spent weekends visiting key 'cruising' sites, in particular the Newcastle foreshore. The information I gleaned came from observation, informal conversations and semi-structured interviews. Most of the people with whom I

\(^{358}\) Government support for the automobile sector is becoming an increasingly controversial political issue. Cite newspaper articles

\(^{359}\) For a discussion of automobility in the geographically expansive country of Brazil for example see Joel Wolfe 2010 *Autos and Progress: The Brazilian Search for Modernity*. Oxford University Press: Oxford and New York.


\(^{361}\) *Autofetish* originated at the Newcastle Regional Gallery, and was curated by Nick Mitzevich.

\(^{362}\) In 2005 I co-curated, with Lisa Stefanoff, a small exhibition *Rust, Dust and other places* relating to automobility in non-urban Australia, at the Foyer Gallery, School of Art, Canberra. A subsequent exhibition, *Supercharged*, was developed by the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane and later toured to several contemporary art spaces interstate.

\(^{363}\) This is due in part to the fact that people are on holidays and like to go driving in the warmer seasons, but most importantly it is because older cars run much better when it isn't cold.
spoke I met at car events. Others were introduced to me as a result of the ‘snowballing’ method.

There are three primary ways by which car enthusiasts ‘advertise’ upcoming events: word of mouth; in the listings of automotive related websites; with flyers posted in garages, auto-speciality shops and on the windscreen of cars at car shows. I benefited from each of these strategies in seeking out car events. A more haphazard, though reliable method was to keep my eyes on the road and notice any ‘special’ or ‘unusual’ vehicles. On more than one occasion I was motivated to find out what ‘show’ was happening and where, simply after seeing, in short succession, a series of unique cars travelling in the same direction.

By participating as a spectator at ‘show and shines’ I learnt that there are specific ways of talking, looking and relating to both people and cars. I became aware of how important the human body was in negotiating these exchanges. These include certain practices of looking, which car enthusiasts have come to recognise as a form of appreciation and a point for knowledge exchange which they actively facilitate. Other practices of the body, which are not acceptable are reiterated more forcefully to ensure that everyone gets the message (look but don’t touch). In short, cars are always ‘shown’ with the human body in mind. Car enthusiasts respond to these bodily practices in the way they exhibit their vehicles. Conventions of presentation are designed either to invite or to limit the kinds of engagement people may have with a vehicle. These practices encourage certain ways of seeing while denying or directing others. What we can tell from these practices is that certain features of the vehicle and/or its modifications are valued differently. Car windows, for example, are rarely left fully open, to discourage people from ‘entering’. Bonnets, by comparison are often left up, to encourage people to peer within the engine bay. Such communicative behaviour may be likened to “skilled visions”. They are conventions that are understood rather than spoken of and I learnt what these practices were by watching and taking photographs.

The automobile event is a highly social arena and I soon realised that these venues were also an opportunity for car enthusiasts to show their own wares (their skills, knowledge, ideas) and

364 In Australia, examples include the following websites of Shannons, Pinkys, Rare Spares, in America the examples I followed were the art car museum email lists, and art car enthusiasm websites.


366 In addition to photographing where my eye was directed through such conventions of display I also followed the lead by watching what car enthusiasts looked at and photographed.
to perform themselves (through talk, attire, displaying photographs, capturing video, etc). I also learned that presentation (of the car) is a considered activity, and that car enthusiasts use numerous conventions, devices and products to maximise the 'show' and the 'shine' of their vehicles. Running concurrently with the celebration of the automobile was a set of values that placed emphasis on work, community and family. Music is also an important feature of many car events, and the specific genre played is often in correspondence with the era of car or enthusiasm on display. For example, a lowrider event I attended in Seattle played hip-hop whereas a Street Rats event near Gosford played rockabilly. Some events, like Chromefest or the Kurri Kurri Nostalgia Festival, were explicit about reiterating the car's perceived association with a certain way of life; linking dance, fashion, performances, music and food in specific ways with the automobile (e.g. 50's music, jive, performances from *Grease*, Hawaiian shirts and 50's dresses and bobby sox, with classic cars).

**Visual Essays**

By drawing upon the approaches outlined in Chapter Two, my fieldwork practices came to reflect a visual acuity. I became especially attentive to the visual and the material, noting the creative techniques, traditions and fashions people employed as well as the habits, acts of observation and other behavioural customs people used. As I have previously noted, film and photography were employed throughout the duration of this project. They were essential techniques in documenting what I encountered. By revisiting my recordings I was able to study more closely the words, images and sensibilities captured at various field sites. Yet as the previous chapter made evident, image-making research is not simply a mode of documentation but a process of inquiry.

Film and photography potentially enable the viewer to follow the trajectory of the research practice through the researcher's own body. In this respect my photographic practice offers an enriched narrative of my own journey of discovery, that is, of my learning how to see in the local context in which I was operating. As an effect of my own bodily engagement, the images made in the course of this research necessarily reflect my own efforts to recognise and understand particular sensory cues and categories that participants use and share in the communication and activities associated with their community/culture. My photographic practice, in particular, became a way of learning the language of looking, presentation and display. This practice of image making as a process of learning how to see is presented visually in the photo essays that follow and is discussed further in my accompanying exegesis.

In addition to demonstrating the distinctive analytical and communicative capacities of art-practice based research, the visual essays that comprise this chapter register the reflexive
sensibilities of the three approaches outlined in Chapter Two. In the section that follows I present a series of images that provide an indication of how, over time, I came to understand that certain patterns and practices are evident in the public dissemination of car cultures. From the thousands of images I have taken, I select only a few to elicit specific themes. Without wanting to be too prescriptive, it is worth giving some context for the ideas I am offering through these images.

Car culture, as it is encountered through institutions and events, offers an opportunity for people to socialise. These engagements are highly regarded by car enthusiasts and constitute one of the key reasons for their attendance. Along with sharing stories about their vehicles and their journeys, car enthusiasts use these opportunities to exchange knowledge and gather ideas for future projects. In this respect the car itself becomes a focus for appreciation, and certain conventions of display and ‘looking’ become evident. These conventions are not limited to the car alone, as often car show participants (including visitors) wear their interest on their body. In these contexts it becomes evident just how much the body of the car and the car owner/driver become sites for the expression of the self. Identity intermingles between the surfaces of the car and the skin, the duco and clothing, spilling out further into the garages and sheds in which the vehicles are housed. Both group identity and the mark of individuality are both expressed in the shared apparel of machine and corporeal bodies. Such expressions of identity illuminate the display aesthetics of car cultures and demonstrate the value placed on corporate and community affiliation as well as the individual.

Practices of dressing the car also reveal conventions. Display boards are used to communicate the car’s history, how it has been restored and where it has travelled. These accoutrements and fashioning are not simply static messaging, they work to imbue the car with a kind of life force. Carried to their extreme, they result in the development of themes, so that certain cars when they appear at car shows become key actors in theatrical tableaux. In such instances a spatial environment specific to the car’s narrative is laid out. Less complex forms of display occur in the various types of signage, which are largely comprised of photos or illustrations and text. The text usually outlines the technical specificities of the automobile, along with its current ownership. Often display boards are used to create a timeline so that the viewer can see the process of the cars rebirth through restoration and/or customisation. Although

sometimes such signage is professionally produced (e.g. by airbrush artist or signwriter) more often this signage is hand-made by the owner. For this reason photography and other means of reproducing imagery are a key instrument in the car enthusiast’s display tool kit. Indeed, the omnipresence of cameras and video-recording devices is hard to ignore.

The cameras themselves vary in type and purpose. Few enthusiasts use professional or prosumer equipment and over the course of my fieldwork I have observed a marked increase in the use of mobile cameras. Certainly photographing, along with looking, seems to be integral to the performative character of the car enthusiast. The vernacular uses of recording and documenting cars adds weight to the value that is placed on display.

Aside from the informative and imaginative presentation practices that car enthusiasts engage in, there is also a prevalence for ordering and classification. The categorisation of cars and other ‘parts’ of the culture occur at different scales. They are evident in the way in which vehicles are arranged and in the way merchandise is sold. These displays give a sense of accumulation, as well as a focus on the particular, so that the mass and the distinct intersect.

The visual essays that follow constitute six key themes that address the relationships of the human and car bodies, the car show as an arena of heightened social activity incorporating certain practices of looking and communicating and knowledge exchange. A final series of images addresses the conventions of automobile presentation and display, including the vernacular use of photography. These themes, in order of their sequence, are: the car as social body, the car and identity, practices of looking, practices of photography, the sensory engagement between the car and the person, and practices of arrangement/display. Ideally the reader will spend time viewing these images, and in addition to the themes identified, observe other threads that run across the constituent essays.
Visual Essays
PART C

The first two parts of this dissertation were directed towards the conceptual, methodological and theoretical scholarship that has informed my approach to the study of art and car cultures. In the following section I apply this framework to six individual case studies. Each involves a particular artwork that comprises a motor vehicle and offers intriguing insights into the production and reception of cars as art. As will become evident, the artworks contribute to an understanding of the relevance of car culture in the contemporary world, and collectively they address the central consideration of this thesis: that cars as art reveal significant aspects of 21st century life. While each case study is explored separately, they are also presented in pairs in order to explicate certain synergies. Hence, Chapters Four, Five and Six incorporate two case studies each. As a whole, these case studies form the basis of my analysis and discussion and consequently, make up the majority of Part C. A final concluding chapter summarises the results of this study, outlining my scholarly contribution while pointing to future directions in research.

All of the artworks selected to establish my argument were made in the last ten years. Three comprise the work of contemporary artists working in the art car medium: Mark Bradford, Emily Duffy and W.T. Burge, all long-term participants in the American art car enthusiasm. Three other case studies incorporate the work of contemporary artists Cai Guo-Qiang, Erwin Wurm and Olafur Eliasson, each of whom is well-established within the global arts arena. Just as they utilise different media and artistic processes in their approach to the motor vehicle, the six artists have used different cars as the basis for their work. The vehicle Eliasson employs is both an elite racing car and a unique prototype (BMW H2R). In comparison, Burge’s version of the Bugatti Atlantic, comprising old VW parts, is also a conceptual machine. Whereas Duffy and Guo-Qiang utilise commonplace passenger cars made by Honda (Accord) and Ford (Taurus), respectively, Bradford and Wurm work with convertible sports cars—a Miata and a Porsche.

Insofar as the car itself forms the fundamental basis of each piece, these six case studies are distinguishable from many other car-related artworks. In order to demonstrate this more clearly it is necessary to provide further foundation for the expression of car culture in contemporary art.
Expressions of Car Culture in Contemporary Art

As I have elucidated in earlier chapters, automobility has been a significant source and subject of creative expression during the last 125 years. As suggested in Chapter Two, the breadth of automobility’s reach means that there is similarly an exhaustive number of artworks that might fall under this theme. For the purposes of clarification it is useful to categorise artworks relating to cars (rather than automobility more generally) in accordance with how the motor vehicle is incorporated within art. I have identified five primary categories by which art and cars may be seen to intersect.

There are those artworks that represent car parts, cars, and car occupants either in a figurative or abstract sense. This field makes up a large number of artworks and they are by far the most diverse in the application of media, incorporating for example: drawings, prints, collage, video, sculpture, photography, murals and paintings. This category might be described as the image of the automobile in art, that is, where the car is subject, content and/or form. Salvador Dali’s *Ghost of Two Automobiles* (c 1925) provides one example, and works may also include the trace of the car as with Robert Rauschenberg’s *Automobile Tire Print* (1951).

There are also artworks that incorporate actual automotive parts (commonly reused) such as tyres, doors, seats, steel, chrome trim and other metal components. Such artworks generally comprise sculptures or installations but may also include ‘2-dimensional’ assemblage works. This can be described as the car as art material or fabric, although the car may also be the subject of the work. Examples would include many of John Chamberlain’s sculptures, César’s *Compression* (1980) or Bruno Rousseaud’s steering wheel piece *Dix heures dix* (2004).

Another category includes artworks that incorporate the car itself as a central and material feature. For obvious reasons these are often large-scale sculptures or installations. They also include performance pieces in which the car enacts a role or otherwise serves as an important prop. These artworks might be thought of as the car as art material, technique and/or subject. Jimmie Durham’s *Still Life with Stone and Car* (2004) presents an example, Arman’s exploded MG sports car *White Orchid* (1963) is another.

---

368 It might well be argued that the idea of automobility motivated creative artists much earlier, that is, even before the car became a reality. For example, Gerald Silk cites Leonardo da Vinci’s concept drawings for a horseless wagon and a “scythed vehicle or war machine” Gerald Silk 1984. *Automobile and Culture*. New York: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., pp 27–29.

369 Other notable examples include Claes Oldenburg’s *Autobodies*, 9 - 10 December, 1963, Los Angeles, and the crucifixion performance of Chris Burden, *Trans-fixed*, April 23 1974, Venice, California, whereby the artist had his hands nailed to the roof of a VW bug.
Artworks that subsequent to their original purpose have come to be considered art by virtue of their acceptance within the art arena/gallery context form another category. These might comprise certain models of car, drawings and components related to the marketing and design of cars. Examples include the tailights of the Miata housed in MOMA New York, or the concept and production illustrations for automobiles that are later exhibited. Such artworks might be thought of as the car celebrated as a unique object and/or design exemplar. This includes cars which are considered artworks by virtue of their unique design or which have been modified in a creative or artistic manner. In the case of the former, the oft cited Citroen DS is a clear example. The customisations of Ruben Torres or Ed Roth are exemplars of the latter.

There are also artworks in which the car does not feature but is instrumental to the production of the artwork. This is where the car (and driving) is largely a methodology or tool of art practice. Ed Ruscha’s *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) provides a case in point, as do many of his artist books. Petr Stämpflí’s *Ligne continue* (1974) photographic series is an abstraction borne of the white lines captured on the road while driving.

Rather than being a conclusive or fixed subset of bounded classes these groupings are a guide for thinking about the different applications of car culture in art practice, and vice versa. As with any categorisation, divisions are somewhat fluid and many artworks cross over or may potentially inhabit more than one category.

As I identified in Chapter Two, where automobility may be seen to emerge most prominently as a coherent theme in art is through the curatorial project itself. It is on the gallery floor of exhibitions and in the accompanying catalogues and websites that a more considered approach to the art of automobility takes shape. Indeed much of the writing on cars in art has arisen from exhibitions.370

artworks raise. In making my selection I have limited my focus in two ways. Firstly, I have chosen works that employ actual cars as a primary substance of the art. This approach resonates with an ‘artefact-oriented’ anthropology such as that enunciated by Henare, Holbraad and Wastell.\(^{371}\) My focus on the automobile as artwork thus aims at “articulating a method by which the material may itself enunciate meanings” whereby an engagement with cars as artworks becomes an “engagement with things as conduits for concept production.”\(^{372}\)

Secondly, I have limited my field to the contemporary art of the last decade. These parameters concentrate the area of study while reflecting my interest in understanding the relevance of the car today, and further still in the contemporary issues that the car as art may raise. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the influence past traditions play on arts practitioners and car enthusiasts mutually. To allow for the kind of productive intersections I advocate above each case study also explores earlier artworks drawn from the 20th century or other car culture practices.

**The Culture of Art Cars**

Art cars occur throughout the world, most prominently in North America, but also in Australia and Europe.\(^{373}\) In Europe and Australia art cars generally occur in isolation as the work of an individual, whereas in America there is also an established, albeit constellated, community of people involved in an ‘art car movement’. Particular nodes in this network of American art car enthusiasm include San Francisco (CA), Houston (TX) and Seattle (WA), each of which serve as annual sites for the congregation of art cars. Art car festivals of a smaller and intermittent variety, have also been held in Nebraska, Portland (OR), and Minnesota. It is important to note that the community represented by such events is loose and mutable in terms of its constituency, and in this respect distinct from the core group of enthusiasts, or artists, who have an enduring commitment and identification with the culture of art cars. During festive occasions, particularly in Houston, the number of art cars on the street swells, not only as people travel from interstate to participate, but also because other people join in as a one-off activity. Because there are few ‘rules’, as distinct from some other car enthusiasms, potentially anyone with a car and a creative impulse is free to participate. This has the effect of encouraging a cross-over with other car culture expressions that may not normally identify

---


\(^{372}\) Ibid., p 3.

\(^{373}\) As I have previously suggested these vehicles are distinguishable from other cultures of car decoration that are generally used for public transport rather than private use.
as ‘art car’. For example, lowriders, and to a lesser extent classic cars and hot rods, regularly participate in the Houston Art Car Parade.\(^{374}\) To a similar extent some members of the art car community also have ties to other car culture groups.\(^{375}\)

The definition and concept of what constitutes an art car varies across the community. Some art car enthusiasts prefer an imprecise description which may encompass any vehicle that has been “arted out”. Other art car enthusiasts are insistent that drive-ability is essential and the capability to be ‘on the road’ defines it all the more so. ‘If you can’t drive it on the road it’s just a float’, as a common saying goes. This difference pertains not only to the functional competence of the vehicle but also its legal status as a registered roadworthy motor car.

Aside from a long-term interest in making and driving art cars, one point of distinction comes in the notion of the ‘daily driver’. This is a concept shared across many car cultures, but in this case refers to those individuals who drive their art car on a regular basis. In other words the car is not garaged for most of the year\(^ {376}\) and brought out on special occasions, it is instead the owner/driver’s primary vehicle. As well as being an enduring and consistent presence in the life of the car’s owner, the creative modifications to the car are permanent. The Art Car Festival of San Francisco and Seattle Art Car Blowout place greater emphasis on this aspect of the art car. For example, the San Francisco-based art car community festival emphasises:

> everyday drivers ... it’s a specific thing, which is a car you drive everyday or regularly, it’s not a parade float, it is decorated permanently, it’s not something you stick on it for a festival and then take off. It’s permanent, it’s part of your daily life, it’s part of you as an artist and you’re an ambassador everywhere you go.\(^ {377}\)

Art cars are made for different reasons, in different styles and techniques. While many art cars are painted or incorporate sculptural elements, others are essentially a bricolage of assembled media, often including found objects or everyday material culture. Not all art car owners make their own vehicles, some are commissioned. Even amongst the majority of art car owner/drivers who do make their own art cars, not all identify as artists. Of the several who do some have received formal training and others have not. Due to the openness of the community and the fact that some art cars do not require specialist skills on the part of the

---

\(^{374}\) There is, in fact, even a special category and prize for lowrider ‘art cars’.

\(^{375}\) Art car artist Al Bartell, for example, has links to art car, lowrider and hot rod enthusiasms and enjoys his motorbike, classic car, truck and not-rod. Al Bartell (personal communication 1 June 2009)

\(^{376}\) The term ‘show queen’ is often used within the broader car culture community to describe this kind of vehicle, which is often trailered into car shows rather than driven.

\(^{377}\) Emily Duffy (personal communication 21 June 2009)
maker, art cars are periodically labeled as an ‘outsider’, visionary or folk arts activity. Although I have met art car artists who celebrate this association, some of the artists I spoke to reject this term and its connotations. While easily perceived as a playful pursuit, art car artists take their work very seriously investing considerable time, money and labour in their creative practices. One art car artist expressed his hope that one day the art car enthusiasm will be considered a legitimate art practice like the established traditions of printmaking, painting or sculpture.

Like other car cultures, art car communities have their own skills, ‘experts’, event circuits, networks, and spaces of performance and production that operate at the local and national level. Consequently, art car artists across the USA share their knowledge and experiences online and through social media as well in non-virtual forums like books, film, galleries and performance events. This has ensured a degree of cooperation and collaboration amongst art car artists, particularly in terms of sourcing materials and working methods. Although it is evident that certain formal attributes are popularly shared across many art cars, there is no one style. Above all, cars are appreciated for their commitment and individual treatment.

---

378 The Houston Art Car Parade was founded and is hosted by The Orange Show Centre for Visionary Art.
379 The Lasters (personal communication 14 May 2009)
380 W.T. Burge (personal communication 28 May 2009)
381 Visker (personal communication 27 May 2009)
Harrod Blank 2007. Art Cars: the cars, the artists, the obsession, the craft. Douglas, AZ.: Blank Books.
In early 2005 an installation of seven cars was suspended from the ceiling of the Seattle Art Museum’s newly remodelled foyer (Figure 4.1). The cars appear identical, being the same colour, make and model. Yet as they hang, each car occupies a different position in their collective somersault through space. One car is on its side, another is nose-diving towards the ground. Sequenced multi-channel tube lights pierce the metal bodies so that each car radiates lines of pulsating colour. Two additional cars are parked at each end of their aerial pirouette. As if to anchor but not distract us from the elevated Fords above, the grounded pair rest on the terra firma of the viewer, stationed at the new and former entrances of the museum. As the eye traces the trajectory of these nine vehicles, across the height and length of the gallery, an arc gradually emerges. What appears is no arbitrary arrangement but a dramatically unfolding narrative. We are seeing a single car, rising up from the ground, twisting through
the air, dangling upside down and eventually landing. This is a depiction, in the round, of a car bomb exploding.

_Inopportune: Stage One_ by Cai Guo-Qiang was acquired as a 75th anniversary gift to the Seattle Art Museum (SAM). It may seem a strange offering, but what better way to mark a new beginning than with a rainbow of cars physically connecting the old SAM with its fresh incarnation. This installation and the long light-filled forecourt it occupies, would soon become the public face of the Museum’s revitalisation project, and the first stage in an ambitious expansion plan. When the gallery reopened several months later, the cars might have appeared something like a gigantic string of party lights announcing the celebration. Given the context of its acquisition and the artist’s broader oeuvre this installation might also be read as a show of fireworks in suspended animation (Figure 4.2).


There is nothing accidental about the placement of _Inopportune: Stage One_. In an overture to the promotional tactics of automobile showrooms around the world, this automotive

---

383 Cai Guo-Qiang began experimenting with gunpowder and explosives many years prior to the production of _Inopportune: Stage One_. Examples include his series _Project for Extraterrestrials_ (1992), _Project to Extend the Great Wall of China by 10,000 metres_ (1993), _The Century with Mushroom Clouds_ (1996) and numerous gunpowder drawings. Cai’s practice with explosives stems from an enquiry into Eastern and Western knowledge systems and traditions, as well as his deep curiosity for the energy that underpins the Universe (e.g. the Big Bang). Many commentators suggest his way of working is a kind of dialogue between the ancient past and the contemporary present and between the cultures of East and West. See for example Thomas Krens and Alexandra Munroe 2008. _Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe._ New York: Guggenheim Museum; London: Thames & Hudson [distributor], pp 269, 271, 273, 277.
spectacle is intended to wow the viewer, drawing their attention towards the Museum's interior. In fact the best 'view' one may have of this installation, as a whole, is from outside the building. In this sense the position and scale of the work operates as a billboard for those passing down First Avenue, the frontage of the museum. Not only does this produce an especially American sensibility – it is after all the home of that grand invention of marketing signage – but it attunes the gallery to its local setting and the former flavour of its surroundings. During the 1970s and 80s First Avenue was well known as a seedy part of town, where people would go to watch 'girly shows' and x-rated films at theatres lit up with bright incandescent globes. Pockets of that history remain today. So that from the other side of the street, quite literally (Figure 4.3) Cai's work meets the city's public and its past on its own terms, as cars, flashing lights, objects of desire, bodies in motion.

Figure 4.3 The theatre across the street from the Seattle Art Museum. Photograph: U.K. Frederick, 2008.

It is unlikely that Cai would have known his work would carry this particular in-situ resonance because Inopportune: Stage One was initially developed for the exhibition Inopportune at the Massachusetts Museum of Modern Art (MASS MoCA). Nevertheless, Cai has a heightened awareness of how the elements of a work relate to one another, and its environment. He has spoken of this in terms of Feng Shui, of "... the relationships these objects have with their surroundings, the attention to orientation, the treatment of the entrance space or the

---

384 The Lusty Lady closed down in 2010 and its landmark marquee is now in the collection of the Museum of History and Industry.
background, the creation of energy fields, and the relationship between the work and the audience or spectator. I consider the audience as part of the energy field and mobilise and manage the flow of energy.” In short, Cai's artwork mediates the space of the world outside the museum and its interior, both physically and metaphorically. One might see this as creating a slippage between the art museum and the public sphere, which is precisely the directive of the “new museum”. This may offer some explanation for why the board of SAM chose *Inopportune: Stage One* to herald its rebirth as a museum of the 21st century.

Driving down this stretch of inner city Seattle produces an uncanny sensation, particularly at night, because Cai’s work, combined with the large glass exterior of the museum, creates the effect of a mirror. “Is that my double, my reflection?” a driver might easily question. And when they do see themselves in this ‘mirror’ what does that suggest about their way forward? “Might I lift off or could I possibly explode?” It is this uncertainty and ominous mood, shrouded in brilliant lights, that urges the driver to look twice. And it is this haunting prescience of the street and its disastrous potential that gives the work such everyday power. *Inopportune: Stage One* speaks to the spectator, the driver, the ordinary person and the global citizen.

In drawing attention to how *Inopportune: Stage One* operates in concert with the newly extended SAM, I have sought to convey my own impressions of how it connects with the public and reflects the environment of the street. You need not enter the Museum proper to encounter the energy emanating from this piece. Yet it is precisely the sensation of feeling the force of an object at a distance while remaining removed from the source of the power itself that lures one closer to the artwork. Having considered the angle from outside we inevitably desire to enter the museum, and the installation, to experience another viewpoint.

**An explosive topic**

By all accounts *Inopportune: Stage One* is intended to echo an exploding car, or more specifically a car bomb. Although the lights bursting from the vehicles resonate with the sequence of detonation, it is the viewer who triggers the explosion. Cai has made this clear: “The entire process must be read by the audience walking along its side ... The body walking by is like a roll of film turning, allowing one to see the movement of the installation.” In its

---


Seattle realisation, the cars are suspended much higher than at MASS MoCA so that the audience must pass underneath each stage of the blast to witness the sequence of freeze-frames first hand. The angle, elevation and pulsating luminescence of each car have been carefully ordered (Figure 4.4). While ostensibly determined by the car’s temporal position in the explosion, the lighting also directs the viewer’s mood as they follow the narrative arc of the sequence.

At the beginning the light is white, a pure intense colour; the force of impact causes the car to float; then the air combusts; it turns red, the temperature appears to rise (in fact, it falls); the car ascends and tumbles in mid-air; a profusion of colour emerges and turns into a fiery display of pyrotechnics; afterwards it turns pink like a dream. As it descends to the ground, its plumage is spread out like a bird, and it is blue.

No doubt Cai’s extensive use of gunpowder has advanced his understanding of how an explosion behaves materially. As importantly, I would think, Cai’s practice has also attuned him to the theatrics and fantastical dimensions of detonation. Surely Inopportune: Stage One attempts to recall the sensory cycle of a fireworks display. The thrill in hearing the whistle of the projectile speed to the sky, the anticipation that builds between the delay in the light and sound of the bang, the beauty of its culmination, the lull as the smoke lingers and the trace elements fall to earth. While much of the delight felt from fireworks is the uncertainty of what colour and pattern will come next, this emotion resides alongside an assurance of how the cycle plays out and will repeat. Curator Laura Steward Heon suggests that Inopportune: Stage One similarly completes “a closed and repeatable circuit”. In other words the explosion is contained and safe. Yet the inopportune of real terror is that we don’t know how, when or even if it will end.

Although the installation evokes the enchanting assurances of a rainbow or a performance that carries closure, Cai is well aware that sky spectacles have lost their innocence. This is the rupture that the artwork represents, and what Robert Pogue Harrison refers to as the

---

387 The Guggenheim realisation was also high above the viewer, but in a cascade of cars tumbling from the ceiling towards the ground rather than the arc of its intended display.
388 Cai Guo-Qiang cited in Ma, ‘I wish it never happened’.
explosive core of the current age. In the artist’s words “The car explosion work relates to terrorism, the antagonistic conflict of civilized religions, car culture, pyrotechnics, history, and so on.”

Certainly Inopportune: Stage One’s allusion to the effects of September 11 is made all the more evident through its aerial suspension. Not only do the cars explode in the air above the viewer – like airplanes arrested midflight over Manhattan – but as Mike Davis explains, the car bomb has become “the poor man’s airforce, par excellence”. In making this claim Davis is referring more generally to the importance of the car bomb in the armoury of global terrorism. However, he also makes clear that the car bomb “with wings” marks a significant technical innovation in the weapon’s history. In this respect the artwork embodies a double threat.

If Inopportune: Stage One represents a car bomb and an exploding plane, then it is also a representation of the media and contemporary global politics. For where else does the Western viewer experience the blown up vehicle, but through the movie blockbuster and the news? This, then, is the artwork as a screen mediating, dividing and relaying the world back to the viewer; a conduit through which different perceptions of war are construed.

---

The screen is a familiar motif in Cai’s work. While conceptually it draws upon the viewing modes of popular culture and the large painted ‘scroll’ screens present in some Asian cultures, Cai often invokes it as a barrier. In *Head On* (2006) (Figure 4.5) a route of wolves crash into a wall of glass and an invisible partition clips the flight of tiny birds in *Transparent Monument* (2006). Cai even introduces the metaphor of the security screen in *Move Along Nothing to See Here* (2006) which incorporates the sharp objects confiscated at airport checkpoints. In that work the screen and arrested movement is present in metaphor, however the title ‘nothing to see here’ makes Cai’s reference to the strength of illusion transparent. In Cai’s work the ongoing play on what is visible and what is hidden leads us to contemplate our own thoughts and actions, as well as the actions and policies of our governments. What is the screen that we crash into and what is it that we are screening out?

**Volatile Objects**

If the acquisition of *Inopportune: Stage One* might be considered a bold statement, the initial commitment to the project, by the artist and MASS MoCA, might be considered brave. Due to its scale, weight and engineering, the work is ambitious, if not unwieldy in practical terms. Potentially more troublesome is the artwork’s content, inspiration and treatment. Cai has stated:

My starting point was not 9/11 itself, but the unidirectionality of culture and thought following that event. Before 9/11, the attitude toward other

---

393 All of Cai’s animals are replicas made from a combination of industrial (eg resin and glass) and natural materials (eg sheep skin). The wolve fugures of *Head On* (2006) are, in a sense, wolves in sheep’s clothing.
religions – and especially the issue of how developed Western countries look upon Islamic society – was more nuanced and open to debate. After 9/11, people no longer discussed these issues, but instead demonstrated a near universal revulsion toward the display of endless suicide bombings by Arabic youth.\textsuperscript{394}

To this day American nerves remain raw on the topic of terrorism, home security, the freedom of religion and martyrdom. This artwork was conceived in response to those very issues. Yet, as Joseph Thompson, director of MASS MoCA, points out in a foreword to the \textit{Inopportune} catalogue:

\begin{quote}
We've registered not one objection to the car bomb reference. In large part, this is because Cai's visual treatment of exploding cars is so stunningly beautiful, and in a way so indirect.\textsuperscript{395}
\end{quote}

Thompson's statement begs the question: do visitors recognise the complex origins of the art work? By Cai's own admission he has a "tendency toward lighthearted art, my car bombs are politically incorrect" and though "looking at these works may feel a little uncomfortable, there are still ingredients of humour, such as a car flipping over in mid-air...it's still delightful".\textsuperscript{396}

Critics and curators adopt a similar tone in describing the work, emphasising its "operatic"\textsuperscript{397} and "meditative"\textsuperscript{398} qualities rather than its troubling content. An obvious criticism then might be that the installation glamorises violence and makes a mockery of suicide bombers and their victims.\textsuperscript{399} That is, rather than communicate or complicate important issues the work simply obfuscates the realities of the source material. How then does \textit{Inopportune: Stage One} compare with related artworks?

In \textit{It is what it is: Conversations about Iraq} (2009) Jeremy Deller deploys the remains of a car bomb used in a suicide attack on Al-Mutanabbi Street, Baghdad in March 2007.\textsuperscript{400} The crushed

\textsuperscript{394} Cai cited in Ma, 'I wish it never happened', p 55.
\textsuperscript{396} Cai cited in Ma, 'I wish it never happened', p 54.
\textsuperscript{397} Thompson, 'Foreword', p 8.
\textsuperscript{398} Heon, 'Inopportune', p 13.
\textsuperscript{399} Suicide bombing has become a hallmark of 21\textsuperscript{st} century warfare and "suicide attacks have proved to be the most effective and deadly method of modern terrorism" according to Boaz Ganor 2009. 'Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century' in S.C. Shapiro, J.S. Hammond, L.A. Cole (eds.) \textit{Essentials of Terror Medicine}. New York: Springer Science+Business Media, pp 13–26.
\textsuperscript{400} This particular vehicle was destroyed in an explosion that left over 30 casualties. Occurring in a cultural precinct of the city, the bombing was conceived as an attack on the cultural and intellectual life of Baghdad. There have been several artistic responses in the wake of the event, including Bazaar 07:
The burnt shell of the car is the centrepiece of a three-phase artwork that is staged first in a gallery and then put on the road. The second phase of the work involves mobilising the car’s remains and involves an Iraqi translator and Army reservist and the public they confront as they tour the United States on a two week road trip (Figure 4.6). Construed as a participatory piece, the burnt shell of the car is ostensibly used as a prop to spark conversations about the US military presence and media representation of the war in Iraq. It is the dialogue elicited which Deller suggests is the core purpose and importance of the artwork.

Figure 4.6 Jeremy Deller’s It is what it is, on its USA tour.

While both Cai and Deller are working within a social and collaborative framework, their individual approaches to the materiality of the car couldn’t be more different. Whereas Deller’s car bomb carries the ugly weight of the authentic artefact, Cai’s nine-car sequence is candy to the eye. So it might be said that Deller’s car bomb roadshow carries a documentary veracity that Cai’s work lacks. This is particularly evident when comparing Deller’s mobile artwork with Cai’s Illusion (2004), a companion piece to Inopportune: Stage One.

Illusion is a 90 second looped video projection of a car bursting with fireworks as it travels through Times Square, New York. The people in the video show no awareness of the volatile

War on Error by Partizan Publik, the collective who first exhibited the car that was later donated for Deller’s use. Maryam Rashidi 2010 (February 3). ‘Cars as Conversation Pieces: an anthropological analysis of the art object in dialogical art.’ Unpublished presentation to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Graduate Forum, Canada; ‘It is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq’. A Project by Jeremy Deller. Presented by the New Museum and Creative Time for the Three M Project, http://www.conversationsaboutiraq.org

401It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq’, http://www.conversationsaboutiraq.org

155
vehicle because the video itself is a 3-channel mashup, comprising footage shot separately. However, a car really was filled with fireworks and filmed for the artist’s purpose. Now that very same car rests inside a gallery, adjacent to the projection and the viewer, its presence provoking uncertainty about the truth of the video. By alerting us to how illusion is produced, Cai once again points to the role of the media by questioning the relationship between experience, representation and viewing.

Clearly both artists make use of the object status of the exploded car as a statement of verification. While Deller seeks to assert an authenticated experience, Cai’s work questions what is real and the power of telemediated conflict. Speaking specifically about Illusion Cai has said “The danger lies in the fact that it seems to have and seems not to have, happened.”\footnote{Cai cited in Ma, ‘I wish it never happened’, p 58.} Ironically, one might argue that Inopportune: Stage One is in fact less contrived than either Illusion or It is what it is, precisely because it does not seek to rely on the force of the ‘real’ embodied in the charred auto remains. And yet audiences purportedly found Illusion quite difficult to watch.\footnote{My experience of Illusion was quite the opposite. In the Seattle Art Museum, there was too much light to clearly make out the video. This compounded the amateurish quality of the video to ill effect, diluting the illusion into a junky pastiche that lacked serious impact.} I would suggest that this is more to do with the coupling of the video and the object components of the piece which produces play between the illusion and the reality of the car ‘exploding’. Although less obviously brutal than the burnt relics of either Cai’s car in Illusion or the real car-bomb that Deller exhibits, Inopportune: Stage One perhaps offers the truest insight into the sensibility of the car bomb’s menace. That is, its power as obscure threat. Instead of announcing what it is in the manner of Deller’s work (“It is what it is”, after all), Inopportune: Stage One disguises its violence in sugar-coated spectacle. In short, it infiltrates our space with the stealth. The insidious fear that fuels the car bomb exists in the interplay between what is seen and what is hidden.

By virtue of its quotidian appearance, its anonymity, and the indiscriminate damage it creates, the car bomb uses “a strategy of tension... [to] demoralize a society”.\footnote{Davis, Buda’s Wagon, p 10.} As Mike Davis points out:

> Under siege from weapons indistinguishable from ordinary traffic... it is the car bomber’s incessant blasting away at the moral and physical shell of the
city, not the more apocalyptic threat of nuclear or bio terrorism, that is producing the most significant mutations in city form and urban lifestyle. 405

It is this insidious quality of the car bomb – to change the way people think, behave and act – that Cai’s artwork conveys with efficacy.

‘Auto Accidents’ of Art History

From the postwar period onwards there have been many creative works which explore the collision and crashing of the car. 406 But in viewing Inopportune: Stage One I immediately recall Andy Warhol’s Disaster series. 407 In terms of content, Cai’s installation may be drawn into comparison with any of Warhol’s car accident imagery, 408 such as Ambulance Disaster (1963), Green Disaster Twice (1963), and Orange Car Crash Fourteen Times (1963), as well as Vija Celmin’s paintings Burning Man (1966) and Time Magazine Cover (1965). The direct and indirect sourcing of news in each of these works demands a certain voyeurism on the part of the viewer. We are urged to call into question what exactly it is we are seeing and we are reminded that the media is perhaps the most habituated way by which “we absorb public trauma in our private homes and our psyches.” 409 To the extent that it is drawn from the media, Inopportune: Stage One offers the viewer a sight that is strangely familiar—the flaming undercarriage of a vehicle. This image is confronting to the viewer because, like Warhol’s Five Deaths (1963) and Green Car Crash (Green Burning Car I) (1963)(Figure 4.7), it is an inversion of the norm. The car and the world have been turned upside down.

405 Davis, Buda’s Wagon, p 7.
406 The most well known of these is Ballard’s novel Crash and David Cronenberg’s film adaptation. Other creative works, including plays, poems, films, games and songs have made extensive use of this theme. See Mikita Brottman (ed.) 2001. Car Crash Culture. New York: Palgrave. The cinema and gaming culture in particular rely heavily on the car chase and the car crash as tropes. Visual artworks on this theme are discussed further in other sections of this thesis and associated exegesis.
407 While Cai has indicated that he was aware of Warhol’s work early in his career he has also suggested that he could not relate to it personally: “I felt there was an immense distance between what he was doing and what I’d seen in my life ... at the time I felt, ‘what do these issues have to do with us?’”[in China] cited in Dana Friis-Hansen, Octavio Zaya and Serizawa Takashi 2002 Cai Guo-Qiang. London and New York: Phaidon, p 12. However, a short time after moving to New York Cai produced an installation entitled Mao (1997), for the Museum of Modern Art in Denmark, which incorporated nine of Warhol’s iconic portraits of the leader from the museum’s collection. Beyond the prints themselves we may see Warhol mirrored in Cai’s strategy of appropriation and reassemblage, as well as his use of monumental imagery like the mushroom cloud.
408 Although there are important distinctions to be drawn between car bombs and car crashes, not least intentionality, there are also strong similarities both in terms of their impact as traumatic events and as the demerger of the bodily boundaries between metal and flesh.
For both Warhol and Cai the genesis of their work is a response to their immediate circumstances. Cai has spoken of the sustained influence of the events surrounding 9/11 on his artistic practice in a way that is reminiscent of Warhol’s 1964 observation: “I realized that everything I was doing must have been Death ... every time you turned on the radio they said something like ‘4 million are going to die’.” Both artists recognise that the overturned car is a daily occurrence, somehow ordinary, despite how ‘unnatural’ it may appear. They each impart this notion of frequency through a use of repetition.

Of course Warhol was particularly attuned to the visual impact of repetition and used it to great effect throughout much of his practice. In *Green Car Crash (Green Burning Car I)* (hereafter *Green Car Crash*) Warhol has serialised a single image some eight times so that the original car accident staggers and bleeds across the canvas. The work is based on a news

---


photograph taken by John Whitehead, in the aftermath of a car chase.\textsuperscript{412} The original image reveals the driver of a car hanging lifeless on a utility pole, his overturned car still burning below him. The smoke and flames of the wreck testify to the immediacy of the accident, hence capturing the incident at its most temporally poignant, “showing death when it has only just occurred”.\textsuperscript{413} The driver’s head is slumped forwards, as if he were looking back at his vehicle, as though he too is watching the car’s immolation, stunned by his own untimely demise. The awful strangeness of the driver’s presence is compounded by the fact that he appears to go unnoticed by a person walking past in the background. In other words this particular death is simultaneously witnessed and overlooked.

In its own right the photograph represents an unusual confluence of sightlines and subjects. No doubt this appealed to Warhol, who was well aware of the fine line between witnessing and voyeurism and the visual conundrum of overlooking. In talking about his Disaster series, Warhol once suggested that repetitive viewing effectively neutralises the violence of death.\textsuperscript{414} Yet it is precisely an overexposure\textsuperscript{415} of the image, through layering and repetition, that Warhol sought to accomplish. He reanimated the car, and the shock of the crash by repeating it and repeating it and repeating it.

Moreover, Green Car Crash is not only an explicit reference to the accident in Whitehead’s photograph. The connotative effects of Warhol’s silkscreen process, the smears and blotches of ink, deliberately signify “little accidents”.\textsuperscript{416} The artwork itself merges a single image into a drawn out flurry of shapes. Perhaps this mirrors the last confusing glimpses of the driver. As Vidal has remarked “whether you are victim or witness is the matter of an instant”.\textsuperscript{417} Warhol uses repetition to suspend the viewer in the moment of witnessing precisely so that death cannot be missed.

Cai’s multiplication of the white Ford Taurus is quite different to Warhol’s staccato silkscreening. Nevertheless, the reiterative function evident in both serves to extend the temporality of their narratives. Warhol slows time by enforcing the viewer to puzzle over the

\textsuperscript{412} By coincidence this car chase took place in Seattle in 1963, although the setting might easily have been anywhere in suburban America.
\textsuperscript{414} Ganis, ‘Andy Warhol’s Iconophilia’
\textsuperscript{415} In using this term I am alluding to exposure as revealing but also the process of over-exposing a photograph, the effect of which is to darken the image.
\textsuperscript{417} Vidal, “Witnessing the “Roadkill””, p 208.
indecipherability of the image, but at the same time *Green Car Crash* reinstates dynamism to an object made useless and inert, just as the overlapping image reinforces the subject’s state of endless collision. The boundaries of each iteration are blurred into a single sequence so that the moment captured is literally drawn out across the canvas. *Inopportune: Stage One* also stretches time across the space of the gallery. In contrast to Warhol’s blurred *duree*, Cai slows time by dividing the event into a sequence of instants. The exploding car is presented as a series of timelapse stills. The action is slowed so dramatically as to become solid, resulting in the cars hanging in mid-air before us. Capturing time in this way, Cai’s installation draws an obvious parallel with Eadweard Muybridge’s motion studies and subsequent stop-animation processes, but as Heon points out it also mirrors the ancient art of Chinese scroll-painting and reading.\(^\text{418}\) Although they achieve it differently, the suspension of time is a critical feature of both *Inopportune: Stage One* and *Green Car Crash*. In expressing the inopportune and the accident in this way both artists seem to recognise that “At the heart of the structure of the reception of trauma lies a delay”.\(^\text{419}\)

**The transmutability of cars**

In addition to the preparatory sketches and gunpowder drawing *Nine Cars* (2004), made as part of the exhibition *Inopportune*, Cai has engaged with the automotive on several other occasions.\(^\text{420}\) His earliest endeavour was *Wailing Wall—From the Engine of 400 Cars* (1992) a sumptuously silver partition of aluminium blocks and ‘pillows’ cast from the molten metal of car engines. Another installation *Cry Dragon Cry Wolf: The Ark of Ghenghis Khan* (1996) incorporated two running Toyota engines that figuratively ‘drive’ a huge raft of inflated sheepskins. It is an early iteration of Cai’s arc formation said to symbolise a Chinese Dragon sweeping down from the sky. Geremie Barme refers to these motors as “the unambiguous symbol of... Asian economic rise and technological thrust into Euro-America”.\(^\text{421}\) The raft itself combines contemporary and ancient technological power in the form of the Japanese motor industry and the watercraft of the Mongol empire. The Dragon, as a whole and through its

\(^{418}\) Heon, ‘Inopportune’.


\(^{420}\) These include the subsequent gunpowder drawing *A Car* (2005) and performance piece *Auto-Destruct* (2005).

constituent parts, plays on the latent threat/fear of Asian supremacy expressed in ‘the West’.\footnote{Zhaohui Zhang 2005. Where heaven and earth meet: Xu Bing & Cai Guo-Qiang. Hong Kong: Timezone 8.}

In many of these auto works Cai retains the car’s function as a technology of movement, only to subvert or question what this movement means. While he uses cars as a symbol of power he employs them in their most rudimentary sense, working directly with their form, technology and substance. He transforms their material presence and in so doing, their meaning.

*Inopportune: Stage One* is similarly an intervention in the car’s surface fabric. In this case the cars themselves remain largely intact. The holes that punctuate their duco and the light tubing are straightforward additions. The energy source that generates light and dictates its sequence occupies the interior of the vehicle. Not withstanding the overall effect of its light fixtures and acrobatics, *Inopportune: Stage One* is an assemblage of rather mundane vehicles. The Taurus sedan was one of the longest running and most successful selling marquees in Ford’s history.\footnote{Not long after this work was first shown the Taurus line was temporarily discontinued, it has since been rekindled.} The ordinariness of this car and its popular usage in America works to reinforce the terrifying anonymity of the car bomb. Like other improvised incendiary devices, the car as bomb results in a modification that usurps the originally intended function of the vehicle. From a conceptual standpoint the everyday quality of the car is what marks it out as dangerous. This is evident on two counts. The very existence of the car bomb as an idea makes each and every car a potential weapon. That is, until a car has exploded we cannot be sure that it won’t. And secondly, as Harrison points out, the “internal combustion that allows cars to function at all” makes the car the bomb that has “on the whole terrorized the earth”\footnote{Harrison, ‘Of Terror and Tigers’, p 33.} and its fragile ecologies.

At the same time, the selection of the Taurus, or bull, parallels Cai’s engagement with the mythic presence and power of animals. The car is in this sense comparable to the wolves, tigers, dragons, and crocodiles in Cai’s creative beastiary. The presence of the pierced Taurus invites comparison with the blood sport of bullfighting. Following this metaphor we might envisage the cars as lanced bulls charging towards some invisible red cape. Yet even this symbolism is not so straightforward, for it is the *torero* (matador) who wears the “suit of
lights (traje de luces)\textsuperscript{425} and who runs and tumbles to avoid goring. Once again, \textit{Inopportune: Stage One} suggests that the origins and impacts of violence may be one and the same. How do we recognise heroism? How do we identify the victim?

The vision I have invoked of cars as running bulls is quite plausible when we consider the other creatures in Cai’s menagerie. There are aesthetic similarities to the linear trajectory of the running wolves that appear in \textit{Head On} and it is clearly connected to the dynamic streak of tigers of its companion piece \textit{Inopportune: Stage Two}.\textsuperscript{426} Ma suggests that the inherently dangerous animals Cai uses are “Emblematic of human nature”.\textsuperscript{427}

![Figure 4.8 Details of Inopportune: Stage Two installed at MASS MoCA. Retrieved from http://www.caiguoqiang.com/projects/inopportune-stage-two-2004-north-adams-ma-usa.]

By establishing an association between the car bomb of \textit{Inopportune: Stage One} and the allegory of a tiger-slayer,\textsuperscript{428} in \textit{Inopportune: Stage Two} the artist invites another interpretation. Heon has drawn a comparison between the arrows that pierce the tigers’ skin and the light rods that jut out from the cars. Robert Harrison notes further that there is a distinction in the direction of force, with one group of bodies absorbing the energy the others expel.\textsuperscript{429} Because the tigers are both the villains of the story and the victims of Wu Song’s aim, the viewer is left to contemplate, once again, who is the victim and who is the perpetrator? By

\textsuperscript{426} As Laura Steward Heon explains the nine tigers of \textit{Inopportune, Stage Two} are a reference to Chinese literary sources, both in form (the hand scroll) and subject (\textit{Outlaws of the Marsh}), Heon, ‘Inopportune’, p 15. There are key formal devices that strengthen the linkages between \textit{Inopportune, Stage One} and \textit{Inopportune, Stage Two} including the dynamism of the nine characters, their frozen suspension, and the manner in which they are ‘read’ longitudinally across the gallery. Harrison, in ‘Of Terror and Tigers’, argues that the two installations are ‘stages’ in a single theatrical tableau.
\textsuperscript{427} Krens and Munroe, \textit{Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe}, p 245.
\textsuperscript{428} \textit{Inopportune: Stage Two} refers to the Chinese folk tale of Wu Song who became a hero after saving his village from a man-eating tiger. Ma, ‘I wish it never happened’, p 60.
\textsuperscript{429} Harrison, ‘Of Terror and Tigers’

162
association, this same question may be turned to the suicidal agents and car bomb of
_inopportune: Stage One._ “Along with the sympathy we hold for the victims I also have
compassion for the young men and women who commit the act.”

The large-scale release of force is a dominant motif in many of Cai Guo-Qiang’s projects
(Figure 4.9). Since the terrorist attacks in America and Europe and the wars in Iraq and
Afghanistan commenced, Cai’s explosions have taken on a more profound ceremonial
character. Through a series of ambitious firework projects the artist has sought to recast the
spectacular explosion as a therapeutic event, a catharsis of healing effect.

_Cai’s artistic strategy holds a curative function is to underscore the social imperative of his
     Consumption as Therapy

To suggest that

For example, staging *Black Rainbow* in Valencia, Spain and *Transient Rainbow* in New York “showed
people how to have courage and hope in the face of calamity”. Cai cited in Kerr and Munroe, _I want to
believe_. The artist’s belief in the remedial effects of gunpowder may be traced to an immersion in
Chinese philosophy, tradition and medicine. The cleansing power of fire that Cai enacts in such places
as New York, Taiwan, Spain and Berlin also reflects the Chinese practice of honouring the deceased by
burning paper money and other offerings.

430 Cai cited in Ma, ‘I wish it never happened’, p 60.
431 For example, staging *Black Rainbow* in Valencia, Spain and *Transient Rainbow* in New York “showed
people how to have courage and hope in the face of calamity”. Cai cited in Kerr and Munroe, _I want to
believe_. The artist’s belief in the remedial effects of gunpowder may be traced to an immersion in
Chinese philosophy, tradition and medicine. The cleansing power of fire that Cai enacts in such places
as New York, Taiwan, Spain and Berlin also reflects the Chinese practice of honouring the deceased by
burning paper money and other offerings.

163
work and informs how we might experience and interpret his installation of cars. With the cathartic power of his real and metaphorical fireworks displays Cai transforms dark moments in the history of the world into an art object that provides pause for self-reflection. With *Inopportune: Stage One* Cai creates a similar site for contemplation by transforming the material and the function of the car bomb, just as the car was initially corrupted as an instrument of war. In some grand gesture of acupuncture Cai is pricking the skin of the car, and our social conscience, to relieve it of its poison.\(^{432}\) In doing so he releases its explosive power. As much as it is an image of a car bomb *Inopportune: Stage One* is also an attempt to alleviate suffering. It absorbs the arrows of our age and returns them as hope and beauty. The car into car bomb, the car bomb into art, art as social action.

\(^{432}\) Alternatively one might suggest that the pierced car carries a voodoo doll connotation. Given Cai’s deep engagement with Chinese medicine and other healing devices, the acupuncture interpretation offers a more cogent line of reasoning.
My first encounter with the art car Thomson was on the verge of Houston’s Heights Boulevard. I had just arrived at the Art Car Museum for an evening event and I had parked not far behind it. From this angle, I may not have paid it much notice, except that a lanky fellow bounced up to it with great excitement. Inevitably, I was drawn closer. As I approached, the dark oval shape of the low compact body and the open interior of the convertible slipped away in the fading twilight. In its place there emerged a strange beast with copper platelets, wiry hair and a large head with horns and an open jaw. A strange hybrid of animal and machinic form, it was difficult to clearly distinguish the functional features from its decorative elements. This unfamiliar surface and shape, above all else, revealed that this was no ordinary vehicle.

Since the 1920s automotive engineers and stylists have played a dominant role in dictating the lines and contours of the automobile. Moving through “cyclical phases of ostentation and constraint”, over the decades the car’s body has shifted from boxy to streamlined, finned

---

and winged, curved, cute and bubbly, and back to boxy again.\footnote{434} Despite these oscillating fashions, car designers have long sought to emulate the speed and grace engendered by wild animals. The car before me was clearly defying those conventions. Not only was it loaded with extra and ‘unnecessary’ metal surface features and weighty protuberances, but it was made to resemble a turtle!

I struck up a conversation with the lanky guy whose enthusiasm drew my attention in the first place, soon learning that Caz was a long time art car artist and the car he was admiring was “Scrapdaddy’s latest creation”. At that point neither Caz nor I knew what to call it, but we would later learn its name was Thomson. In the days that followed this auspicious encounter, I came to know a little more of Thomson’s genesis and the artist who created him.

In the following pages I consider the use of animal symbolism in the example of Thomson specifically, and the art car community generally. I examine the conditions under which this unique art car came to exist and explore how it fits within a framework of remembrance and memorialisation alongside related ideas of mortality and impermanence. In identifying this artwork’s status as an act of commemoration I propose that Thomson may be viewed through the lens of affective labour.\footnote{435}

Affective labour has been identified as one of the “highest value producing forms of labour” and the dominant mode of production in the current postmodernisation or informational economy.\footnote{436} It is often used to refer to work with a service focus, or that which is highly reliant on “knowledge, information, communication and affect”\footnote{437} rather than the delivery of tangible commodities as such. That is, affective labour is “immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible: a feeling of ease...satisfaction...even a sense of connectedness or community.”\footnote{438}

\textit{Making Thomson}

Mark Bradford is a Houston-based artist who is also affectionately known as ‘Scrapdaddy’. The moniker is a fitting description of Bradford’s chosen medium and his achievements. The

\footnote{436} Hardt, ‘Affective Labor’
\footnote{437} Ibid., p 91.
\footnote{438} Hardt, ‘Affective Labor’, p 96. Of course Thomson, as a result of Bradford’s labour is not actually immaterial in the sense that other kinds of affective labour may be.
'daddy' in the title is especially helpful in conceptualising Bradford's process. As distinct from simply recycling or re-purposing disused metal into sculptural assemblages, Scrapdaddy builds new life:

Scrapdaddy ... the name, comes from me giving something that's discarded and trash, scrap and moulding it ... back to life, into some kind of sculpture that represents something that's alive, like whether it's a figure or, you know, a creature.\footnote{Mark Bradford (personal communication 8 May 2009)}

Thomson's particular biography provides a fitting account of Bradford's creative motivation and process. Like the majority of the artist's materials, Thomson was born out of salvage. It began life as a Mazda Miata sports car that Bradford bought after seeing a notice on the Art Car Museum's website.

The Miata was wrecked and they were going to salvage it...like if anybody was interested in buying it for salvage price to make an art car out of and it just so happened I had just that much money and you know it was my last little bit of money and I wanted something to show for it so I got it instead of spending it on food and things.\footnote{Ibid.}

Bradford had acquired the Miata just a month before Houston’s Annual Art Car parade with the intention of decorating it and participating in the festivities. But soon after, Bradford heard news that his friend, and celebrated art car artist, Tom Kennedy had drowned off the coast of California.\footnote{Michael Taylor 2009 [April 14]. 'Art car pioneer Tom Kennedy dies on Ocean Beach', \textit{SFGate}. Retrieved from http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Art-car-pioneer-Tom-Kennedy-dies-on-Ocean-Beach-3164512.php} This dramatically altered Bradford's intentions for the vehicle and he set about drawing and designing a creation that responded to the Miata's structure. In an apt homage to Kennedy, whose most famous creation was a car named \textit{Ripper the Shark}, the Miata would soon become a mutant turtle named Thomson.

\textit{Building a Future}

In his efforts to transform the Mazda Miata into a mutant turtle, Bradford invested the car with several turtle-like features. This included referencing aspects of the turtle's anatomy and its movements. Thomson was faithfully assigned an armour-like shell, a protruding head and arms and legs that swing back and forth like flippers. At the same time he acquired several
fantastical features, such as the potential for vocal expression and the ability to shoot fire from its tail.

Thomson’s exterior resembles a plated shell comprised of copper discs that have been individually hammered into bulbous circular plates, before being varnished and spot welded onto an armature of metal affixed to the car’s frame. At the joins of these overlapping scales, Bradford has incorporated a tuft of bristling wires. Each cluster of metal filaments was then ‘brushed’ with a kitchen fork to form a sprayed arrangement. Because they are made from copper and steel and have different patinas and gauges, the sprigs of wire burst forth in subtly variegated buds of silver, copper, black, grey and the green of aging bronze. They look wispy and almost ephemeral, but they are stiff and coarse to the touch.

The scalar patterning of Thomson’s scutes is carried over into its limbs. These legs are attached to the vehicle’s frame just in front of each wheel. They are much longer and thinner than real turtle feet or flippers and at each end there are steel spikes that resemble claws. Four wire loops act as clasps so that the oversized ‘flippers’ may be adequately harnessed to the body of the vehicle when driven on the street. Towards the rear of the vehicle there is an array of steel flutes which jut out as though it were a bristling tail. Below this the boot has been replaced by a complex tangle of tubes, wires and piping that service the vehicle’s many standard and unconventional functions. In front of the fluted tail, Bradford has inserted the
intake of a jet turbine. This has been connected to a gas cylinder from which LPG is released, and when lit allows Thomson’s rear to “shoot fire.” Bradford explains:

This sounds and looks like a jet but it’s not pushing the car ... I wanted to be able to do some kind of fire performance with it and I needed something to give it some kind of tail, like a turtle would have a small tail or something like that. It’s supposed to be Thomson the turtle, a mutant turtle. The head comes out, it swims and you know it’s a turtle so its slow, it needs all the help it can get, so it has a jet in the back.\textsuperscript{442}

The head itself is a particularly important feature primarily because it gives Thomson its distinctive identity. In large part the head resembles that of a turtle in its shape and reptilian anatomy. It differs in that it has copper horns, ears made of wire mesh and two large shiny nostrils that stand out against dark green scales. Thomson’s bottom jaw is disarticulated so that his mouth gapes open to reveal steel fangs and a bronze tongue. A mechanism has been installed which allows the driver to snap the mouth shut. Thomson’s glassy eyes appear fairly innocuous at first however Bradford has installed two lights and wired them to the car independently so that even when the headlights are switched off Thomson’s eyes may glow. The head protrudes from just below the bonnet and is level with the car’s main headlights but because this extension is quite heavy Bradford needed to make a brace to support the weight. At the same time, he wanted Thomson’s head to move in and out much like a turtle’s neck extends and retreats.

Doing the neck, the head coming out ... like, elongating is something that I haven’t done before and I was excited about and so...I toyed with the different ideas of maybe using cylinders, hydraulic cylinders or pneumatic cylinders and having the head come out but the problem was I didn’t want to, you know, hurt the engine or go above the engine ... I’d got a filing cabinet from a buddy of mine and I realised that the drawer mechanisms that you pull out would be the best thing. They’re not strong enough all by themselves so I welded two drawers together to make the mechanism that the head comes along.\textsuperscript{443}

In looking more closely at Thomson’s features, it becomes apparent that Bradford’s process is both structural and ‘cosmetic’. In order for the car to look and operate according to Bradford’s intentions, the car had to be partially re-engineered. The suspension had to be modified and

\textsuperscript{442} Mark Bradford (personal communication 22 May 2009)
\textsuperscript{443} Ibid.

169
motorcycle shock absorbers were installed to bring flexibility and strength to Thomson's neck. At the same time Bradford's process reveals an understanding of the way the vehicle functions. This is demonstrated by his initial caution towards altering the vehicle's bonnet. "The hood is there for a reason on cars, you know to protect the electronics, and it's gonna rain" but at the same time "I didn't want the car to look unfinished and I felt like without the hood it kinda looked unfinished." His solution was to cut a hole in the centre of the bonnet which he then covered with a tempered glass dome. Abstract forms, cut from metal sheeting, provided additional flourishes.

Despite undertaking to transform the salvaged car into a creature all his own, Scrapdaddy took care in recognising the essential role that the Miata played in his formulation. The Miata would form the armature and propulsion and fulfil the relevant regulatory requirements to enable Thomson to function as a road-registered vehicle. As such his design would take care not to interfere with the engine or otherwise radically disrupt the chassis, axles, steering or wheel alignment. Bradford would need to adjust the suspension and reinforcing to support the weight of the arms and head that he had added to the front end. Relatively few adjustments were made to the vehicle's interior barring a small elevated seat installed behind the front passenger seat. This "princess chair" was made for Bradford's daughter to accompany him and his partner during the Parade.345

Although Bradford cannot allow his modifications to undermine the car's capacity to operate, it must be said that he sometimes pushes the mechanics to its limits. As art car colleague W.T. Burge observes:

You'll notice that he'll have a tiny little car or moped or something holding up 10,000 pounds of metal, the machinery just groans and slaves under the weight of art that he puts on top of it...there's so much art on it that it's almost falling down.346

What is clear from the sort of details I have described - the swinging arms, snapping mouth and wiry sprouts of 'hair' - is that each attribute contributes to giving Thomson the presence of a living entity. His body moves in a distinctive way, he growls, his eyes flash with light and gaseous fire expels from his rear. But like any living being Thomson also possesses frailties.

344 Ibid.
345 Mark Bradford (personal communication 8 May 2009)
346 W.T. Burge (personal communication 28 May 2009)
Mega Mutant Metal Mammals and other Art Car Creatures

As is evident in Thomson, Bradford’s approach involves re-envisioning the car as a spirited entity. This practice may be described as a kind of unleashing, in which an animal form is pulled out of the vehicular design. Bradford is not alone in seeking to transform the car into a figural being. Many art car artists have used animals in particular, as a basis for developing their projects. Whole vehicles have been sculpted to resemble alligators, hippos, dogs, cows, rabbits, roosters, peacocks and even imaginary beasts such as dragons. Certainly animals were a form of inspiration for Tom Kennedy. While best known for Ripper the Friendly Shark he also made a whale, a Kitty Cat car, a dolphin and a hippopotamus. In Kennedy’s case the entire vehicle became subsumed in the character of a chosen subject, whereas for other art car artists the animal is deployed as a painted or sculptural motif. In rare instances, such as the mixed media ‘Decorated Cars’ of David Best, taxidermy specimens (of a rhino, buffalo or moose head) are integrated into the vehicle’s front end where they become a grandiose hood ornament. In Best’s example the animal head is a focal point of an assemblage of objects attached to the car body. In other examples the art car references a particular animal or draws on entire ecosystems as a theme. Some art car artists prefer to make creatures of their own invention, as is evident in the case of Visker, whose art cars Stumper, Noggin del Fuego II and Ooja have a fantastical cartoonesque quality (Figure 4.12).

---

447 An inverse approach has been used by automotive companies, whereby designers endeavour to integrate an animalian essence into a vehicle’s conceptual development. This is demonstrated in the concept and advertising behind the 2012 Mazda CX-5 crossover SUV. Television advertising features a cheetah morphing into the CX-5, and the press release suggests the underlying design philosophy emulates the world’s fastest land animal: “The side view features the prominent front fenders and the sculptured body sides accentuate a sense of power, suggesting the toned muscles of a cheetah.” KODO Design Language Retrieved from http://www.mazda.com.au/design/kodo-design-language
449 Dragons are a popular motif in the art car community, examples include Luna the Dragon by Julian Luna and the mirrored dragon design on artist and art teacher Rebecca Bass.
450 Examples include D.C. B The Rhino Car or The Best Car, which incorporates the head and antlers of a male moose.
451 See for example the Coltmobile by Ron “Colt” Snow
We might assume that this impulse to animalise the car carries a totemic relationship and that there is some kind of personal identification that propels the artist to select a specific creature. However, this is not always the case. As Ben Gibson explained, his own decision to draw upon the tiger was largely pragmatic: “I wanted to art out the jeep ... I wanted stripes...and zebra was already taken.” Yet, whatever the original reason may be for choosing a particular beast, over time an association between the animal and the owner/driver develops. Amy Lynch, owner of the Z-bra mobile, states “The car is part of my identity... Everywhere that I am people know me as the Zebra girl.” For Lynch this association began quite simply, “well I wanted to go monochromatic...so I did a little research on all my black and white animals”, but in explaining her attachment to her vehicle she reveals how her connection with the zebra has deepened metaphorically:

It’s the Z-BRA mobile ... It’s about women. Female zebras lead the herd, they’re the ones that decide when it’s time to go to the watering hole ... and there are no two zebras that are alike ... so everyone is an individual, they’re all separate and different but when they travel as a group then everybody is safe and secure, it’s kind of a neat concept for me ... Why I made an art car was I was married to a very dangerous man. And I left him and then I was scared to death because he was stalking me ... Specifically I wanted to stand out for safety sake. I didn’t want anyone to not notice the

---

453 Ben Gibson (personal communication 8 May 2009)
454 Amy Lynch (personal communication 21 May 2009)
455 Ibid.

172
girl in the little white sedan that just disappeared in the middle of the night. I didn’t want to be that statistic. And I knew I needed to stand out to be safe. [So the choice of the zebra goes back to] female empowerment, camouflage, the idea of family, everything, it all ties in together to exactly why it wound up being zebra. The zebra saved my life and I know it did ... People don’t know deep meaning on mine because they look at it and go “its black and white stripes, it’s a lot of fun.” Well, it’s my camouflage.456

In describing how the zebra symbolism can be appreciated at different levels Lynch demonstrates how a chosen animal, and other adopted ‘themes’, can come to operate as an emblematic device, through which the driver/owner identifies and by which others perceive their identity.

What is unusual about Thomson in this context, is that it’s own taxon is definitively unclear. This is not to suggest that Thomson doesn’t fit in, or that the turtle reference is oblique, but that Bradford has developed his own schema of hybrid car creatures. Indeed, much of Bradford’s artistic focus is directed to making large-scale kinetic structures that possess animal-like features (Figure 4.13). As Bradford states they are “mega mutant metal mammals” and “black blood runs warm through their motorised hearts.”457 To some viewers mega mutant mammals may be thought of as contraptions or kinetic sculptures, in the vein of Tinguely, but in the context of Houston they may be regarded as a unique species of art car.

Bradford’s menagerie share a distinctly prehistoric or reptilian appearance. This is due in large part to the plated or scalar surfaces of the creature’s body, which is Scrapdaddy’s signature style.

I like to use wire that’s rounded like when I made all this (gestures to Thomson’s limb), it’s circles—wire that comes in a spool, so that it already has the curve to it and then when you triangulate everything it makes everything more realistic ... then you can put the scales on. Flat pieces are not the same... it doesn’t look as good. I use the scales a lot because it’s easier to get the rounded look (gesturing towards his arms) otherwise you have to hammer something round and it’s really hard to do, it’s just easier working with something smaller.458

456 Ibid.
457 Mark Bradford (personal communication 22 May 2009)
458 Ibid.
Bradford's preferred materials reflect his desire to produce out of base metal something that appears biological. He wants his art cars to exist as living entities, so they must possess features and move in a manner that is independent of normal vehicular motion. In order to find the scrap that best fulfills this purpose, Bradford regularly visits auto wreckers and salvage yards. Because this requires attention to the potential future application of discarded materials, Bradford's search for scrap may be viewed as a conceptual process that works against the fundamental principal of planned obsolescence that originated from within the car design industry.

Due to its connection with the oil and heavy manufacturing industries as well as the shipping activity through the Gulf of Louisiana, "Houston is a great place for scrap". It is intriguing to think of Houston's material history making its way into Bradford's vehicles. Moreover, when we trace the biography of the scrap from which they are constituted these creatures acquire further meaning. The source of some of Bradford's scales presents a case in point:

> After 9/11 American Airlines out of Dallas sold all their silverware and they shipped thousands of pounds of silverware to the ship channel where I found them. And I'm like "Oh My God" and I bought a couple and then took

---

459 Ben Gibson (personal communication 8 May 2009)

174
them home and made, like, a little sample and I was like “Oh this is the best scales ever!” and then I was able to get hundreds of pounds out of them. I made one car completely in spoons and then I made a car completely with the handles of the spoons. Like I put the handles together to make, like, fans and then layered the car...unfortunately I didn’t get a thousand more pounds...but in hindsight it forced me into doing something else besides spoons and that’s when I started doing the copper.\textsuperscript{460}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[scale=0.5]{figure414.png}
\caption{Different scalar and plated surfaces developed by Marc Bradford for his creatures. Photograph: U.K. Frederick 2009.}
\end{figure}

There is something particularly evocative about Bradford rebirthing the airline cutlery discarded in the aftermath of tragedy. While he surely realises the symbolic power in his act of recovery Bradford only speaks of the material’s durable properties “I like that they are stainless, so that’s a metal that is going to be around forever.”\textsuperscript{461}

\textit{Resurrection}

When I spoke to Bradford about Thomson and his experience of making art cars, themes of permanence and ephemerality, and preservation over time persistently made their way into our conversations. It is likely that Bradford was acutely aware of the passage of time because

\textsuperscript{460} Mark Bradford (personal communication 27 May 2009)
\textsuperscript{461} Ibid.
of Tom’s recent death.\textsuperscript{462} Although Tom Kennedy died before Thomson was created, the memory of working with Kennedy accompanied Bradford throughout the project:

Initially I was just going to decorate it and you know have a cool convertible to play around with, but I wasn’t going to spend all that time. But then with the passing of Tom, I just felt like I got in a trance about reflecting on years past working on other vehicles myself and working with him. Also just thinking about how right now is a blessing and I don’t want to take for granted that I can do something better next year. You should do your best always so you don’t have regrets. Anyway, you know, that’s why I went through hundreds of hours of work, I estimated it was about 500 man hours, man and woman hours, on the vehicle...\textsuperscript{463}

With less than a month between commencing and the project’s parade deadline there is no doubt that Thomson’s birth was complicated by time. Bradford had a lot to do in a limited time span. Despite the intense heat and humidity and the hectic schedule Bradford just kept on moving, welding, wiring, issuing instructions to his assistant and searching his studio for the materials he needed. It could be said that Bradford physically invested himself into the vehicle through the very energy he expended in building it. As well as being an intense exertion of energy, Thomson’s making also appears to have been a period of deep reflection and Bradford returned to themes of survival, gratitude and legacy several times during our discussions:

When I started on Thomson and with Tom dying last year at the Art Car Museum, you know I just really want to do my best you know to figure out how to ... gather... and like preserve what I’ve got and what I’ve done with my cars.\textsuperscript{464}

Thinking when I’m making it, that like this car you know it was going to go to the crusher and the guy sold it to an art car artist because he wanted to like preserve it a little bit. But I feel personally that this car will not be going to the crusher, that it will be preserved as a sculpture for years to come, unless it gets damaged or something. But if I preserve it and take care of it, then I think it will bring smiles and joy to people for years ... When I make vehicles nowadays ... I like to use stainless steel a lot or copper so that it

\textsuperscript{462} I am referring here to both Tom Jones and Tom Kennedy.
\textsuperscript{463} Mark Bradford (personal communication 22 May 2009)
\textsuperscript{464} Mark Bradford (personal communication 22 May 2009)
won't rust away so that it will structurally hold its own outside [in the elements].

This commitment of mental, emotional and corporeal capital resulted in a very substantial moving sculpture. Yet Bradford’s actions might also be likened to a form of affective labour.

Defined as “labour that produces or manipulates affects” such that “the ‘product’ of such labour is not an … object with direct exchange value … but rather an affective state in another person”, affective labour offers a cogent account of Bradford’s motivation, because it is precisely this kind of investment – producing a response – that Bradford seeks to make:

The main thing about making art for me is to invent something that people can, you know, react to, whether that is a … smile or ‘woah I can do, I can make something’ … and if I can inspire somebody to make something [that] would be the best thing, and you know being able to drive your vehicle, you can’t please everybody but if you can please one out of 10 that’s good…It goes back to not caring what other people think, that it’s ok to make people smile, or to make people uncomfortable.

There is no doubt that Thomson was built to create a sensation. Its entire body is dedicated to that purpose—it roars, it flashes, its arms ‘swim’ as it moves. But Thomson’s relevance may be further understood if we consider the manner in which Allen and Baker use affective labour to mean:

a self-transformation where the labouring body becomes a medium for the endurance of the past event or victim that is thereby commemorated. In this way the bodily activities of the commemorating individual themselves become the mnemonic substrate.

In honouring Kennedy through his creation and performance with Thomson, Bradford is not simply remembering his friend he is facilitating Kennedy’s legacy to live on in the ongoing performances that Thomson takes part. Moreover, Thomson might be seen to precipitate a sense of contact with Tom through the virtual presence empowered by memory. It is in this sense that the naming of Bradford’s vehicle is most meaningful. By calling his creation ‘Tom’s son’ Bradford acknowledges that its line of descent is not purely his own. Rather, Thomson’s

---

465 Ibid.
467 Mark Bradford (personal communication 27 May 2009)
genealogy emerges from an expanded social network, a lineage of individuals and inspirations with which his making is infused. Furthermore, the relational emphasis of the name implies a futurity. Tom’s son is alive as the next generation. It is, if you like a continuation of the broader art car project in which Tom Kennedy, Tom Jones and all the other art car enthusiasts participate.

Allen and Baker’s description of a living memorial is relevant here: “it is their life rather than their passing which is marked by the living memorial. This is accomplished by directly connecting their life to those of others”.\(^{469}\) In forging a connection between different forms of life, human and non-human alike, Thomson becomes a living memorial not only to Tom’s practice in life, but to the broader perpetuation of his life’s work: the art car movement.

Bradford is well attuned to the art car community and the reciprocal relationships that ensure its survival. He is conscious too that it is entering a new generation and he ties his own practice to fostering that longevity:

Twenty years ago going to college and, you know, deciding that I’m gonna be an artist ... the Art Car Parade had just started and it was a way for me to show my work and get people’s reaction like instantly ... This year with the parade I felt good ... seeing that it could go on for another twenty years or more ... I mean art survives time and that’s the best thing about being an artist for me ... I feel like I’m building something that will be around for a long time.\(^{470}\)

As well as being a gesture of commemoration to Tom, Bradford’s desire to build something that will last may be viewed as a direct riposte to his own mortality. Bradford is not alone in responding to loss and grief in this manner. Several other art cars have been made in the course of bereavement,\(^{471}\) some of which have included personal items of the deceased. Artist David Best believes that such objects enhance the power of a vehicle: “What really makes a car rich is when people bring pain to it ... It becomes a very sacred offering. The car now becomes a shrine.”\(^{472}\)

\(^{469}\) Allen and Brown, ‘Embodiment and living memorials’, p 318. (my emphasis)
\(^{470}\) Mark Bradford (personal communication 22 May 2009)
\(^{471}\) For examples see Blank, Art Cars, p 153; Roberts, Art Cars: Revolutionary Movement, pp 37–9.
\(^{472}\) David Best cited in Roberts, Art Cars: Revolutionary Movement, p 39.
Insofar as it does represent a memorial gesture, Thomson is indicative of commemorative practices that occur throughout different car culture communities. This attributes an important functional value to the automobile that is in keeping with the display aesthetics of so many car enthusiasms, that is, to remember. Consistent with this idea, Amy Lynch has spoken of not knowing how to respond to the events of 9/11.

‘God Bless America’ was a sticker that went up the day after 9/11, and I put it on my car cause at the moment I felt like I needed to do something, everybody felt like they needed to do something, it was very tragic ... Nobody knew how to handle that situation, I didn’t know what to do, so I put a sticker on my car, that was it.

Lynch’s example demonstrates how memorialising gestures engender complex emotions and are not always easily identifiable. Within the Houston Art Car community, specifically, commemorative behaviour has taken many forms. After the death of art car artist and curator Tom Jones a “spontaneous shrine” was erected on the sidewalk just outside of the Art Car Museum. Some of his friends also brought a specially decorated hot rod to the 2009 Art Car parade in his memory (Figure 4.15). When Tom Kennedy passed away less than a year later bumper stickers reading “Never Forget Tom Kennedy” began to adorn art cars throughout Houston, and several memorial car events were held throughout the country. At the Art Car Ball that year a special truck demolition event was held in Kennedy’s honour. Over the years, the Houston Art Car Klub has also dedicated two memorial awards, complete with specially designed trophies, in memory of beloved members Brian Bryan and Jeff Towns.

---

473 It is important to note that such commemorative practices are not only directed towards honouring the dead. It is also used to celebrate the living.
474 In the context of car cultures, remembering is often cast as an act of nostalgia.
475 Amy Lynch (personal communication 21 May 2009)
477 This event took the form of an auction in which Art Car Ball attendees were invited to bid on taking sledgehammer blows to the truck’s windscreen and other parts of the vehicle. The proceeds of the auction were to be given to Tom Kennedy’s widow.
While different car enthusiast communities may speak with a different aesthetic they share a related discourse of automobility. Consequently, many of their commemorative practices impart a physical dimension through the vehicle and experience of driving. Whether it is through the dedication of a car restoration project or a memorial inscription (Figure 4.15), the memory of the deceased is activated through the ongoing movement and display of the
vehicle. One car restorer stated that it made sense to dedicate the car to his friend because they had spent so much time building it together. In this case the work of the deceased, and their own affective labour, becomes an embodied presence in the materiality of the vehicle and its performance at car shows.

In a similar way Thomson is invested with Kennedy's prior creative actions. Which, enacted as inspiration through Bradford's own physical labouring becomes the raw material of meaning-making with which Thomson is loaded. While I have clearly conceptualised Thomson as a commemoration, Bradford expresses it differently:

Well I think it's something like I just want to, like, cherish. I guess before that I was taking it for granted that I would do one better next time instead I think it's just, like, always you should do your best and not take for granted that there is gonna be a next time. Tom, he always worked really hard and I just think that it's best to just do your best and not think that there is gonna be a next time to do one better. And I've had fun making it.

It is relevant that in discussing Thomson in the context of Tom's passing, Bradford's inflection is on life rather than death. This is a characteristic of the living memorial in which value is placed on the lived connection whereby the perpetuation of life is emphasised. In addition to honouring the life and work of Tom, and the art car project generally, Thomson became something of a catalyst for Bradford's own self-realisation, in which his focus shifted to his own life's work and dreams: "When I started on Thomson...you know, I just really wanted to do my best you know to figure out how to ... gather ... and like preserve what I've got and what I've done with my cars."

We see this in how Bradford speaks with a new-found urgency to pursue his own dreams and his desire to ensure the endurance of his art cars through the creation of a 'circus'. Not long after completing the 2009 Art Car Parade Bradford made a commitment to realise his dream of a Mega Mutant Metal Mammal Show in which all of his art cars would perform.

With the passing of Tom ... and with Tom Jones dying, you know sittin' on the side of the road ... I kinda had some thoughts "Holy shit man if

---

480 Mark Bradford (personal communication 22 May 2009)
482 Mark Bradford (personal communication 22 May 2009)
483 Bradford's Scrapdaddy Circus performance at Discovery Green in downtown Houston was realised in 2010. A small book, Scrapdaddy Circus of dreams, was produced and narrates the author's journey.
something happened to me right now I'd leave a mess", I mean I don't want someone to have to clean up this shit...I mean I feel grateful that I realised that now. This moment is such a blessing and so good, I just really want to, you know, look honestly at the situation and that is ... we really only have this moment really to do anything. And I just want to recognise that I want to do the circus and one day I want it to be like this, and not like a whole bunch of trash that someone has to pick up, that all my work gets destroyed in a scrap yard, I'd like it to be preserved.484

However Bradford’s dream is realised, and however long Thomson ultimately lasts, the labour Bradford imparts involves “a much more intimate and indeterminate relation between its producer and artefact, where the latter is never really finished as such.”485 In short, no amount of steel can dictate how the art car project will eventuate, but no amount of impermanence can undo the regenerative energy that he and others have contributed to its life thus far.

**Mortality and Rejuvenation**

In this chapter I have critically examined two artworks and the social spaces in which they were produced and encountered. Drawing upon interviews to elicit the artist’s own perspectives, and my own close consideration of the methods, materials and metaphors of their practice, *Inopportune: Stage One* and Thomson are read against a background of other artworks and contemporary socio-cultural circumstance.

By pairing the artworks of Cai Guo-Qiang and Marc Bradford I have sought to illuminate the aesthetic synergies between them. One common artistic strategy may be found in their interest in animal form and energy. Both Cai and Bradford seek to capture and channel the charisma of different species through replication and in doing so have developed their own art menageries. While *Inopportune: Stage One* offers a more oblique reference to the bull and its lethal charge, Thomson is specifically engineered to resemble a turtle and mimic its swimming action. Combining the car and the animal symbolically in this manner, both artists invest the car with the energy of a living entity. Such a collusion invites reflection upon the relationship between biological and non-biological systems so that we might ask: what connections exist between automobility and the natural world?

---

484 Mark Bradford (personal communication 22 May 2009)
A more striking correlation is that both artists reveal how ordinary objects may become implicated in monumental crises. Cai’s representation of an exploding car bomb is a political statement that addresses the desperation of global conflict and modern terrorism. With its repetition and freeze-frame sequence, *Inopportune: Stage One* visually alludes to the tactics of news coverage: editing violence and hostility into short temporal snapshots that are replayed until they become almost mundane. In doing so Cai signals the global reach and domesticating effects of televisualised battle, thereby recognising Virilio’s complaint that mass media is a crucial element in campaigns of psychological warfare. Bradford’s piece cites the effects of global terrorism and 9/11 more subtly and materially. Comprising the rejected cutlery of Delta Airlines, *Thomson* and some of Bradford’s other mechanical beasts embody the very consequences of 9/11 in their armoured skin.

By bringing the car into conversation with the contemporary politics of global conflict, both artists recall the links that have long existed between the auto industrial complex and the machinery of war. As well as being involved in defence-related activities and the production of special military vehicles, the automotive industry was credited with contributing “more material to the Allied effort than any other” during World War II. For some automakers this relationship has proven to be a promotional opportunity, as the successful civilian commercialisation of the Jeep and the Humvee (High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle) demonstrate. Beyond the supply of armaments, the very concept of automobility has been a potent ideological force, pressed into the performance of nationalist propaganda, including fascist regime projects like the motorway schemes of Mussolini and Hitler. Yet in contrast to the specially manufactured arsenal of the armed forces, Cai and Bradford remind us of the devastating realisation that in 21st century combat, weapons are everywhere.

Despite bringing the issues of war, death, heroism and terror into focus, *Thomson* and *Inopportune: Stage One* are ultimately acts of healing and redemption. Like all of Bradford’s

---

486 Chrysler Corporation, for example, through its Detroit Tank Arsenal plant built over 25,000 tanks as well as marine engines and craft. Dennis Adler 2000. *Chrysler*. MBI Publishing: Osceola, WN., pp 68–9.


art cars Thomson is built from the salvaged discard of a consumerist society, but Thomson in particular is also a performance of healing, a commemorative gesture for lost friends and all that they gave to the art car community. By honouring them in this manner, Bradford effectively redirects his sadness and channels the absence of Tom into a powerful performance of creation.

While Cai’s artwork is born of less localised circumstances, it is no less a personal/individual effort to effect healing. In keeping with his immersion in Chinese philosophy, tradition and medicine, Cai Guo-Qiang wields the image of violence in a recuperative manner in order to lance the boil of mass trauma. Whether real or representational, the artist’s pyrotechnic displays are intended to be cathartic, alleviating pain and suffering by transmuting the flow of energy. Hence, the car bomb explosion of Inopportune: Stage One is not an emulation of violence but rather an attempt at “using the opponent’s own force to defeat him”.

In summary, Cai and Bradford utilise the motor vehicle evocatively to explore human responses to war, terror, and death and the way it is represented and remembered. In the process of reimagining the automobile as art, they transform the stark realities of the suffering and sadness encountered into experiences of reflection, joy and hope.

---

Over the course of this project I have occasionally caught sight of myself. Most often it has been a semblance partially disguised by the technical apparatus of a recording device. I've noticed my image in these instances because when you are behind the lens of a camera, you become keenly attuned to the subject in your field of vision, how the light plays on the surface of things and precisely what is in and what is outside the frame of the viewfinder. At these times, my own reflection has felt like an obstruction or intrusion of sorts: a figure that gets in the way of capturing the true centre of my attention, the object of my interest and my gaze. Usually I would set about reframing the image to elide my presence, but once in awhile I took the photograph anyway. On one occasion I recall actively playing with my own reflection to create a kind of cubist portrait of myself on the bonnet (Figure 5.2a).  

491 At the time I felt a distinct pleasure in placing my own image, metaphorically, within that all-too-familiar advertising trope of the ‘model’ woman draped across the bonnet of a car. This pose has also been used in calendars and pinups, which traditionally adorned garages and gas stations. I am also
Prior to facing VainVan (Figure 5.1) I hadn’t considered the implications of encountering myself through the materiality of the vehicle. Being startled by my own image or annoyed when my presence disrupted the composition were feelings that I attributed to my subjectivity as a researcher rather than my existence as a woman. For it is in my role as a researcher that I have become aware of just how reflective the car can be. From its window glass and high gloss ducos, to the hubcaps and metallic fittings, the car is replete with mirroring surfaces. These surfaces do not operate in the same way that a car’s mirrors function. They don’t cast back a clear vision. Instead they offer distortions, abstractions, and fugitive shadows.

Still, there have been times during my fieldwork when I was acutely aware of my sex.\footnote{It's not that my presence as a woman was ever unwelcomed or my interest in talking about cars discouraged, in fact it sometimes felt quite the opposite. Admittedly, there were times when I felt my lack of automotive expertise was a gendered experience but often this worked in my favour as a} However, only on odd occasions did I ever feel out of place—as a woman in an other’s aware that the abstraction of Cubism comes with its own critique regarding the representation of the female form.
Those moments came when I peered into the sheen of the ‘clear coat’ and faced an image I could not recognise. The image reflecting back at me was quite obviously not my own but that of a fantastical hyper sexualised caricature (Figure 5.2b). Emily Duffy’s VainVan is a direct riposte to this kind of strange misrecognition. And when my likeness appeared through an assortment of mirrors affixed to the side of her vehicle (Figure 5.3), the vast gulf between these different representations of woman was realised.

VainVan’s most obvious departure from the kind of ‘murals’ I describe is explained by the fact that Duffy’s representation of woman is an “essentialism self-consciously aware of the fiction of essence”\textsuperscript{493} and representation. In fact that is the underlying message of this artwork. Through playful provocation, Duffy wants women (and men) to consider how images and ideals of women, femininity and beauty are constructed. Moreover, unlike the airbrushed semi-naked women adorning car side panels and bonnets, Duffy rendered this image of woman herself. Thus as both a maker and a driver, Duffy creates a statement about women’s agency in negotiating both automobility and cosmetic culture. Hence VainVan becomes an intervention in the habitus of automobility precisely by establishing, on a daily basis, an alternative space where the car is not simply a commodity or fetish but a site for debate. The researcher. Things were explained to me precisely because, as a woman, I wasn’t expected to know much about cars.

great irony of course is that Duffy achieves this by redeploying the trappings of fashion and all manner of kitsch accessories.

Duffy moves away from any singular vision of woman by proffering VainVan as a question and by rendering woman in a multiplicity of formats. In the first instance “this car, the car itself, is a woman’s body.”

Although the mini-van was not her initial choice, Duffy soon realised that the make ideally suited her purpose. “I thought, wait a minute this is actually the woman car, a mini-van. That is a woman. That’s everyday woman.” She proceeded to decorate the car to explicitly signify a woman’s body and its complex associations with the beauty industry (Figure 5.4).

So the front end has a bra, made out of bras, in the shape of a bra. And a lot of women don’t know that those plastic black covers you see at the front end of a car those are called ‘car bras’. So I did that and then I glued the bras down with silicone. So there are like all these hidden layers of irony and poking fun at the beauty industry and the way women distort their bodies for beauty. Then the top of the car has, like a woman’s head, curlers and I took drain pipe that looks like curlers and painted it to look like curlers... and then the back end has fattening food, just like a woman has on her caboose, also a couple of panties and thongs.

Duffy extended her anthropomorphising technique into the van’s interior (Figure 5.5a), where she covered the ceiling in artificial rose-petals and feathers because she “wanted it to feel kind of womb-like.” Thus the car body is mimetically transformed into the physical features of “the generic woman body”, but at the same time references Duffys’ relationship to her own body. This point is reinforced by the predominance of the colour pink and the clothing

---

494 This comment brings to mind the short film This woman is not a car (1982) by Australian artist Margaret Dodd. The film is a comment on the manner in which both women and cars are fetishised as objects of desire. It follows the story of a woman returning from a trip to the beach with her children. She pulls into a service station for petrol and a fantasy sequence unfolds. At first erotic and humorous, the film develops into horror as the male mechanics force themselves onto the car and by association its female driver. In the concluding scene the woman gives birth to a car—a ceramic object which Dodd had also made. As an artist Dodd is best known for the many ceramic cars (particularly Holdens) made during her career in America and Australia.

495 For a discussion of the “chick car” as an automobile category and symbol of women’s empowerment see Chris Lezotte 2012. ‘The Evolution of the “Chick Car” Or: What Came First, the Chick or the Car?’ The Journal of Popular Culture 45 (3): 516–531.

496 Emily Duffy (personal communication 21 June 2009)

497 ibid.

498 Emily Duffy (personal communication 21 June 2009)

499 ibid.
that Duffy wears when she ‘shows’ the vehicle. VainVan is “like an outfit I wear, its an accessory...its autobiographical and its talking about an issue I care about at this point in particular, there’s even some of my own bras on the front.”

Using a different mode of representation on the side panels of the car, Duffy pictorialises four different “racial groups: a Caucasian woman, an African woman, an Asian woman and a Latin or Hispanic woman.” Duffy refers to these women as “the four saints of beauty, and around each one is a halo of some kind of beauty product.” The African woman has painted fingernails, the Hispanic woman has hairclips, the Caucasian woman has hair rollers and the Asian woman has make up. Explaining her intention as wanting “to have things that were small details that people could study at a festival where they can come close in and look, but also some kind of message that people could catch immediately as I was driving by from a distance so they could tell something about what this was about.”

A third mode of address appears as text painted onto the vehicle’s surface. On the passenger side the statement reads ‘Vanity thy name is Woman Marketing’ while the driver’s side poses

---

500 Duffy (personal communication 21 June 2009) states that she is not a “girly girl” and before turning 40 never used to wear pink, in this context she suggests that VainVan may also be a ‘mid-life crisis’.  
501 Emily Duffy (personal communication 21 June 2009)  
502 Ibid.  
503 Ibid.  
504 Ibid.
the question: ‘Who profits from your self-loathing?’ This textual device directly communicates the challenge the artist puts to the public, and manifests her voice in a dialogic exchange with a female viewer/audience. In addressing the viewer in this way, Duffy not only ‘speaks up’ for herself and her sex, she encodes the female viewer within the car itself. By portraying the woman as viewer rather than merely the object of viewing, Duffy regenders the gaze and empowers the female viewer to search below surface ‘appearances’ to discover the substance beneath.

These are two questions I want women to ask themselves, I want them to question this statement and that question, how does that apply to you? So if you were to ask yourself, well who is profiting from me hating myself? There is a huge industry that’s making money off of you despising yourself. And I was part of that, for awhile, so that is part of my penance to say “don’t hate your body, don’t hate yourself, accept yourself as you are, don’t inject yourself with silicone”...I mean this is directed at women, but the sad thing is that men are now also having this problem...they’re getting implants and they’re hating themselves. And it’s all just to sell product. So with a humorous ironic twist I’m trying to get social messaging across that makes people think.

In identifying her art car as a device of social messaging Duffy reminds us of the public domain in which the car – as art – is operating. In her opinion it is the car that makes the art more accessible:

I think, you know, the people we get generally don’t go to museums because they don’t understand and they think it’s a waste of time and money and why should I go to a museum? This is actually really democratic. It’s public, it’s everyday, it’s in your face.  

But as with any art however, the public don’t always ‘get it’, so much so in Duffy’s case that she has even been asked if she has a salon or if she has Mary Kay. Admittedly frustrated by the public’s lack of imagination, Duffy puts such comments down to “how Americans react to art, they are confused by it, they don’t know what to do with it.” Yet this doesn’t desist Duffy in challenging viewers to question what is beauty and what is woman. Moreover an

505 Ibid.  
506 Mary Kay is a cosmetic chain operating “with more than 2.5 million Independent Beauty Consultants...more than 200 premium products in more than 35 countries around the world.” Retrieved January 30, 2013 from http://www.marykay.com/en-US/About-Mary-Kay/CompanyFounder  
507 Emily Duffy (personal communication 21 June 2009)
invitation to comment is built into the very structure of VainVan. Beneath the words ‘write about beauty’ Duffy has fixed chalkboard and a purse containing chalk (Figure 5.5b).

Figure 5.5a Detail of VainVan interior. Figure 5.5b VainVan’s Beauty comment board. Photographs: U.K. Frederick.

Duffy is able to reach a broad audience with this political artwork not only because the car exists in the public sphere, but because it moves through it on a daily basis. It is a rolling billboard. This is the kind of public space that art car artist harness, not a space in a public square “but the city itself. Not nodes but circulation routes; not buildings and plazas but roads and bridges.” In this sense the art car is distinguishable from the monumental statuary and permanent sculpture that traditionally define public art. Yet it points to an alternative that Maksymowicz identifies as “the most authentic type of public art” as “one that directly engages people who do not regularly visit galleries and museums with the socio-political issues that affect their communities.” This kind of art consciously “seeks to integrate itself

510 Ibid., p 148.
into everyday life”,\textsuperscript{511} it secures broad circulation, and precisely because it is transitory it leaves its trace in your mind.\textsuperscript{512}

As Mitchell and others have pointed out, there is considerable controversy and public debate over the general purpose of art in public space. Does it offer the opportunity “for new forms of public solidarity”\textsuperscript{513} or is it an important vehicle for expressions of public resistance? Is it “utopian” or “critical” or both?\textsuperscript{514} Should it serve the desires of the community or should it challenge community values? I would argue that an art car like VainVan urges us to reconsider what role art can play in the public context of contemporary life.

Because art car artists realise the potential of the road as a conduit of mass-communication there are many art cars that carry an overt message. In some instances the agenda appears little more than unreconstructed ideology or patriotism. More commonly however, the ‘art car with a message’ is a focused meditation on a single issue. The sentiment may reflect a particular concern of the driver/maker but at the same time they often expose problems of national or global relevance. I am thinking here of several art cars that exhibit a concern for environmental preservation, some of which, in full awareness of the irony, use the body of the car as a protest against oil consumption and automobility itself.\textsuperscript{515} Thus for many art car artists the car becomes a voice through which they can provoke the public into thinking about key issues. In this respect it upholds the spirit of public art, as a site for public discussion and debate.

\textsuperscript{511}Ibid., p 155.
\textsuperscript{514}See W.J.T. Mitchell 1992. ‘Introduction: Utopia and Critique’ for a discussion of these defining attributes.
\textsuperscript{515}It is worth noting in relation to this point that a large proportion of the art car artists I spoke to, as well as other car enthusiasts, are of the belief that automobility, as it is currently practiced is unsustainable. Many of them expressed concern over both the depletion of oil resources and the emissions that driving stimulates. Several suggested that alternative fuel sources were badly needed and discussed their own consumption practices. Duffy for example spoke of driving her art car as “hard to justify, I’m doing a bad thing [by consuming fuel] but at the same time, it’s a balance because it’s also bringing art to people who might never see it.” Emily Duffy (personal communication 21 June 2009)
While some art car artists make their statement bluntly, others take delight in urging the spectator to explore and discover different layers of meaning. Despite this difference, most art cars are structured around a single theme which is encoded in the art car’s name. For example, *Eartha* is a car which takes the natural world as its subject. This same thematic technique occurs in other car enthusiasms, as in the case of street machine customs. Here the theme appears to be used as a principle for guiding stylistic modifications. So that rather than form the basis of a message, *per se*, the theme works to establish a vehicle’s character. For instance, a plastic crocodile head installed into a car’s dashboard may become the talisman around which subsequent modifications are geared (Figure 5.6). An intriguing aspect to the thematic customisation of streetcars is that they sometimes entail a whole armoury of props and paraphernalia. These accoutrements are rarely visible when the car is on the road but spill out into theatrical tableau when the car is “shown”. Effectively, the car’s driver/owner creates an immediate aura around the vehicle, a definitive space which sets the car apart from all of those around it. Increasingly, such accessories comprise not just objects and elaborate signs but also screens, sound systems and even automatons to create multi-media spectacles (Figure 5.7). Themed cars of this nature are of a different order than the *VainVan* and other art cars, in large part because they embrace the latest technological instruments and aftermarket embellishments in order to stay apace with ever-changing fashions.
Fashion is of course the fulcrum of consumer culture and it is the very same public that the art car entertains to which advertising directs its efforts. There is consequently, a shared terrain (and mass-audience) upon which art, advertising, activism, state-sponsored ideology and propaganda compete. It is perhaps for this reason that Duffy’s work recalls for me the art of Barbara Kruger (Figure 5.8). Both are political artists who use text and pictures in a process that operates somewhere near the intersection of these different discursive strategies.

This is evident in the various ways Duffy constructs and speaks about her art car. She describes it as “autobiographical”, and about her “personal journey as an artist”, and as a form of “social messaging” or “anti-propaganda propaganda”.516 Most evocatively she refers to this art car as her “penance” for “working at a knock-off house, a clothing company that copies other companies designs and makes them cheaper.”517 More specifically she recounts the policy of altering the colour range of clothing, up to six times a year, so that the previous season’s attire would not match the current fashion and people would have to buy a whole new wardrobe. She explains that this cycle of superfluous consumption “went against

---

516 Emily Duffy (personal communication 21 June 2009)
517 Ibid.

194
everything I believe in as a human being and so after working in that business for a number of years I felt guilty."^518

Figure 5.8 Barbara Kruger, You are not yourself, reproduced from Mitchell and Kruger.

Although VainVan was motivated specifically by the artist’s discomfort with the clothing industry, there are obvious parallels to be found in the fashioning of automobiles. Indeed, American auto stylists (particularly GM’s Harley Earl) are credited with pioneering the concepts of planned obsolescence and product hierarchies, now standard principles governing the production/consumption cycle of most mass-manufactured goods. As early as the 1920s GM’s Alfred Sloan recognised that style could be an important tool in leveraging the GM product above its competitors. By eschewing the standardised and functionalist aesthetic associated with mass production, GM ultimately gained market edge. Gartman argues that stylistic alterations, which were often superficial, worked to disguise the industrial methods by which cars were manufactured, thereby temporarily alleviating the angst of the working classes who were otherwise ‘dehumanised’ by the implementation of Taylorist methods.^519

^518 Ibid.
Even though the actual alterations implemented were often only ornamental, annual models changes were introduced to stimulate consumer demand for the 'new'. At the same time cars were arranged in a stylistic hierarchy, to encourage consumers to aspire and upgrade their social mobility via the means of purchase power. In this way obsolescence became an instrumental feature of automobile design and marketing, and an 'aesthetic of the new' came to dominate as the foundation of mass-consumption.\textsuperscript{520} Of course advertising played an enormous role in achieving this effect, and early on the subjectivity of femininity was co-opted into its service. American culture around the turn of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century perceived the car as a toy and fashion accessory of high society. It is on the basis of the car's early association to amusement, fashion and leisure, that is consumption "rather than values of enumerated work",\textsuperscript{521} which made women's automobility acceptable.

Cotton Seiler argues that the promise of transformation that automobility offered was compelling for both sexes and argues that by driving women "affirmed their fitness for citizenship and legal equality with men."\textsuperscript{522} Moreover "women's self-representations of driving...as parables of political competency\textsuperscript{523} were instrumental to this process. Other historical studies suggest the status of automobility was less ambiguously gendered.\textsuperscript{524} It remains however that women featured often in early automobile advertisements, where their presence was foregrounded in "the ornamental allure of the car itself and the clothing and accessories that went with it."\textsuperscript{525} Subsequent marketing campaigns have seen the model of women's automobility constructed around the performance of domestic duties or as an emancipation from the household. At the same time advertisements have depicted the female figure as conjoined with the car in a nexus of glamour and seductive power. Such illustrations conflate the two 'objects' into the ultimate commodity fetish, to be desired and enjoyed in image, if not reality.

Rather than replay these histories of objectification VainVan reconfigures the links between automobility and the ideals of beauty and consumption commonly signified by the appearance of woman. This vehicle is no fixed statement about gender, nor is it an image of

\textsuperscript{520} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{522} Ibid. p 58
\textsuperscript{523} Ibid. p 58.
\textsuperscript{525} Seiler, Republic of Drivers.
what women do or should look like. Instead it offers a dynamic and shifting impression reinforced through the flux of the van’s motion, and witnessed by the fact that, as a project, it is ongoing.\textsuperscript{526} It recasts the role of the mirror – as a shifting image – in a more productive light, not as an emblem of vanity, but as a way of approaching self-insight.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.jpg}
\caption{Figure 5.9 Detail of mirrored dragon on the Ram Charger owned by art car artist and teacher Rebecca Bass. Photograph: U.K. Frederick 2009.}
\end{figure}

The mirror is in fact a popular material within the art car community. In many examples I have observed (Figure 5.9), it is used selectively as a design feature, but in \textit{Shattered Vanity} (2007)(Figure 5.10), a vehicle produced by Houston art car artist Nicole Strine, shards of mirror cover the entire surface of a Honda. Above all, the optical effects of the silvered glass provide an extremely shiny and dynamic finish. Like chrome it catches sunlight and reflects it brightly, and as with some expensive automotive paints (e.g. ‘Harlequin’) it has a chameleon-like appearance, appearing to change colour in accordance with the colours that immediately surround it. Unlike chrome or expensive paints, however, plate mirror is accessible, affordable and does not require specialist equipment or experience to apply. Why this material tends to be used solely by female art car artists, however, urges further consideration.\textsuperscript{527}

\textsuperscript{526} Emily Duffy (personal communication 21 June 2009) testifies to this idea of the dynamic form when talking about her practice: “I work the entire surface, all the time.”\textsuperscript{527} Neither the factors of shine nor affordability would seem to account for a notable absence of mirrors in art cars made solely by men. There have been several art cars, made by men, which achieve a shiny
For centuries the Western imagination has associated the mirror with woman, feminine beauty and vanity. But as various art histories reveal, the looking glass is an ambiguous icon. Phillippy suggests that behind the “distinction between good and bad uses of the mirror lies the gendering of the gaze... Women’s characteristic superficiality, the argument runs, leads them to mistake the mirror as a tool to adorn the body, overlooking its more serious intellectual use.”\(^\text{528}\) Thus when used as an analogy of woman, the mirror’s shifting surface has often asserted a negative character, inferring a transitory or duplicitous nature. Against this historical context it is intriguing to note that the art car artist works with the mirror in fragments. They must break or cut the mirror in order to shape it and, in a process similar to mosaic, affix the shards to the surface of the car in a tessellated pattern. Even VainVan reappropriates used hand mirrors into a collage of parts. Thus the material fragmentation resulting from the making process reiterates the fact that all representations of gender and sexuality, like concepts of beauty, are ‘fabrications’.

In this regard there are intriguing parallels with the photomedia works of dada artists Hannah Hoch (Figure 5.11) and Claude Cahun. It is persuasive to think of this method – as one of deconstruction and reassemblage – as a way of controlling the mirror in all its symbolic valency and redirecting the gaze of the viewer.

---

surface through the use of salvaged or low cost materials. These include art cars which reuse old trophies, Accesserod (uses chromed car parts), The Reflector (uses reflector plastic), the Penny Van (uses shiny ‘copper’ pennies).

Figure 5.11 Hannah Höch *Das schöne Mädchen* 1920, photomontage.

We might speculate as to why, aside from its optical brilliance, mirrors are used to such an effect by female art car artists. Do they consciously hold the mirror as a tool to regender the subjectivity of the gaze as female? Or by applying the mirror (as strongly signifying woman) to a car, which is dominantly perceived as masculine, are they attempting to remould the perception of automobility within a rubric of womanhood? My sense is that such motivations may be inherent rather than consciously realised. I am certain, however, that many artists create their art cars in a spirit of self-reflexivity. As Emily Duffy stated clearly in explaining why she could never sell her vehicle: "it's autobiographical and it's talking about an issue I care about at this point in particular...my own issues of trying to not hate my own body. This car is
about that struggle. That goes in everything I stick on it.” In this sense VainVan is ardently autobiographical. I would hazard to suggest further, that is not simply a mirror of its maker/owner/driver, but a background that many women share.

Reconfigured and reimagined, the mirrored car is thus transformed from a mark of vanity to a call for self-identification and self-knowing. By calling attention to the body, through various modes of address, VainVan reinforces the position that “the viewer, in effect, is the subject of the work.” In the end then we might think of VainVan as a mirror also, casting back at society important questions about gender, identity politics and the negotiation of the self.

---

529 Emily Duffy (personal communication 21 June 2009)
530 Many art cars may be considered autobiographical because they are often invested with images or sentiments that are deeply personal to the artist/owner. Yet the urge to represent the self, as a gendered being, is an inclination that I have only observed amongst women art car artists. Examples include Kelly Lyles’ Excessories Odd-yssey, Amy Lynch’s Z-bra mobile, as well as Women who Rock.
Fat Car is a celebrity. Since 2011 its image has featured on websites and television, newspapers, magazine articles and ad campaigns. Its voluptuous curves and luscious skin make it the ideal poster child for Australia’s latest art institution. As a collection of art preoccupied with sex and death, the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), and its owner David Walsh, have received considerable publicity. Fat Car has been a key asset in MONA’s marketing strategy. So much so that even as I am purchasing my ticket to the ferry that will take me to the gallery, I am faced with one last enticing brochure judiciously placed to overcome any last minute uncertainty. As a consequence, there can be no chance meeting with this bloated Porsche Carrera, instead I am seduced into going there specifically to see it ‘in the flesh’.

Fat Car (2006) is an artwork by Erwin Wurm, on permanent display at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), Tasmania. At first sight it may appear awkwardly out of place, a breath of levity in an underworld of art pervaded by strident expressions of mortality. But I would argue

---

\[532 \text{This is one of the most persistent characterisations of MONA’s curatorial imperative and is an identified theme of David Walsh’s collecting strategy.}\]
that the artwork’s emphasis on the biological impulse to feed makes it a perfect fit. This drive reinforces the image of the fat car as a body and as a being that consumes. One effect of this anthropomorphising energy is that the fat car’s hunger becomes conflated with human desire (appetite). While it is impossible to look at this car and not sense a living body it is worth considering how its installation at MONA extends this reading further.

Like the majority of artworks at MONA, *Fat Car* resides in a darkened space. Despite its relatively cartoonish lolly-like presence here the otherwise jocular *Fat Car* cannot quite shake the sombre mood of its setting. Cast amongst the modern and ancient dead – of *Melbourne Burning* and Egyptian sarcophagi – *Fat Car* is no longer a Porsche but a body exposed under the spotlights. The dramatic staging and bold colour of the car’s exterior magnify its raw nakedness. And its position at the edge of the mezzanine, but with ample room for milling about, ensures that nothing competes for its attention.

When one does broaden one’s vision to *Fat Car’s* immediate surroundings it is clear that the car has been positioned between two icons of the ancient world. Hovering immediately at the vehicle’s rear is a large fragment of an Egyptian sandstone sarcophagus (664-30 BCE) carved in the form of a mask-like head. Just beyond the car’s frontend there is a small antechamber housing the coffin and mummified remains of Pausiris (100BCE-CE100). This is an intriguing alignment of objects, because despite differences in cultural origin their purpose is not so different. The car and the mummy in each their own way are a technology invented to contain and carry the body forward through time and space.

The ancient Egyptians employed an elaborate system of interring and preserving elite members of their society, which included wrapping and layering a body after its organs had been removed. In its emphasis on both the existence and absence of materials the technology of mummification alerts us to the presence of unseen forces acting upon and through the tangible. This may be likened to Christine Macel’s description of Wurm’s practice as a kind of “psychosculpture”. By focusing on the body ‘casing’ and its dilation, Macel suggests Wurm fills his sculptures with feeling. If casing serves to contain and organise the psyche, then *Fat

---


534 As a consequence the sculpture is somewhat isolated. Combined with the conceptual barrier/shield denoted by the line on the floor this positioning lends the piece an aura which reinforces its fetish status.

Car is bulging with emotion. Could it be that some kind of invisible emotional energy inflates the Fat Car and draws the viewer into its orbit? If the statistics recorded on MONA’s ‘O’ are anything to go by 15% of its visitor’s feel the love whereas 3% sense hate. Because I am less concerned with whether people do or don’t like Fat Car such percentages do not really matter. It is interesting simply to observe that people feel anything at all.

We might describe Fat Car as modern-day mummification—the maintenance of the organic in inorganic form. Because the stated intention of the work to synthesise technological and biological systems Fat Car may be regarded also as a rumination on the posthuman condition. While Wurm’s working process does not incorporate the prosthetic, tissue art or transgenic practices of other posthumanist artists he nevertheless coaxes the car into a kind of cosmetic surgery such that it resembles the philosophical spirit of biotechnology. Fat Car appears as a conflation of human and machine form and as such is a material representation of “the particular moment where the artificial and the natural—the organic and the technological—begin to dissolve into each other.” At the same time Fat Car recalls the way in which cars have “re-shaped corporeal existence.” Thus the artwork as a whole, addresses contemporary anxieties about the role of technology in manipulating, augmenting or otherwise destabilising the normative human form. It is worth noting, further, the emphasis Wurm has placed upon the role of skin, a boundary surface that is “both a system for protecting our individuality and a first instrument and site of interaction with others.”

For it is here, in the layer of fleshy duco/dermis that the collapse of organic and machinic takes place and it is in the simulation/presence of skin that the viewer first recognises some semblance of humanity.

---

536 The ‘O’ is a hand-held device on which all of the artwork details are displayed, as well as additional curatorial content. It looks and works in a similar manner as a smart phone.
539 Here I am referring to artists like Stelarc, Orlan and Eduardo Kac.
Despite having made other ‘fat’ cars, Wurm’s own reaction to this particular sculpture was one of shock—in his opinion its colour was “not possible” and “too wild”\textsuperscript{543} and he perceived it as something of a mistake. However, David Walsh, the person who commissioned the work and selected the colour, was insistent. A lurid, lipstick, pornstar red it would definitely be. Perhaps these mixed feelings, these different personalities and tastes – artist and collector – are imbued in the car itself and the audience registers the tension between them. Without invoking the adage ‘the car reflects its owner’, I can’t help but wonder if David Walsh sees something of his own body in this vehicle. Not so much who he is but what he could become. In this sense \textit{Fat Car}, like many of the works at MONA, is a reminder of the body, the self, and our inevitable mortality. Recognising the corporeality of this car in \textit{this} environment inevitably casts a pall over its playfulness. The true weight of it dawns upon you slowly. \textit{Fat Car} is not simply fat, it is \textit{morbidly} obese.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{me-fat-erwin-wurm-1993.jpg}
\caption{Me/Me Fat (1993), Erwin Wurm}
\end{figure}

\textbf{Fattened Form}

In 1993 Erwin Wurm made a portrait of himself entitled \textit{Me/Me Fat} (Figure 5.13). The image is a composite of two photographs of the artist shot against a backdrop of dense green foliage.

\textsuperscript{543} Wurm in interview on MONA’s O, Museum of Old and New Art.
Both halves of the self-portrait show the artist comfortably and confidently posed and directly facing the camera. There are, however, two conspicuous differences between these representations of Erwin Wurm: his clothing and his body mass. On the left the artist appears casually dressed in t-shirt and black jeans. On the right the artist is more formally attired, wearing grey slacks and a long sleeve shirt buttoned up to the neck. One man is thin, the other has been artificially plumped. In this portrayal Wurm has doubled himself, literally and metaphorically, rendering his own body, through the play of volume, as a tool and object of sculpture.544

To recognise that layering, stretching and thickening (Figure 5.14) are essential to Wurm’s sculptural practice is, however, not to deny the currency that the property of fatness carries. Fat Car is undoubtedly a trenchant critique of the excesses of capitalist society and the materialistic impulses to both fetishise art and cars. Wurm is interested in how things appear, how fat is imaged. He would be well aware of the complicated symbolism of weight in

---

544 This is not the only example of Wurm making artistic use of his likeness. In fact the artist’s body, with all of its mental, physical and psychological faculties, is an important component of Wurm’s practice. However, to my mind Me/Me Fat stands out as a quintessentially sculptural self-portrait that signals Wurm’s attention to weight loss and weight gain as sculptural processes.
Western cultures and how these meanings are born out in art and mass media. What is exceptional about Fat Car is how this symbolism is manifest materially. In contrast to the ephemeral, commonplace or inexpensive things that constitute the standard medium of Wurm’s oeuvre (eg dust, fruit, second-hand clothing, instructional drawings) the fat cars epitomise indulgence by virtue of the luxury objects from which they are made—Alfa Romeo, Rolls Royce, Porsche. The artist not only ‘wastes’ a well-functioning car by rendering it immobile, he does so extravagantly. Of course, such wastefulness is symptomatic of an avaricious humanity. This profligacy is all the more apparent in Fat Car (2006) when we consider that ‘adding weight’ is antithetical to the sports car’s iconic attributes of speed and sleekness.

Technically speaking, Fat Car (2006) is a modified Porsche Carrera convertible. The bulges that resemble rolls and folds of fat are styrofoam and polyester urethane applied to the car’s exterior body and sculpted to wrap around it as a cohesive layer. The entire surface of the vehicle is subsequently coated in a rich lacquer ‘skin’. The sophisticated industrial methods employed by Wurm ensure that the layer of ‘fat’ melds seamlessly with the vehicle underneath. This ‘smoothing’ effect is integral to the artwork and effectively lends the modifications a ‘natural’ appearance. Because the fundamental architecture of the car is unchanged the entire process may be likened to a kind of plastic surgery.

Noticeably, certain features of the car, such as the door handles (Figure 5.15), the headlights and numberplate, retain their original composure. Wurm explains that his initial approach was modelled on an understanding of the human form: “What are those parts of the body that don’t grow even when you’re really fat?—like the eyes, the teeth, the navel, the knees, and maybe the elbows. So, I decided that several parts of the car are related to the body, equatable with bones, eyes, and so on.” One critical difference between this work and earlier iterations (e.g. Fat Car (2001); Fat Car II (2002)) is in the handling of the car’s insides. Wurm turned his attention to engorging key components of the car’s interior when he “realized that fat not only grows outside, but it also grows inside of us. Fat also destroys the

---

545 The presence of too much or too little weight is a convention constructed and employed by individuals, societies, and industries. While weight is more often used in negative stereotyping, it can also be read as positive to the imaging of healthy bodies. For example, in the case of AIDS patients and sufferers of anorexia.
546 As well as the incomes that such objects demand and the affluent lifestyles that are associated with them.
547 Bear in mind the other connotations of the term ‘waste’ with regards to the body, that is ‘wasting’ as both a state of weakening and emaciation, and the biological inflection of ‘waste’ that is a byproduct of eating.
548 Zuspan, ‘Interview with Erwin Wurm’.
inside of the biological organism". As a result in *Fat Car* (2006) we find the driver’s seat so inflated that it actually presses against the steering wheel. Importantly, Wurm fattens the inside selectively, swelling only the seating—those components of the car that are designed to embrace the human contour and which signal the presence of an occupant(s) even in their absence. By filling the space intended for the human body with simply more car, Wurm not only amplifies the body and its excess, he better achieves the idea of the work itself: to “combine a technical system (the car) and a biological system (the human being or animal or whatever)."

Figure 5.15 Detail of *Fat Car* (2006), Erwin Wurm. Photograph Katie Hayne.

Wurm’s choice of car design – a convertible – works all the more effectively in drawing the viewer’s attention inwards. The ‘convertible’ vehicle is intended to be open and exposed in a way that other automotive designs are not. Its status function works precisely by showing off its insides—making the driver visible. In *Fat Car* (2006) we may easily peer into the central core of the vehicle not to find the cavity we would expect but, instead, a bloated interior. To my eye, the overstuffed seats, with their expanded bands of leather, bring to mind the distended belly of a python that has eaten a large animal. This internal view reinforces what we already knew (the car is fat) as well as revealing the unexpected: this car has just had a meal. In addition to providing a perspective that the other fat cars obscure, the openness of the Porsche offers something further. It flirtatiously draws the viewer closer because the

---

549 Ibid.
550 Ibid.
551 This could also be said for *Fat Convertible* (2005) another fattened Porsche made by Wurm.
physical barrier to entry is quite literally lowered. While some viewers would reject this invitation outright, others may find it compelling. This then begs the question, why would anyone want to get into a car that has no room for a passenger? No doubt there is a certain comfort that comes with all that padding. But it seems to me that along with the promise of a sensuous enveloping softness, the prospect of getting inside the car brings with it the possibility of being swallowed.

Of course cars are intended to envelop the human body in a protective sheathing. So, in a sense, every time we enter a car we are, effectively, ingested by the machine. But because this car is fat, by inference, it eats. Thus Wurm’s overindulged sports car aligns the ultimate commodity fetish with consumption itself. While the fatness of the vehicle infers the act of excessive eating and, metaphorically, indulgent consumption it also implies that the car is so all-consuming that it threatens to eat us alive. In the sense that eating sustains one entity in the process of devouring another, the act of consumption is not simply a means of fulfilment but a means to penetrate and destroy. As such, Fat Car may be seen to symbolise the consequences of automobility more broadly, as a monstrous entity that ravenously depletes resources.

**Consuming Cars and Food**

As well as exploring the concept of consumption, Wurm’s sculpture also brings to mind a wealth of existing associations between cars and food. These links are many and varied, from Ford’s inspiration for the moving assembly line (“from the overhead trolley that the Chicago packers use in dressing beef”) to the accessorising of classic cars with fake food displays. Beyond the associations evident in popular culture, scholars point to the shared emphasis that the food and car industries place on “capitalist relations of production” including their

---

552 This is also what makes this type of sports car all the more ambiguous as a status object.

553 In saying this I do not mean to imply that the overall tone of the Fat Car is menacing. However, the danger presented by getting into an unfamiliar vehicle is difficult to repress and is often employed in cinema as illustrated by Matthew Bright (dir.) 1996. Freeway, (USA); Ida Lupino (dir.) 1953. The Hitch-Hiker, (USA); Dave Meyers (dir.) 2007. The Hitcher, (USA); Quentin Tarantino (dir.) 2007. Death Proof, (USA).


conventions of scale, uniformity, standardisation, convenience, automation and efficiency as well as related corporate strategies in marketing, distribution (e.g. franchising) and reliance on low-cost labour. Jakie and Sculley have argued that the proliferation of the fast food industry in America is directly linked to an increasingly automobilised populace. In identifying this period of growth as a story of postwar America we may come to understand why the burger, fries and thickshake have become ornaments in the performance of classic-era car culture. Such expressions of car culture, like Fat Car, testify to the fact that the ways we eat, move, socialise and communicate have become intimately entwined with the automobile.

Even as food researchers demonstrate that that the car-centred diet is more complex, automobile transport continues to be linked to a low nutrient high caloric intake. Indeed, it is ‘fast food’ coupled with low levels of physical activity that make car reliance a key contributor to the “obesogenicity of the environment”. Just as researchers are investigating the relationships between sedentarism, eating practices and car use, Fat Car is a realisation of the implications mass has on movement. As a consequence of its fatness the Porsche can no longer drive as it should. Far from being a luxury sports car capable of high speed the excess flab has rendered it stationary. This contradiction in terms, and values, is what makes the car so oddly amusing.

This philosophical inconsistency is a strategy Wurm imparts in all of his car sculptures. Apart from their vehicular status, The Renault 25/1991 (2008), The Truck (2005), the Telekinetically Bent VW Van (2006) and the Fat Car series share a common principle. They have each somehow been distorted and in the process disavowed of their normative function. It is not that they no longer run but that they do not move logically forward. Whether it is a VW Van, which by virtue of a twist at its centre can only go in circles, or a VW Golf with two wheels off...
the ground and precariously balanced against a wall, Wurm urges his vehicles to go in ways that they aren’t supposed to. To look at these vehicles as objects we see them as absurdly contorted but to imagine them driving requires a new perspective. To view them ‘correctly’ implies we must alter our own mode of perception. We must tilt our head to take in The Renault 25/1991 (2008) as it slants to one side. It is this artistic impulse – to question how reality is constructed – that draws Wurm’s practice into comparison with Claes Oldenburg.

**Recalling Oldenburg**

There are many parallels between Fat Car (2006) and the soft sculpture of Claes Oldenburg. Examples such as Floor Cone (1963), Soft Pay-Telephone (1963), Soft Switches (1964), and Soft Toilet (1966) to name a few, reveal a shared emphasis on the world of the consumer. These articles, like Wurm’s fat cars, reflect sculptural processes of expansion and softening. While Wurm often uses hard materials to capture a fluid or floppy appearance, in many instances Oldenburg’s objects exchange canvas, foam and kapok for the harder materials of ceramic, plastic and metal. Beyond the artworks’ materiality or appearance I am conscious of the conceptual effects of this transformation in substance. By turning their attention to the everyday through the tactics of the absurd, Wurm and Oldenburg both manage to produce artwork that prods the viewer gently. That is, they make serious sculpture with humour.

In keeping with an iconography of the ordinary, much of Oldenburg’s work imitates food, American cuisine in particular. The scale at which he has reproduced cakes and hamburgers simultaneously recalls the visual geography of the road, with its billboards and monumental roadside attractions reflecting a “think big” American attitude. What unites Fat Car (2006) most clearly with works like Giant BLT (Bacon Lettuce and Tomato) (1963), French Fries and Ketchup (1963) and Oldenburg’s other ice cream cones, apple cores, and pie a la mode is that they all operate within a discourse of eating. Admittedly, the giant hamburger and the fat car infer different stages in the consumption process, yet as the latin etymology enunciates: that which is fit to be eaten (ediblis) derives from that which eats (edere). As such the excessive fatness of Wurm’s car is in direct correspondence with the abundance of food that Oldenburg has offered up.

---

562 The car itself doesn’t touch the wall, but is held in place through the tension exerted by a marker pen which bridges the space between the tyre and the wall.
Oldenburg's inspiration for upscaling his foodstuffs into gigantic servings purportedly came from admiring the way automobiles filled the space of a showroom. Not long after making this shift in scale Oldenburg temporarily relocated from New York to the automotive landscape of Los Angeles. During his time on the west coast Oldenburg produced *Autobodys*, ostensibly a drive-in happening in which the audience sat in their parked cars and participated by honking their horns and blinking their headlights. According to Barbara Rose, Oldenburg recognised the car’s iconic impact “with its power as well as its capacity for destruction, as a symbol of the American spirit.” Upon his return to New York, Oldenburg initiated the Airflow project to pursue this theme more intently.

**The Airflow Project**

Rather than a single artwork, the Airflow project might well be described as a sustained focus of artistic energy and attentiveness to a particular subject. It represents a period of intensive research and experimentation which Rose credits as “the essential prototype of his whole series of soft machines”. The focus of this undertaking was the Chrysler Airflow (produced 1934-1937), the first American automobile designed on the principles of “streamlining”. Despite the revolutionary approach to its design the car was a commercial failure. By the time Oldenburg turned to the Chrysler Airflow it was regarded as ‘modern-looking’ but outmoded. This offered some appeal to Oldenburg who, as Rose points out, “deliberately wished to choose a ‘subject far enough away to be on the verge of disappearing from function into archetype...to press style upon mere function.”

In the early stages of the Airflow project Oldenburg travelled to Detroit to consult with Carl Breer, one of the car’s designers and to study the vehicle in detail. He produced a large array of drawings (Figure 5.16) and photographs during the process, but the single most recognised artwork to emerge from this three-year endeavour is the multiple *Profile Airflow* (1969).

---

565 Ibid., p 97.
567 The Airflow was designed to make use of aerodynamic principles and employed a variety of innovative methods including the observation of bird anatomy, flight formations and wind tunnel testing. Ibid.
568 Ibid.
570 *Profile Airflow* represents an important advance in both printmaking and serialised sculpture because it incorporates a cast-resin relief superimposed on a lithograph. The process of editioning (and
interest in considering Airflow in the context of *Fat Car*, concentrates on the many soft sculptures that emerged from the project. Of particular note are the small-scale models (Figure 5.17) made in canvas filled with kapok. Their reduced size are suggestive of the toy Airflow that Oldenburg had owned as a child as well as the clay models used in concept car design. Along with its general shape, Oldenburg has dutifully rendered key features of the car’s design—the running board, the cooling vents, the split windshield, the spare tyre mount and the fender skirts. Window contours and further detail is impressed as patterns in spray enamel.

As if to mirror the staged manufacturing and assembly of automobile parts, these features were made as individual fragments of canvas and subsequently stitched onto the car’s ‘body’. Far from producing a seamless whole the flaps of material and loose threads present the machine as a *working* assemblage. Furthermore, the blue paint and off-white canvas combine with the stencil shapes to give the impression of a three-dimensional blue-print. In stark contrast to the idea of streamlining, where component parts are integrated by design to simulate a continuous flow, the tailoring of Oldenburg’s Airflow is exposed. Oldenburg, in other words, alerts us to the style of the car by pulling out the features. Like Wurm and his

the subsequent recall of inferior multiples) echoes the mass production of the original Airflow automobile (and its commercial difficulties). The development of the work is also significant in the artist’s oeuvre as the project that initiated Oldenburg’s long-term practice of applying industrial products and processes to create sculpture.

212
fattened sportscar, Oldenburg’s art is unconcerned with retaining the characteristic line and contours by which the iconic Airflow was made famous. The artwork is in fact stout and lumpy. Another compelling similarity is that Oldenburg chose to lay bare the vehicle’s interior. Although the Airflow was not a convertible, Oldenburg represents it as such. The rear suicide doors are flung open and the roof of the car is spliced across the centre. Oldenburg wants us to experience the body of the Airflow, inside and out as a coherent entity.

Oldenburg took his interest in the Airflow’s innards one step further when he produced an ensemble of soft sculptures representing its specific components:

I dissected the car into parts that would serve as sculptures - the radiator, the engine, the muffler, the dashboard, the tires, the doors, taillight, mudguards, etc- and established three scales. 571

Through his surgical sculpting procedure Oldenburg produced tyres, the radiator and fan (Figure 5.18), the engine and more. This new-found x-ray vision led him to contemplate “the car as a body, flayed, as in an anatomical chart. Cloth as sheet of tissue, rope as muscle.” 572

Rose suggests the Airflow project was for Oldenburg a deeply intimate theme because Oldenburg’s attention to the Airflow’s internal structure – its skeleton and organs – led him


572 Rose, Claes Oldenburg, p 100.
into a deeper awareness of his own body. At the time Airflow was conceived Oldenburg had
gone on a diet stating it was "a method of becoming aware of my body's internal parts." 573

Figure 5.18 Soft Engine for Airflow with Fan and Transmission—Scale 5 (model) 1966. Retrieved from

Despite the "subliminal figurative quality" 574 of Oldenburg's art, and arguably soft sculpture in
general, 575 the Airflow is "not about anthropomorphosizing [sic], its about releasing the many
identities of form." 576 It is precisely this "projection of body" into a world of inanimate things
that makes both Oldenburg's and Wurm's work so humorous. 577 The comic effect of such
transpositions is not lost on either artist. Play, wit, ridicule and revelrie have long been used as
a way of critiquing societal norms and hierarchical organisations. 578 From the beginning of the

573 Oldenburg cited in Rose, Claes Oldenburg, p 100.
574 Martin Friedman cited in Rose, Claes Oldenburg, p 15.
conjunction with an exhibition of the same title.
576 Rose, Claes Oldenburg, p 100.
577 André-Louis Paré 2006 'Pourquoi et comment la sculpture est devenue humoristique / Why and how
Sculpture has become humorous', ESPACE 76 (Summer): 12.; Richard H. Axsom 1997 'Beyond a Laugh
and a Pretty Line', in Richard Hayden Axsom, David Platzker and Claes Oldenburg (eds) Printed Stuff:
Prints, Posters, and Ephemera by Claes Oldenburg; A Catalogue Raisonné 1958–1996. New York:
Hudson Hills Press, pp 11–49.
578 Bhaktin's theory of the carnivalesque is of relevance here.
20th century artists have used “laughter’s critical force”\textsuperscript{579} to throw tradition off course.\textsuperscript{580} While both artists may be seen to be poking fun at specific social institutions and practices they are, in effect, caricaturing reality.

In short, Wurm’s sculpture, like Oldenburg’s before him, “shows a reality that we dare not look at.”\textsuperscript{581} It is through humour that Wurm is able to make his non-sensical approach to the everyday world accessible to the audience. It is the cuddliness of its curves and its toy like appearance that makes \textit{Fat Car} endearing and funny. We find it funny because we know cars aren’t meant to \textit{look} not meant to \textit{be} like that. It is through this gentle intervention of absurdity that Wurm’s \textit{Fat Car} succeeds to “engender mistrust”\textsuperscript{582} in the socially constructed image of reality.

\textbf{Bodies and Identity in Motion}

In this chapter I have discussed two artworks that utilise the frame, form, shape and surface of the automobile to raise questions about the contemporary status of the human body. My own multi-sensory awareness and engagement with these vehicles has played an essential role in this research, and is directly informed by the reflexive methods of visual anthropology and contemporary archaeology practices. Additionally, through the processes of interview and observation, these fields contribute to a reading of each artwork’s material valency. Together with art theory, which has specifically broadened my reading of these artworks as fetish objects, public performances and visual media, these perspectives enable \textit{Fat Car} and \textit{VainVan} to be studied through the lenses of embodiment, commodity, fashion and autobiography.

The unmistakable link between \textit{VainVan} and \textit{Fat Car} is found in their reference to the human body, and the subsequent reflection on self-identity this stimulates in the viewer. There is of course a distinction in how the artist has approached this anthropomorphising process, yet each focuses their attention on altering those surfaces of the car in which the human body comes into contact. In doing so, both artists are appealing to the human desire to engage through touch. In the case of \textit{Fat Car}, this haptic impulse remains unrealised because the audience is discouraged from getting too close. While this inevitably reinforces the fetishistic

\textsuperscript{579} Paré, ‘Pourquoi et comment’.
\textsuperscript{580} Additionally, Kant believed laughter to aid in digestion and promote a feeling of health in the body. This is worth noting because it further complicates the relationship between humour and fatness in \textit{Fat Car}. The fat produces the humour, which in turn has a curative function on the body. Because so much of Wurm’s practice is informed by his reading of philosophy, it is not unreasonable to propose that Wurm is conscious of this irony.
\textsuperscript{581} Paré, ‘Pourquoi et comment’.
\textsuperscript{582} Peter Zuspan, ‘Interview with Erwin Wurm’

215
undertones of the work it also ensures that the viewer internalises a connection with the fattened Porsche. By contrast, Duffy encourages viewers to come forward and discuss. The questions prompted by VainVan’s textual surface coax the viewer into conversation while the blackboard invites people to directly write their thoughts and opinions onto its body.

Unlike Wurm’s Fat Car, the VainVan is explicitly gender specific. Duffy draws upon a host of references to the female body to remodel her station wagon as woman. While she literally redresses the car in a bra and curlers, this transfiguration is not limited to visual appearances. The feathered and rose petal interior of her car is an allusion to the intimacies of the female form such that Duffy is also alluding to the sensory dimensions of the body. At the same time the artist recognises this body as an entity that consumes, not only the sweet pastries that fatten her rear but also the images, ideas and myths of beauty that envelop her. Fat Car invokes the theme of consumption by playing upon the physiological consequences of eating. Fatness here is an allusion to excess and its presence leads us to suspect that human and car bodies alike will guzzle and gobble and devour until there is nothing left. Overindulgence is further signalled by the material properties of the artwork, the luxury status of the Porsche and the duco colour that Wurm regards as excessive.583 Furthermore as a commissioned artwork, Fat Car drives home the point that with the emergence of capitalism, the body has come to be both “a marketable commodity”,584 and a site of transaction between sitter/patron and artist.585 Hence the body and art itself consumes and is consumed accordingly. By explicitly illuminating the relationship between the car and human body Duffy and Wurm alert us to a simple fact. We wear our cars and our cars wear us. Our bodies are the means by which we express our identity, our bodies are what makes us distinct. This point is expressed materially in each of the artworks. The bras with which VainVan fronts its audience were once the personal apparel of Duffy and numerous other women. The defining red colour of Fat Car’s duco was the personal choice of art collector David Walsh.

At the same time this metaphoric fusion of bodies refers us to the increasing integration of the human body with technology, a transition which has altered our perception of the body

583 Wurm, interview on MONA’s O
277. Woodhouse argues that as financial patronage of art shifted away from the church towards wealthy individuals a new relationship between art and the human body emerged, whereby the representation of individuals, e.g. through portraiture, meant that the body’s image became a saleable commodity.
585 Fat Car epitomises the contemporary manifestation of this exchange with David Walsh not only commissioning the piece but also having the privilege to choose the colour of the duco discussed.

216
and by inference what it means to be human.\textsuperscript{586} While Duffy has not discussed \textit{VainVan} in such terms, her use of the car as a mnemonic for the female body is immediately suggestive of the hybrid entanglements of the technological and biological that characterise the figure of the cyborg. Rather than producing a hybrid species as such, theorists of automobility speak of this merger as a social being, an assemblage of car and driver,\textsuperscript{587} "in which the identity of person and car kinaesthetically intertwine."\textsuperscript{588} What is relevant in this context is the feminist opportunities of the concept that Haraway posits. "The cyborg, she claims, 'is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must code.'"\textsuperscript{589} In other words, the project of the self is ongoing and "We are to conceive of ourselves as open-ended projects rather than finished entities."\textsuperscript{590} As an entity composed of fragments and as a moving invitation for the multitudes to participate in her message, \textit{VainVan} exemplifies the possibilities Haraway identifies.

Both of these artworks may be considered in reference to constructs of posthumanism, not because they utilise the practices of transgenic, tissue and prosthetic arts or permanently combine objects\textsuperscript{591} but because they symbolise the philosophical spirit of cyborg hybridity, where "the artificial and the natural – the organic and the technological – begin to dissolve into each other".\textsuperscript{592} By playing with the boundaries between the human and the machine form Duffy and Wurm complicate our understanding of the human body, its relations to personal identity and how we perceive and define what is beautiful. By weighing down a racing car Wurm breaks the cardinal rule of car design performance—he distorts the speed and


\textsuperscript{588} Nigel Thrift 2004. 'Driving in the City' \textit{Theory Culture Society} 21(4/5): 47.


\textsuperscript{590} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{591} See Dant, 'The Driver-car' for a discussion of the concepts cyborg and hybridity in comparison to his construct of the driver-car assemblage.

efficiency of the vehicle. Thus this fattened Porsche juxtaposes “seemingly incompatible realities” flaunting its remodelled lines and their impracticality.

Aside from drawing attention to the illusion of appearances and the lure of the commodity itself these artistic alterations to the car body’s surface represent a critical adaptation of the car as a consumer product. By dismantling “the design, function and aesthetics of industrial production” and marketing they are subverting notions of normativity as it corresponds to the body. At a broader level, both works provide us with deeper insights into how the car has re-shaped our bodies and our lives.

---

I first encountered Phantoms in image only (Figure 6.1). My father had saved me a clipping from the newspaper. He thought the car looked pretty good and that it showed considerable workmanship on the part of the maker. By that time Phantoms had received a degree of acclaim and had recently been exhibited at the 2007 Essen Motor Show in Germany. Although I was intrigued by the car and touched by my father's interest, I must admit that I didn't think much more of it until I was in Texas on fieldwork. Here I watched a series of videos made by Erik Kolflat, a filmmaker and long-term recorder of the art car community in Houston. One of Kolflat's videos captures the making of Phantoms. Shot over an extended period, the narrative effectively follows the building process. During this 30 minute video sequence I witnessed the character of the car emerge from fragments of steel. I observed the complex structure that supports the vehicle's surface. I sensed the heat and light of the fabrication and witnessed the frustrations, achievements and exhaustion of labour. Watching this video of Phantoms' birth, compelled me to learn more of its genesis and its maker, W.T. Burge.

This video is now available online, see Erik Kolflat 2012 (April 25). W.T. Burge's "Phantoms", [video file] Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkzQGK3r4Ms
In many ways these introductions, through visual media rather than in actuality, set the scene for my discussions with the artist and my subsequent understanding of this artwork. Taking these encounters further I aim to explore the way in which Phantoms encapsulates the ideas of freedom, forward movement, speed and escape while at the same time representing death. For in creating this homage to the modernist impulse Burge is also heralding its end.

Envisioning the present past

In his studio, Burge showed me various artworks in progress and sketches for future vehicles, he pointed to a wall of visual influences and he showed me his workbench and the tools (many handmade) that he uses for finer detail. He also created an image of Phantoms for me through our conversation. To some extent this vision was more vivid and detailed than any direct experience the vehicle might have offered, or at least more so than the one I initially had.\(^{596}\) For when I finally encountered Phantoms it was only momentary.

Although all of the vehicles in the 2008 Art Car Parade didn’t seem to hang around long enough, when Phantoms passed me by it appeared to go all that much faster. In the same instant it seemed to be there it also seemed to vanish. In the immediacy of that moment I was certainly transfixed but my meeting with the car can only be described as fugitive. Because this is not the way one generally anticipates viewing art, or vehicles on show, I confess a slight disappointment. One expects to be able to walk around, peer into, ponder and linger, to ‘look but don’t touch’. By way of contrast, the contemplation that this vehicle offered was in the spectre of its absence. It took me some time to realise that the momentary glimpse is precisely the way we are meant to experience this artwork. Like the ghosts it bears as its vanguard and the fender skirts at the rear, Phantoms is intended to leave us behind...haunted and wanting more.

A fleeting impression of Phantoms reflects and conveys the car as motion. This experience is all the more faithful to Burge’s philosophical stance on the nature and purpose of art cars. “If it doesn’t drive it’s just a float”.\(^ {597}\) This sentiment is parlayed through the art car community on bumper stickers and in talk. But for Burge this commitment to movement is more than a catchphrase, it is a key expression of personal identity that is reflected in his practice. Thus Burge is explicit in linking the driving function of the vehicle to its integrity and value. He is

---

\(^{596}\) Phantoms is in the collection of Anne and Jim Harithas and is sometimes displayed at the Art Car Museum, Houston.

\(^{597}\) Burge (personal communication 28 May 2009).

220
adamant that the machine is integral to the art: “After all what good is a car that you can’t drive?” At the same time Burge recognises the performative capacity that a car can carry even when it is stationary. This is evident in the way that he has staged *Phantoms* in various photographs.

One of these images (Figure 6.2) was taken as a memento of a pilgrimage Burge undertook in *Phantoms*, to the resting place of the famous industrialist Howard Hughes. Burge wanted this shot of his creation in front of Hughes’ grave because Hughes is one of his heroes; “he loved cars, he loved aeroplanes and he loved machines” and “especially because he’s crazy.”

However, to the uninformed viewer of the image, this information is difficult to disclose. We might sense Surge’s pride through his posture and expression as he appears to gaze back from the left foreground of the photograph to the vehicle. And because *Phantoms* is aligned with the Hughes monument in the background we might extend this sentiment to that structure also. Is Burge establishing an alliance between his own creation and the genius of Hughes through this composition? Or is he simply paying his respects to the deceased Houston luminary by positioning the car as an offering?

Another photograph taken at Glenwood Cemetery the same day operates quite differently (Figure 7.3). In this image Burge is squatting and leaning against the car, his arm resting on the left fender of the vehicle. Artist and car are linked by their contact as well as a shared frontal

---

598 Ibid.
599 Burge also mentions a familial connection in that his father worked for Hughes Tool Company. W.T. Burge (personal communication 28 May 2009).
posture and a comparable height. Burge carries a mournful expression and his position at the
head of the vehicle brings his face into play with the three ghouls that form its frontend.
Towering above them in the background is a grand Neo-classical crypt set into wooded lawns
above the road. Here, in the stonework of the tomb's façade, where a family name ought to
appear, the word PHANTOMS has been inscribed. In this photograph Burge and Phantoms are
drawn together as a single entity (artist/car/ghost) and brought into association with the
mausoleum hovering over them. The generalised “pastness” evoked by the practice and
materiality of photography heightens the spectral content of the image to lend it the
impression of a relic.

Figure 6.3 Photograph of W.T. Burge with Phantoms at Glenwood Cemetery, Houston. Courtesy of W.T. Burge.

Together, Burge’s stills give some indication of the theatrical role that cars may play through
and within photography. As a vernacular practice, his photography parallels a recurrent
impulse to model and depict the car within a variety of settings or backdrops. This particular
mode of representation is used widely amongst car enthusiasts, within a broader suite of

---

vernacular applications. One popular approach is to juxtapose the vehicle with unique architecture or spectacular natural scenery, thereby establishing a mutually connotative relationship between the subject and its environs. Car enthusiasts often seek out locations specifically to stage such images (Figure 6.4).

The architect and car enthusiast Le Corbusier was an early advocate of this approach, famously deploying the automobile and “the look of mass-production to develop a new aesthetic for modern architecture.” As well as noting formal features of car design and including cars in his sketches, Le Corbusier compared cars with monumental structures

---

602 It is outside the scope of this thesis to discuss these practices here, although they are touched upon briefly in my exegesis.

603 A site may be chosen for any number of reasons. Examples I have observed include buildings chosen for their temporal continuity with the automobile; because of the building’s architectural significance; or a building’s symbolic importance (e.g., Parliament House). The beach is another site that is favoured for ‘posing’ vehicles, presumably due to its metaphorical connections with leisure, paradise and beauty.


He often photographed cars in front of specific buildings, in order to emphasise affinities in design and to illustrate his ideas; by pairing the mass-produced car and the house as “a machine for living in”. Today, of course, this device is commonplace within the advertising sector. Whether the ultimate purpose of such photography is to sell cars, promote ideologies or to create memories it is evident that these pictures work by communicating specific values and meanings through the creation of visual affinities and contrasts.

The Parthenon, 447–434 B.C.

The run of the whole thing and in all the details. Thus we get the study of minute points pushed to its limits. Progress. A standard is necessary for order in human effort.

Delage, “Grand-Sport,” 1921

Figure 6.5 Le Corbusier, Toward an Architecture, p 135.

I emphasise photography in this context because it reinforces the temporal dimension of Burge’s artwork. The idea that a photograph carries with it a sense of pastness and
mortality is related to its role as a device for remembering. This mnemonic role is one reason why car enthusiasts use photography, and it parallels the capacity for cars to fulfil a similar function. Both photographs and cars may act as "prompts for reverie" allowing us to travel back in time through memory. Indeed this is one of the emotional pleasures often noted by car enthusiasts. In fact, attachment to a particular car or the general appeal of cars from a certain period is often "intimately bound up with the enthusiast's memories of childhood and youth." While often derided or dismissed by scholars, nostalgic memories and feelings are highly valued within car culture communities. In part nostalgic behaviours allow car enthusiasts to express their appreciation for the skills, tradition and heritage of automobilities. In this way nostalgia can be a vehicle for knowledge. But it may also be a practice of individual agency and a way of questioning "modernity and its teleology of progress". Photography is a popular activity amongst car enthusiasts, and as Burge’s images demonstrate one of the ways in which the past and present are made to collide.

Themes we may draw from the associations made in Burge’s photography include a sense of nostalgia, as well as a gothic melancholy and, most obviously, the eternal presence of death. There is also a bond established between the “timeless” space of the cemetery, the tradition and gravitas of monumental sculpture manifest in the memorial and crypt, and the craftsmanship of the hand built vehicle. An underlying value I have identified is Burge’s admiration for Hughes as a creative individual and catalyst for a number of engineering achievements. This respect is extended to the early 20th century car designer Jean Bugatti through the form of Phantoms’ body. The bizarre inventiveness and engineering brilliance embodied in these two historical figures may be seen as an analogue to the spirit of art car enthusiasm as engendered by Burge: “The cars we build don’t exist. The cars we build don’t exist when we start building them.”

This point was made evident on many occasions during my fieldwork but is also noted in the scholarly literature. See for example Derek Tam-Scott 2009. ‘Rationalizing the Lunatic Fringe: Bases of Classic Car Enthusiasm’ Intersect 2(1): 104–125.
This was made evident to me at numerous car display venues and nostalgia-themed events (e.g. Kurri Kurri Nostalgia Fest and Chromefest) and it has been noted by other scholars, for example Dannefer, Rationality and Passion; Joanne Mackellar 2009 ‘An examination of serious participants at the Australian Wintersun Festival’ Leisure Studies 28 (1): 85–104.
W.T. Burge (personal communication 28 May 2009)
By Burge’s own account Phantoms is modelled on a 1930’s Bugatti Atlantic, an extremely rare European vehicle (Figure 6.7). Conceived by Jean Bugatti in 1935, just years before he was killed while testing a race car, only a handful of Atlantics were made. The vehicle’s shape and lines represent a radical departure from earlier Bugattis and it is still considered to be “one of the most remarkable bodies to be put on wheels.” The most distinctive features of the Atlantic’s design are its low-slung aluminium body, doors that cut into the roofline and a dorsal seam that runs from the radiator to a point at the back of the vehicle. We can see from the images of Phantoms’ construction (Figures 5 and 6) how Burge’s design pays homage to the Atlantic’s core traits. Even the external riveting of Phantoms’ body emulates the exposed seams and rivets on the aluminium alloy panels of the Bugatti concept car. However, the resemblance to the Atlantic is most apparent in the teardrop shape of the cab, the extended

617 Bugatti was only 30 years of age at the time of the accident.
618 Bugatti is the most famous of vintage automobile marques, synonymous with craftsmanship, performance, superior design and exclusivity. Vehicles developed by Ettore Bugatti include the famously luxurious Bugatti Royale or the Type 35 “the most aesthetically perfect of racing cars”. Ettore’s son Jean was also a car designer and although the Type 57S Atlantic is less widely known it is nevertheless revered for its creativity. Amanda Dunsmore and John Payne 2009 Bugatti: Carlo, Rembrandt, Ettore, Jean. National Gallery of Victoria International, 7 February-26 April 2009, Mulgrave: Peleus Press, p 24. Today, all Bugattis are highly sought after and very expensive to acquire. It is worth adding that Australian sculptor James Angus produced a sculpture inspired by the Type 35, which was exhibited in 2008 the Sydney Biennale.
619 Ibid., p 27.
engine compartment, and the pronounced fender skirts. The split windscreen and semi-circular side windows of the Atlantic also inform Burge’s design. Other formal linkages are evident in the framework of Phantoms. For example, although it is hidden by the plating surface the central spine of the vehicle’s structure runs down to a point at the back much like the celebrated dorsal seam of the Bugatti.

Despite its resemblances to the rare Atlantic, Phantoms’ mechanical innards are salvaged from the once ubiquitous VW Bug. Its framework is a hand-fabricated armature covered in thousands of pieces of thin metal each welded to the framework and lightly hammered into shape.\textsuperscript{620} This surface creates an impression of fragmented line, an allusion to “rags blowing in the wind”.\textsuperscript{621} Other notable features include the right hand steering, hand cut windshield and coolant system that Burge developed. It is designed to be “bare bones functional”\textsuperscript{622}, so that Burge can fix it anywhere, independent of anyone else. The most noticeable feature of the

\textsuperscript{620} Burge made a hammer specifically for this purpose. WT Burge (personal communication 28 may 2009)
\textsuperscript{621} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{622} Ibid.

Figures 6.8 and 6.9 The construction of Phantoms. Photographs: W.T. Burge - Truant studio
vehicle is undoubtedly the gargoyle like heads, metallic ghouls with eyes that glow a cold blue because “the car is death”.

What we find at the heart of Burge’s appreciation for the Atlantic is an appreciation for the marriage of form and purpose. Bugatti has not simply made a machine that moves into an object of beauty. Rather, his design expressly communicates movement, thus reinforcing the inherent beauty of the car’s function.

Motion in your design is like the holy grail of automobile design... because you want it to look like it’s moving when it’s sitting still... You don’t want it to look like it’s dead when its not. None of my cars look dead, they look like they’re moving ... Porsches look like they’re moving all the time, they always look like they’re haulin’ ass, ‘vettes always look like they’re haulin’ ass. If you were to look at things in terms of the mountain and energy. The Porsche would be the irresistible force, a Hummer would be the immovable object, they don’t look like they’re moving when they’re standing still, they look like a house...Most automobile design has a tendency to be forward moving...like its going into the future.

For Burge the car’s capacity for movement is of essential importance. It motivates his practice and is key to the car’s function as art:

The reason I build art cars for the road instead of just regular hot rods and stuff like that is because there are millions of people out there...who are never going to walk into a museum, so what they get is a piece of museum for a moment, that’s drivin’ by them on the road.

It is this same principle of motion that aligns closely with Burge’s sense of freedom and individuality. In stating “I am the car” and describing his art in terms of a romance for the road, Burge conflates his sense of self with the apparatus of automobility.

While Burge refers to being on the road as if it were a fundamental state of his being, other car enthusiasts speak of driving in more specific sensory terms. Tony Lee, a hot rod builder from the town of Trinity, Texas distinguishes the normative experience of his daily drive (as mere transportation) from the driving he does in his hot rod (as “a journey” or “major event”) primarily through dimensions of affect and attunement to his immediate environment:

---

623 ibid.
624 ibid.
625 ibid.
626 ibid.
228
If you hit a rainstorm you’re going to get wet. If it’s hot outside you are going to be hot. If it’s freezing and snowing outside you are going to have snow in the car with you. It’s definitely a life choice I guess. I feel like when you are driving something like this you are out to enjoy the road you’re not out to get to some place...you are just making a journey.  

Key to the sensorial effects of automobility is speed. And speed is an essential quality in the aesthetics of modernity. As the many racing and touring contests of Europe and America testify, from an early period automobility was used to advance a sensibility of fast and unimpeded progress. Moreover cars were designed in keeping with these visions of modernity. Through such practices as streamlining and in allusions to flight the image of speed was built into the automobile. Speed and forward movement did not simply provide adventure and thrill, it issued symbolic access to the prospect of ‘getting ahead’. The fact that historically sports/racing cars were the domain of the elite simply reinforces the association between status and high velocity. It is no wonder then that speed and racing retains a currency within particular car cultures and practices, such as the hot rod enthusiasm.

For theorists like Paul Virilio the value of velocity cannot be divorced from the violence of its militaristic applications nor from the accidents that the technology of speed creates. In making plain that “highway casualties are casualties of Progress” Virilio’s stance reminds us, that the accelerated pace by which we live our lives carries perilous consequences. Yet it is, in part, the risk that acceleration bears which has made it enticing for motorists. Whether it is as indices of aspiration and status or via the physical affects of exhilaration and power it generates, speed and its bind to modernity, reinforces the motorcar’s symbolic association with liberation and escape.

627 Tony Lee (personal communication 1 June 2009)
629 In addition to the economic status associated with the possession of a high-performance vehicle, in some car enthusiasms another kind of status may be acquired through competitive racing episodes, whereby a driver gains a reputation. See for example Heli Vaaranen & Neil Wieloch 2002. ‘Car crashes and dead end careers: Leisure pursuits of the Finnish subculture of the kortteliralli street racing’ YOUNG: Nordic Journal of Youth Research 10 (1) : 42–58.
631 As Douglas Kellner points out “Virilio claims that every technology involves its accompanying accident...accidents are part and parcel of technological systems, they expose its limitations, they subvert idealistic visions of technology. Accidents are consequently, in Virilio’s view, an integral part of all modes of transportation.” Douglas Kellner ‘Virilio, War, and Technology: Some Critical Reflections’ Illuminations, pp 1–18. Retrieved from http://www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/kell29.htm
While many scholars critique the symbolism of driving as a performance of freedom\textsuperscript{633} it is hard to deny that “the capacity of individuals and groups to move freely serves as an index of their power.”\textsuperscript{634} The fact that such liberties as car access and ownership have been curbed or denied on the basis of race, class and gender demonstrates that the coupling of freedom and automobility is more than symbolic. Historically, for many Indigenous peoples, women, African-Americans, Hispanics and the lower classes,\textsuperscript{635} access to the car and the personal mobility it affords became an issue of economic and spatial politics. Such issues become all the more pertinent if we follow Seiler’s line of argument that historically the practice of driving, as a gesture of forward movement, came to represent an “embodied expression of self-governance and agency,”, which taken further came to serve as a “metaphor for republican citizenship.”\textsuperscript{636} In short, the freedom and sovereignty that the car is perceived to promise comes into sharp relief when we consider how and when movement is blocked.

In the current century as the world struggles to deal with the complexities of diaspora, migration and the politics of border protection, the freedom to move has become a matter of life and death. The salience of this issue is brought into focus by the many ways in which the motor car is implicated in human migration. The most palpable examples being those in which the car is modified to transport human beings in both novel and dangerous ways (Figure 6.10). Hearing and seeing how humans have been smuggled inside car seats, in double floors, under the bonnet and in the dashboard, in order to cross a border is a poignant reminder that the freedom of movement is hardly a universal but nor is it a hollow trope. In this respect automobility may be construed as an altogether different kind of escape.\textsuperscript{637}


\textsuperscript{636} Although Seiler’s argument is framed specifically in the context of American cultural history, salient features are applicable to other Western nations. Seiler, \textit{Republic of Drivers}, p 58.

\textsuperscript{637} Escapism in this sense reflects a desire for a ‘better life’ but does not always entail physical relocation. It may account for why the car has long been a potent symbol and vessel of fantasy and ‘dreams’. For a Marxist reading of how automotive styling was manipulated by the automotive industry
The artist Betsabee Romero explores these very tensions of human migration in her emblematic installation *Ayate Car* (Figure 6.11). Comprising a 1955 Ford Victoria painted in rich religious iconography and filled with ten thousand dried roses, the piece was initially installed near a frontier wall in the borderlands of Tijuana, Mexico. In this migratory context the artwork became a kind of ex-voto for the thousands of migrants who risk their lives seeking to cross the border. As Zugazagoitia points out, *Ayate Car* “can be seen both as a means of transport and a chapel, combining the practical/real with the spiritual/aspirational.” Appropriating the themes and materials of automobility is a key attribute of Romero’s practice and like Burge she recognises its broader communicative dimensions as art:

The automobile is an object that has served as a form and cultural mechanism for me and it puts me in contact with publics that are normally foreign to contemporary art, seeing that we are citizens of the world, beings in transit and circulating within the codes of territorial relationships.

---


638 An ex-voto is a religious gift of gratitude for a ‘miracle’ that has been granted. The production of ex-votos is a vibrant folk art tradition in Mexico.

The idea of drivers, passengers and speed are historical and cultural concepts with which everyone has an intimate relationship on a daily basis.\textsuperscript{640} Romero brings us back to an understanding of automobility not only as a practice of movement but as concept and mode of delivery that is broadly accessible to the general public, which thereby allows art to travel into new territory. Burge shares this sentiment when he speaks of art cars as the experience of “a museum for a moment”.\textsuperscript{641} We might then think of art cars as a form of public art. Quite distinct from the monumental statuary or modernist sculpture that has characterised this genre, the art car is a more contemporary iteration, appearing on the street and intervening in everyday life only temporarily.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.jpg}
\end{figure}

The Ghost of Automobility

I have suggested that various ways of seeing mediated my first encounter with Phantoms. Amongst these are images of the car and its maker visiting a cemetery. This setting brings the inspiration,\textsuperscript{642} form and theme of the car into focus, but so does the technique used to capture the moment. In arguing that photography is an allegorical art, Owen points to how the practice represents “our desire to fix the transitory, the ephemeral, in a stable and stabilizing image.”\textsuperscript{643} In a related way we may liken Phantoms to photography because it harnesses, in metal, the artist’s impression of death.

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{640} Betsabee Romero cited in Zugazagoitia, ‘Encounters and Circumstances’, p 181.
\textsuperscript{641} W.T. Burge (personal communication 28 May 2009)
\textsuperscript{642} By inspiration I am specifically referring to the presence of Hughes and Bugatti, whose spirits haunt the car in terms of their influence on the thinking and design of the artist.
\end{footnotesize}
Renowned Texan pinstriper Sonny Keeton tells me that death has always been associated with the car, and that skulls are an important aspect of its iconography. Car enthusiasts recognise the dangers of the road and those who build or work on vehicles know the physical and emotional scars they can leave. The imagery of death is a way of confronting those mortal realities while at the same time acknowledging that by driving at high speeds they are both taunting death and trying to outrun it. While most evident within the hot rod enthusiasm, in recent years skulls and other ghoulish motifs have also penetrated the fashions of street machine culture, where it seems to be more generally used to signify evil and badness.

As a five-headed wraith, *Phantoms* embodies the theme of death in spectacular guise. The interior cabin — lined in stitched silk — amplifies the car into a coffin on wheels so that the driver becomes a phantom also. Burge enjoys adopting this persona:

> [The car] has a little tiny window [so] all you see is my hands driving, if I have my black gloves on I pretty much disappear completely... If I’m riding at night, see its right hand steering on it and the funny thing about that is that people drive up next to you when I’m in the right lane, they drive up next to you expecting to see the driver there but when they pull up there’s nothing there at all... It’s really a nice feature because the car really looks like a ghost car, there’s nothing in it. It’s like “Oh my God I can’t see anybody”. I’m usually dressed completely in black and the interior in there is all black and grey so you just disappear into the shadows, that’s what I really prefer.

By his own account Burge envisages *Phantoms* as the Grim Reaper of automobiles, “that’s the vehicle that comes and gets your car when it goes to the junkyard.” So that when Burge describes *Phantoms* as “no life, it’s all ghost” I understand him to mean both the fatal havoc that cars wreak on a daily basis but more specifically the death of automobility. In the end then *Phantoms* is an omen of how things will be in the future.

---

644 Sony Keeton (personal communication)
645 In making this distinction I am endeavouring to show that even though some motifs appear across multiple car cultures they may be used in different ways within those cultures. The fantastical use of skulls, zombies and monsters within street machine customs carries a different sensibility to the viscerally raw renderings of death that appear on hotrods. In effect, one is skin the other bones.
646 Burge noted during our interview that his wife Lisette, a renowned wedding dressmaker, assisted him by making the interior as well as a silk car cover.
647 Self-identification with the car is something that Burge acknowledges outright, by stating that all of his art is a self-portrait and in claiming that he wants to die on the road. W.T. Burge (personal communication).
648 Ibid.
649 Ibid.
650 Ibid.
Cars are going by the way side, that's kind of why I'm here I think, I'm here to make the last great memories before they go...I think cars are dying...Pretty soon they won't be able to see cars on the road.\textsuperscript{651}

\textsuperscript{651} Ibid.
Before entering the exhibition space that houses Your mobile expectations, visitors are ushered into a long darkened room. As we wait, the dosant explains that the exhibition space allows for only a few viewers at a time. In preparation for our entry she invites us to wrap ourselves in one of the cloaks that are hanging on an adjacent wall. The exhibition space is quite chill, we are told, and the cloaks will help to keep us warm. As I take a length of grey fabric down from its hook I think of the felt used by Joseph Beuys in so many of his installations and sculptures. Perhaps this reference affects my response because as I wrap the material around my shoulders the effect is immediate. With a strange leap of the mind, I somehow imagine that I am wearing a wolfskin not a bolt of cloth. I notice its softness. This is a protective mantle and I feel comforted and strong. This sensation happens in an instant and passes quickly. We are now free to enter the adjoining room and people proceed eagerly towards the doorway.

Crossing the threshold into the room is something of a shock. Two things hit me simultaneously. The first thing I’m conscious of is my own breath. The dry sharpness of the air as I inhale brings a gentle tickle to the back of my throat. Although it is arresting, the smell and sensation of the refrigerated air is not unpleasant. In fact it is almost enticing, like sticking my head in the ice cream freezer at the corner shop when I was a kid. The second assault is on my vision, the strong glare bouncing off the white walls of the cube and the shining steel floor is a conspicuous contrast to the low-lit passage from which I entered. It causes my eyes to dilate. Adjusting to the light, I take another step forward. My feet land heavily against a hard
industrial surface. This space is not only cold in temperature, it is starkly functional in mood and appearance. It suddenly feels as though we are in a laboratory, in the midst of an experiment. My grey shawl shifts shape, I am now wearing a lab coat. Only after all of this, after I have become aware of the space my body has entered, and my own body’s reaction to it, does my attention turn to the object at its centre.

The thing in the middle of the room is what we have all come to view. I say thing, rather than art or car, because the object radiates the presence of a living being. It is still and silent, a dormant cocoon-like structure. With the shape of a beetle or a turtle, the size and scalar surface lends it a prehistoric quality. Beneath a white icy carapace a yellow glow emanates from its core. Light seeps through the ruptures in its exterior and from the mouth-like cavity at either end of its oval body. It is only on closer inspection that any car elements are identifiable. Beneath the icy exoskeleton there are four tyres, a seat and a steering wheel. Even with these components hinting at its origins it appears more creature than car. And there is almost an ‘expectation’ that it might hatch before my eyes. It is this unusual appearance and air of mystery that also positions the work as a thing, a rare oddity of the world. I recall the strange entities and spectacles that have fuelled world fairs, freakshows and Wunderkammer for centuries. This thing is one of its kind, unknown and unnamed. In crouching over this object and staring into its strangeness, I sense a kinship of curiosity with those first museum audiences who gathered to view a mermaid’s hand or the first imported pineapple. It seems to me that such inquisitiveness is one way in which we articulate our humanity. Certainly wonder is the engine that drives this artwork. Channelling the power of spectacle and the human desire to witness the extraordinary Eliasson places a question at the heart of this art experience: What are your mobile expectations and where will they take you?

Eliasson’s Machine

I begin this account of Your mobile expectations (Figure 6.12) with a personal response because this is precisely what Eliasson’s art practice seeks to elicit and address. An enquiry into the nature of individual experience – and the external forces that shape it – thread through much of his art.

I think the situation lies with the viewer. Without the viewer the readings of the piece could be endless. So with each viewer the readings and the

---

652 I refer here to objects collected and displayed by the John Tradescants (at The Ark) as an illustration of the public interest in curiosities and which seeded the development of museums.
experience are nailed down to one subjective condition; without the viewer there is, in a way, nothing. Because of his interest in “positioning the subject” many of Eliasson’s works seek to elicit phenomena. One could say that his purpose in producing phenomena is to trigger a shift in the perspective of the viewer whereby “suddenly your representational and your real position merge, and you see where you ‘really’ are, your own position”. Where Eliasson’s manufactured illusions differ from most theatre or cinema, or even other art, is that he doesn’t aim to suspend disbelief indefinitely. The hardware that makes the illusion possible is always exposed as part of the art. When people realise how machinery operates the illusion they are witnessing an awareness takes place. This shift in point of view, an almost instinctive realisation of one’s bodily location in time and space, is what Elisasson refers to when he talks about “positioning the subject” or “going in and out of the work”. “There’s a certain moment where people go "Aha!"; the moment they say ‘Aha!’ they see themselves.”

Along with the centrepiece of the gallery, the space that houses Your mobile expectations is a construction Eliasson has produced. Doubling as an exhibition space within the museum, the room is in fact an industrial cooling unit that keeps Your mobile expectations frozen. In this sense the gallery is a kind of vitrine that we willingly inhabit, one of Eliasson’s “structures that pretend or make us believe that we’re outside, experiencing the piece, but in fact we’re inside, behind the glass, not experiencing anything other than an image.”

One feature of the room makes this especially apparent. A single small window has been cut into the wall near the exit door. This is a framing device that visitors may pass on their way into the ‘waiting’ room corridor. It offers people outside the freezer a ‘peek’ into the exhibition space and the bodies that occupy it. Once inside the exhibition the window becomes a tiny portal to the outside world and serves to advise the viewer inside that she is part of the representation and the image. We see ourselves seeing and being seen and in this process become aware of ourselves.

The grey shawl is another device that Eliasson uses in this piece. Ironically, he unveils the artifice of the gallery in the very act of clothing the viewer. By inviting us to cloak ourselves

---

654 Ibid.
655 Ibid.
656 Ibid.
657 Ibid.
before we enter, Eliasson asks the audience to participate in the performance of the exhibition. This not only heightens anticipation, it creates a semblance of unity amongst the group. And while they do keep the viewer a little warmer, the primary purpose of the cloak is to attune the audience to the temperature of their own bodies and surroundings. This is a vital clue to understanding Eliasson’s method and purpose. What he wants is for the visitor to become conscious of their own self and their experience as an exchange of energy.\footnote{Here again there is a connection with the work of Beuys. Once again the grey fabric recalls Beuys and more specifically his concept of sculpture as comprising spatial, social, thermal and temporal dimensions. Eliasson art is also concerned with thinking about multiple dimensions.}

**Energy**

Energy capture, storage and use is the essential content of *Your mobile expectations* and of course energy lies at the heart of car culture also. It is appropriate then that a hydrogen powered vehicle served as the basis for Eliasson’s installation. Although we cannot distinguish this vehicle beneath the structure Eliasson made, the idea behind this car lies at the centre of the artwork. The BMW H2R is a clean energy race car with an internal combustion engine designed to run on liquid hydrogen (Figure 6.13).


For the final construction of *Your mobile expectations* Eliasson removed the outer alloy skin of the H2R prototype and replaced it with an frame of interlocking steel rods and a lattice of reflective/mirror plates (Figure 6.14). This rigid casing forms a cone-like shell from which...
triangular shards of metal protrude like quills. Each plane of steel was then individually sprayed with water, over several days, until a layer of ice was formed (Figure 4). At each end of the cone formation there is an opening that resembles a gaping mouth. Icicles fall from its metal lip to create dramatic fangs. Light from within the housing emanates through the ruptures in the scalar pattern of the exterior structure.

![Image of Your mobile expectations](http://www.bmwartcarcollection.com/2011/05/16-olafur-eliasson-bmw-art-car/)

*Figure 6.14 Production stage of Your mobile expectations.*


*Your mobile expectations* brings numerous allusions to mind. Perhaps the most obvious lies in the polar conditions of the artwork surroundings. On the one hand this provides a clear link to the glacial environments under threat from global warming. On the other it refers to the fuel source alternative being offered—liquid hydrogen must be cooled and compressed. The frozen image may also refer to our human tendency to fix our perspective and position. Another reference to energy is realised less explicitly. The solar flare that radiates from the core of the structure is a reminder of the sun at the centre of our universe. Coupled with the primordial appearance of the structure, this yellow glow urges us to recall that in its fossil form oil is ancient sunlight.

In speaking of other Eliasson projects Daniel Birnbaum refers to the artist’s use of the sun as a metaphor for challenging normative knowledge based on perception. Like a modern day Copernicus, he suggests Eliasson seeks to twist perspective to reveal new ways of thinking. It is perhaps this impulse towards innovative wisdom that drew BMW to enlist Eliasson in the first place.

---

The BMW Art Car Series

Following a commission to produce BMW’s 16\textsuperscript{th} art car, Olafur Eliasson undertook an extensive amount of research. Over a two year period he consulted a wide array of sources, conducting interviews with designers, engineers, artists, a violin maker, architects and physicists. His studio hosted two symposia (Life in Space, Life in Space)\textsuperscript{661} as a platform for the discussion of ideas and with his studio team Eliasson conducted numerous experiments on the development of form. This consultative and collaborative methodology is a reflection of Eliasson’s interest in varied points of view. Although Eliasson framed this venture as an exercise in car design, in practical terms Your mobile expectations is a drastic modification of an existing BMW. This is in keeping with the ‘art car’ brief, which is to work within the parameters of the BMW product line. To understand the radical nature of Eliasson’s proposal it is necessary to bear in mind the other ‘art cars’ commissioned by BMW.

Beginning with the 1975 BMW 3.00 SL painted by Alexander Calder, BMW has commissioned eighteen art cars over a 36 year period. While BMW is not the only automotive company to foster a relationship with the artworld,\textsuperscript{662} its commitment to the art car series is distinctive. The elite status of the brand is reinforced by the exclusivity of a stringent selection process weighted to well-established (and/or commercially successful) artists. Individual art cars may be viewed at the BMW Museum or as they tour significant cultural institutions and motor

\textsuperscript{661} Olafur Eliasson 2008. Your mobile expectations: BMW H\textsubscript{2}R project. Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publisher.

\textsuperscript{662} In addition to Ford’s patronage of Rivera discussed in a previous chapter, Renault, Fiat and Mercedes have all commissioned artworks relating to cars. Most recently I observed an artist drawing on a Mini Cooper (a subsidiary of BMW) as part of a moving display at the 2011 Perth Motor Show.
shows throughout the world.\textsuperscript{663} In this light the art car series may be viewed as a major marketing success. And beyond brand promotion the exercise may be seen as a lucrative investment in art.\textsuperscript{664} To some extent this specialty ‘line’ of BMWs attempts to reinstate the historic grandeur of the ‘hand-made’ vehicle. The company goes to some effort to promote the unique object status of these cars as works of art, ensuring that the artist’s signature, like the BMW badge, is recorded in the vehicle documentation and often on the car itself. This is one aspect in which Eliasson’s art car stands out markedly. Not only does Eliasson fail to mention the other art cars in his extensive documentation of the H2R project, he explicitly argues that no reference to the BMW corporation (badges, logos, etc) should appear in the immediate vicinity of the artwork.

Nevertheless, there are conceptual similarities between Eliasson’s art car and others in the series. For a start, several of the artists are concerned with questions of time and motion in their broader practice. There are also formal connections and shared motivations. Jenny Holzer’s direct messaging spikes the social conscience and urges the reader to think critically. Truisms painted on the car’s exterior: “The unattainable is invariably attractive”, “Protect me from what I want” strike directly at the vehicle’s allure and prestige. David Hockney turns the car inside out, painting an imagined interior on the outside of the vehicle. And the scalar geometry that covers the surface of Frank Stella’s BMW offers a kind of 2-dimensional precursor to Eliasson’s faceted geodesic frame. Unlike all the other cars in the series, however, Eliasson’s redesign stretches beyond the physical parameters of the vehicle. He does not simply ‘decorate’ the BMW’s surface, he re-imagines the car from the outset.

Eliasson’s process involved stripping the H2R prototype that BMW had given him and rebuilding it. BMW representative Timm Kehler views Eliasson’s approach, based on the idea that ‘engagement has consequences’, as complementary with BMW’s pursuit for a clean energy vehicle:

\begin{quote}
...it’s perfectly in line with what we are trying to pursue with the car he’s working on...it’s a hydrogen car, and it’s a vision that we want to promote to secure the future of the automobile. As with all visions it takes a lot of
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{663} I was told by a representative of BMW during a 2007 exhibition of BMW art cars at the Sydney MCA that the cars are too valuable to tour as a complete collection. In July 2011 BMW launched a virtual tour of the entire collection, including video footage, photographs and specifications about the cars. The site (http://www.bmw-artcartour.com) opens with an introduction about the enduring historical connection between the car and the arts, specifically citing the 1909 Futurist Manifesto.

\textsuperscript{664} Though this can hardly be viewed as risky because each of the artists selected is already a commercial success.
engagement to bring them to life – it requires a change in the perception and usage of cars.\textsuperscript{665}

Although BMW recognised certain synergies in their endeavours, Eliasson’s final work could also be seen as contradictory to the corporation’s purpose. Despite engaging with the technology of the H2R, and particularly the functionality of the hydrogen engine, Eliasson’s intent was decidedly a rejection of function. His car didn’t have to drive. He was re-making the form of the car as a concept.

\textit{Making a Place for Entropy}

On first appearances the site-specific installation \textit{Cadillac Ranch} (1974) has little in common with \textit{Your mobile expectations}. A line of ten rusting Cadillacs up-ended in a wheatfield in Texas recalls little in the way of formal comparison with Eliasson’s elegant and contained design space (Figure 6.16). Yet in their collaborative approach and sensibility towards audience/environment engagement the works share a similar discursive terrain. Furthermore, both installations operate alongside the spectre of an elite and iconic brand.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{cadillac_ranch.png}
\caption{Cadillac Ranch as it appears today. Photograph: U.K. Frederick 2009}
\end{figure}

\textit{Cadillac Ranch} was made by the counter-culture artist collective Ant Farm, through the patronage of Texan philanthropist Stanley Marsh III. It is essentially a work of public sculpture

that comprises ten Cadillac cars buried nose down and at 60 degrees to the ground. An emphasis on the Cadillac’s styling ‘evolution’ is spelled out in the precise arrangement of the structure according to the distinct model changes in the Caddy’s most distinctive design feature—the tailfin (Figure 6.17). As such, the alignment of the cars may be viewed as a distinct timeline, a narrative progression from 1948 to 1964, in which each car denotes a significant model change in the Cadillac range. Ant Farm founder Chip Lord has described the piece as a “monument to the rise and fall of the tailfin”. The precise linearity, scale and spacing of the vehicles – and their rootedness in the earth – gives the work a monolithic appearance akin to earth art or ancient stoneworks.

Ant Farm founder Chip Lord has described the piece as a “monument to the rise and fall of the tailfin”.

The precise linearity, scale and spacing of the vehicles – and their rootedness in the earth – gives the work a monolithic appearance akin to earth art or ancient stoneworks.

Figure 6.17 One of ten half-buried Cadillacs (note the small bump of a tail fin).


There is no doubt that Cadillac Ranch operates today as a beacon to the golden era of American automobile design and postwar auto-Americana. It is a contemporary henge on the sacred Route of 66, complete with pilgrims and their ritualised behaviour. But does this make it a tribute to modernity? To my mind the artwork is better viewed as a memorial, in both content and form. In commemorating a 14 year trajectory in the apex of American automobile styling and the postwar boom it symbolised, Ant Farm were also marking its closure. Moreover, by charting this transition through the very feature that made the Cadillac so

666 Cadillac Ranch is seen to represent each and every model change from 1948 to 1964 – however some intervening years did have a model lineup change as Chip Lord acknowledges, the styling was almost indistinguishable and


668 In this respect Cadillac Ranch shares similarities with Car Henge, a public sculpture in Nebraska arranged and painted grey to resemble Stonehenge.
distinctive, *Cadillac Ranch* has become a bold testament to obsolescence and the death of the American Dream it glorified.

Up close the cars are a shell of their former glory and viewed from the adjacent interstate, the installation resembles an orderly burial ground of giant headstones leaning to one side. The sight is disarming, as though a whole lane of traffic simply drifted off course. Ernest Larsen suggests that this is precisely where the power of the work resides. As an “irruption... of the inexplicable... in the placid texture of the everyday”, the project “undermines the stability of perception.”

As Chip Lord acknowledges, the burial process is central to reading the work as a critique. In their current weather-beaten state it is more accurate to refer to these monoliths as Cadillac remains, but when first installed several were functioning vehicles. As Lord recalls one Cadillac was driven by the collective during their preparatory work right up until the day it was driven to its grave and pushed in. “It ran so well it was painful to bury.” During the intervening decades the perishable features of these vehicles have worn away or been

---

670 At the same time it is worth noting that many of the cars were not yet old enough to be collectible, and hence valued and unaffordable in the manner they are today.
671 Chip Lord, *Autoamerica*. 

244
removed. At the same time the work has become a site for audience participation. The armature of the Cadillacs have evolved into a living structure over which children scramble and families spray paint their names. \(^{672}\)

One might wonder if this kind of intervention was what Ant Farm had hoped for all along. Perhaps *Cadillac Ranch* was intended as an overture to the power of entropy, a sentiment gaining currency amongst artists in the late 1960s-early 70s. In this respect it shares common ground with Wolf Vostell’s Silent Traffic (1969)\(^ {673}\) and *Ghost Parking Lot*, made by Jim Wines and the architectural group SITE in Hambden Connecticut (1978). This installation comprises a group of cars, in whole or part, overlaid with concrete and asphalt so that the vehicles are quite literally embedded in the fabric of the car park.

Our whole idea has always been to make a public space out of something that’s already inherently there. The notion was that these cars exist as part of every asphalt parking lot. So we combined them in a way that’s very archaeological. They keep repairing it. I wish they’d just let the cars disintegrate because that process would have its own beauty …

dematerialization was part of the idea. It’s becoming increasingly ecological, biodegradable. Almost everything that goes into a car goes right back into the earth. \(^{674}\)

Like *Ghost Parking Lot*, *Cadillac Ranch* involves a method of burial that both signifies and elicits a process of dematerialisation. There is, however, a noticeable difference in the burial rituals each display. Whereas the Jim Wines/SITE work shrouds the vehicles thus ‘layering’ them to rest, *Cadillac Ranch* insistently draws attention to what is being interred. The directional force of the Cadillacs suggests a violence that is absent from *Ghost Parking Lot*. These Cadillacs are not entombed but driven like a stake into the ground, front-end into the earth and tail fin to the sky. Given our understanding of a car’s forward motion, it is easy to read the momentum of the vehicles as a gesture of *stabbing into* rather than a *rising from* the dirt. It may well be that this is an environmental gesture about the car sacrificing the earth. But where might we arrive if instead of its normative direction, we read the cars’ motion in reverse? Ant Farm did, after all, intend for the Cadillac’s rear end, and its evolution, to be a

---

\(^{672}\) According to the Cadillac Ranch website that links to Ant Farm “Be sure to take sure paint spray cans with you, as the purpose of this monument is to let the audience participate in it.”


focal point of the work. Adopting this viewpoint the viewer is urged to address the arse-end of the Cadillac. This gaze – ‘seeing the back of something’ – refers to something that has passed us by. Here Ant Farm depart from Eliasson who simply masks the brand of the car. Instead they accentuate the Cadillac’s point of design distinction and turn it against itself. Cadillac Ranch may celebrate a brand but it also heralds its demise. Following this tack Cadillac Ranch is easily interpreted as a landmark to nostalgia. However, supplanting any bereavement for a lost era is the living nature of the sculpture. It is the activation of the site by the public that returns the work to the present. It is the names of people now, that change virtually each day. Yet in their transitory passing and through the ephemerality of their marks these visitations retain a link to the Cadillac’s pastness. The sense of failure captured by the formal properties and material process of the work in fact signals the possibility of rebirth. This is why the land artist Robert Smithson was drawn to quoting Nabokov: “the future is but the obsolete in reverse”. Entropy is universal.

More recently Cadillac Ranch has acquired a new frame of reference that ties to Your mobile expectations. Ironically, these once gas guzzling leviathans now stand in an actively cropped field of wheat—a common source of biodiesel. Both works draw upon their immediate environments to allude to consumption and fuel alternatives. They remind us of the car’s origin in organic resources by uniting the car with elemental substances of our natural world, water, earth, light. They alter the relationship between the object the viewer and their surroundings. Above all, it is the act of “critiquing the present and envisioning the future” which Cadillac Ranch shares with Your mobile expectations.

Expectations and Environment

Your mobile expectations reflects Eliasson’s ongoing interest in perspective and object-subject relations. It is a conjuncture of his formal experimentation with light, meteorological conditions, environment, geometric structures and the physics of space. Eliasson’s motivation in creating what he calls “a double perspective” is relevant to our understanding of Your mobile expectations as both a car and an installation experience. As Daniel Birnbaum points out, the effect of this kind of third person perspective of ourselves is that it inverts the visual encounter, “you’re being seen by the situation. You’re not only a productive,

phenomenologically active subject, you’re also produced by the piece. In other words Eliasson expects that in looking at this car, I will experience the car looking back and I will become aware of my self. Exactly whose mobile expectations are these?

As noted earlier, the artist creates this effect through an ensemble of devices intended to draw our attention to the illusion of the image we encounter. But he also reinforces it in the title and materiality of the piece itself. ‘Look at yourself’ the mirrored surface speaks. And yet it is not easy to do so, the reflectiveness is dulled by the ice. As Eliasson himself has pronounced in relation to his practice more broadly: “the spectator is the central issue. The person, the subject looking... is the issue.” This emphasis on the audience as participant in what they are doing has obvious philosophical ramifications for the environmental questions the car provokes. By seeing ourselves seeing we are able to adopt a critical position. You, me and the car together are the issue at the centre of this artwork.

Most importantly, this awareness is not only seen it is felt. The freezer unit we endure to confront our mobile expectations ensures this. It is this artificially arctic environment that brings into focus the question of energy that underpins the exhibition. Eliasson is well aware that energy is never lost, it goes somewhere. In such a contained site, where bodies mingle they invariably share. When I enter the room I take in the atmosphere of the room. I breathe in cold air and I exhale warm breath. I cannot be present without being altered and in turn altering the atmosphere in some way. As my body loses heat the temperature of the room rises incrementally. So that just by being here breathing, inhaling and exhaling the artwork is changed.

If I were to stay in the room my body temperature would gradually drop to a point that is unsustainable. I would become what I see before me, a frozen entity, a white shadow of life. At the same time, though perhaps not the same rate, the room would absorb my body heat and the frozen carapace would gradually sublimate. This subtle exchange of energy is a metaphor for the kind of impact human existence is having on a global scale. “How much of yourself are you prepared to give up to experience this vehicle?” the artist seems to query. As Eliasson points out “Feelings are actions and actions have consequences”.

The sublimation process is a vestige of the energy exchange that takes place in the room. It is too gradual to observe with the naked eye, but it will eventually claim this creature-car. The

678 Ibid.
679 Eliasson, Your mobile expectations’, p 19.
visitor’s virtual blindness to the threat they pose – what could be called the consequences of their expectations – might be a provocation to recall that we cannot always recognise what we irrevocably alter.

Although this exchange of energy is not visible, other tangible residues remain. Humanity leaves its trace all the same. Fine filaments of hair and fragments of skin and clothing fluff may be seen sticking to the car’s icy surface. This accretion of impurities is visually reminiscent of the speckled black glacial ice that Eliasson captures in his photographic series Glacier Mills. As if to reinforce this connection and an overall association to the glacial environment, these photographs are displayed in the hall where we exit Your mobile expectations. As you leave the room, if it has not already occurred you experience a kind of third person perspective of yourself and are reminded that you are “an experiencing mind, that you’re a subject – you’re subject and object...” at once. This is bound up in how Eliasson views our experience of the car to be, and how he hopes to change its perspective.

Sense and Time
In this chapter I have examined two artworks that draw attention to the car as a building project—they are an allusion to human agency, and the power of our presence in the world to undo and remake the future. Through the vantage of contemporary art theory I have traced the creative antecedents of Phantoms and Your mobile expectations, as well as conceptualised their position in the performative spheres of installation and public art. Because both artworks are concerned with time, entropy and immanence, archaeology provides valuable insights into the idea of dematerialisation and the fragment. This perspective has also informed my appreciation of how time’s passage is made material and further how ruin has been deployed as an evocative representational strategy. Whereas in other chapters I explicitly used the camera as a tool for embodied interaction with cars and artworks, here I take a visual anthropology approach to mean a focus on the visual media produced by others. In particular I have touched on the role of photography in car enthusiasms to explore the way photograph and filmic constructions of particular artworks and cars may affect their reading.

One of the prominent threads that runs through the works by Burge and Eliasson is a consciousness of causality and time. Your mobile expectations recalls a sense of deep prehistory while Phantoms responds to the promise and myths of modernity. The works resonate with themes of contemporary global relevance: energy use, climate change and

---

680 Eliasson, Your mobile expectations’, p 20.

248
massive flows of people. Although both of the works are confident expressions of creative imagination, the theme they implicitly address is the uncertainty of the future. By drawing upon the historical and geological pasts to create an image of the future they cause the viewer to consider how we came to be in our present circumstance. Where we are going? How did we get here? What exactly are we doing now? What kind of world are we making for ourselves? Through a direct appeal to the senses, these artworks invite the viewer to contemplate their agency. While the issues they raise are of universal importance, the presence of the car works to ground them at the level of the everyday individual. This is not someone else’s world, this environment is yours and mine.

Both Burge and Eliasson make their point in metaphoric and material terms, by making cars that have never been seen before. By reconfiguring the automobile itself, they demonstrate how established concepts can be redrawn. And because their works involve the remaking of iconic brands Burge and Eliasson draw us into an appreciation of the car as a form and object of engineering design. Car design has long been considered an art in its own right.\textsuperscript{681} So much so that along with premier car events and specialty car venues, art museums also provide occasions for admiring the technical, engineering, and design characteristics of select motor vehicles. For the most part cars presented in such forums appear in a pristine condition, and this is where the works of Burge and Eliasson make a radical departure from tradition. Rather than regard these iconic designs with distant veneration, both artists, in effect, strip them apart and rebuild them by hand. In doing so they rewrite the blueprints of BMW, VW and Bugatti to create concept vehicles from their own imagination. Eliasson’s approach is to start from the whole BMW and tear away its surface. Once left with only the basic car module he disguises its innards within a pod-like casing. Similarly Burge begins by dismantling an old VW Bug, he then brings together its key components within a hand fabricated steel armature.\textsuperscript{682} In the process the artists remove any semblance of ‘brand’.

Aside from their implicit reference to design there are also certain formal similarities that the two works share. Each comprises an ovoid structure of interlaced or overlapping metal plates lending each artwork a scalar shell-like appearance. The casing of Your mobile expectations is

\textsuperscript{681} The BMW Group proudly emphasise the links between art and design, specifically through its long-term investment in an Art Car program. While promoting their designs in association with prominent artists, BMW also proposes a fundamental difference between the two processes suggesting that “the task of art is to interpret reality...and to point beyond it...the task of design, on the other hand, to shape reality.” BMW AG Public Relations (ed.) 2002. ‘Art and Design’ in Kunst am Automobil [Automobile Art]. Munich: BMW Art Car Collection, np.

\textsuperscript{682} In so far as he is transforming the humble ‘Bug’ into his own version of a Bugatti, Phantoms might be regarded as Burge’s Magnum Opus.
multi-layered, consisting of a diamond-shaped lattice of mirrored metal overlain by a complex
husk of geodesic segments coated in ice. Phantoms, by contrast, has a single thin layer of
welded strips of steel that is both fragile and light. When the car is moving these fragments
have the effect of splintering the clean ‘lines’ of the exterior surface and what was once an
armour dissolves into a blur of ‘shreds’ which evoke the residual rags of a wraith. It is their
external formations that gives these artworks a ‘creature like’ impression. In the case of
Phantoms, “the five ghosts riding together”683 are readily visible, whereas Your mobile
expectations is more ambiguous. On the one hand it lies there pulsing with a dormant energy,
a cocoon or eggshell slowly cracking. On the other it expresses a hollowness, as though it were
an abandoned exoskeleton. What is clear is that for both artists the exterior shell is both
formally and conceptually significant. Not only does it serve to represent, it masquerades and
hides what lies beneath.

In short, both artists are using the shelled exterior of their ‘cars’ to figuratively contain an
invisible force. In the case of Burge, this latent energy is rendered paranormal. But with its
emphasis on speed and forward motion Phantoms might be seen as harnessing the spirit of
modernity. It is no coincidence that this energy is depicted as ghostly, because Phantoms is
presaging the death of automobility. There is a subtle correspondence between this haunting
and the strange emptiness at the core of Your mobile expectations. The yellow glowing centre
remains an ambiguous signal. Could it be the radiance of a new dawn breaking? Or is it the
last luminescence of a life that is waning? In Eliasson’s artwork energy has a dual presence. It
is ‘physical’ in terms of what is released in the combustion of fuel and through the exchange
of bodily energies. But it is also ideational, something imagined, an alternative destiny not yet
available.

Clearly both artworks communicate a strong sense of futurity. In their references to birth and
death they attune us to the notion of life cycle. Yet they operate in a different temporal
register. Your mobile expectations implies a geological timeframe, referring both to the
millions of years encoded in glacial cycles as well as the Carboniferous period when fossil fuels
first formed. Visually evocative of this time before humanity, Eliasson’s art car possesses an
immovable stillness. It is a fossil fixed in primordial stone, a large iceberg with faceted edges.
The only movement, outside of our own, is in the glinting crystals of frozen water—a slow
sublimation we cannot ‘observe’ with the naked eye. Here, time is slow. Phantoms, by

683 W.T. Burge’s description of the artwork prior to its construction. See Kolflat, W.T. Burge’s
“Phantoms”
contrast, operates at a dramatically different pace. It appears in a flash from the recent past, accelerating with the myths of progress. Burge's artwork, in other words, encapsulates a much more compressed time scale. Phantoms is outrunning the harried 20th century. The passage of time that Phantoms conveys is not limited to its art-deco features and reference to the historical figures of Hughes and Bugatti, it is further reinforced by the nostalgic practices Burge enacts in its presence. The ghoulish imagery of the vehicle, and the photography of the car at the cemetery recapitulate the vanitas that pervades car culture iconography. Phantoms is a moving memento mori. Faced with the unpredictability of the future: diminishing resources, a warming climate, homelessness on a global scale, in the realities of the vanitas we can be assured.

Finally, in the fantastical creatures they resemble and the passage of time they evoke, the art cars of Eliasson and Burge remind us that automobility is more than a means of physical transport. It also a 'structure of feeling', a mode of mental travel in its own right. The car is a time machine designed to draw us backwards and forwards, in four dimensions, from a point in the present. This kind of travel is a way for remembering as well as being the stuff of dreams and aspirations. Hence, in the hands of artists like Eliasson and Burge the car has the capacities of flight that early modernists dreamed of. This is the flight of imagination and fantasy. But these contemporary artists envision automobility in a far more tempered and reflective manner than the rapid haze of revolution and conquest the Futurists sought. For them the car cannot be a fantasy left unbridled, even though this is the realm of desire that corporate advertising and popular culture thrive on. Contemporary artists reveal these hopes and escapist longings but also recall that the car will inevitably become grounded on terra firma. We may dream but we must do so from the plane of the earth. This is because automobility is not simply a useful (if often dangerous) technology to take us forward. It is a complex apparatus of cultural phenomena. While it is indeed an airy ideology and object with symbolic currency it is also a suite of individual and cultural practices, ideas, aesthetics and knowledges. We humans engage with these moving parts through our bodies and we experience it through our senses. And in the ways of being automobile we shape our lives and alter our environments.
I think we learn to become worldly by grappling with, rather than generalizing, the ordinary. – Donna Haraway

All things began in order, so shall they end, and so shall they begin again.

- Thomas Browne, *The Garden of Cyrus*

Figure 7.1. Odometer reading. Photograph U.K. Frederick.

Not long after I began this PhD I took a photograph of the dashboard of my station wagon. At the time I was fixated on the odometer, thinking of my mileage as some kind of metaphorical measure of progress. I imagined that I might take a similar photograph every year, to mark my advance towards an eventual finish. What I didn’t anticipate then were the detours, the wrong turns and the breakdowns that are encountered along the way. Considering this photographic

---


impulse now, I understand what I didn’t realise then: this was my own small way of positioning myself as the driver of this research.

Although I long ago gave up counting the kilometres I have travelled, I have had plenty of opportunity to contemplate my vantage point from behind the wheel. I’m not sure exactly why, but for me, the space of the car interior can be a highly contemplative and thought-provoking sphere. As I explain further in my exegesis, driving became a tool for thinking and a mode of practice-led research. On one of my trips I had an important revelation about car culture. As I was gazing through the windscreen to the road ahead it suddenly occurred to me that at the very same time, and in the very same plane of perception, I could also glimpse the road behind in the rear view mirror. That is, in the same present moment I could see where I was going and where I had been, I was moving towards and away, in unison. In other words, the past and the future converged in the present space of the motor car. This experience of looking both ways at once, seemed to me to be an especially apt impression of automobility. Car cultures are based on the traditions of the past and the dreams of time to come, they are both deeply nostalgic and yet fantastically aspirational and future-oriented. Like Janus, the Roman god of transitions, car cultures look to the future and the past, simultaneously.

Looking Both Ways

I began this thesis with a dystopian vision of the world at the point of collapse. This image, forged in the afterglow of the GFC, now seems overly pessimistic. We may well be sensing the consequences of the car, but the apocalypse burns slowly. Moreover, endings expressed in the form of obsolescence, waste and ruin have haunted automobility for decades. Whether foreshadowing or following, beginnings are simply their necessary double. In effect, there is no single narrative that might account for the present state of automobility. Yet, like the two halves of a story, one cannot ignore the divergent forces that shape and mould car cultures. This image of automobility – as inherently paradoxical – is a characterisation that dominates the scholarly literature. It has not been my task to either chart or reconcile these apparent differences. Yet, as Diego Rivera’s creative partnership with Edsel Ford revealed in Chapter One, they may be put to productive use. A key feature of my argument is that we need not relegate our understanding of the car to a simple dichotomy. The powers that affect the course of automobility may also be complementary. The car liberates and constrains, moves us forwards and backwards. The car turns us in circles. Hence, rather like the Ourobous than a unilinear trajectory from origin to final, life through the lens of automobility is better imagined

686 Over the course of this research, around 2 million more cars were registered in Australia alone.

254
as a turning or eternal recurrence. There is no end without beginning and no beginning
without ending again. The tip and the tail touch infinitely. When rendered in this light, time
itself becomes cyclical and the concerns for the past and the future, that are so essential to
the practices, imagery and discourse of car cultures, become entwined rather than
oppositional.

It is evident that the stories of automobility comprise changing meanings and moving parts. In
moving away from dualistic frameworks and linear progress I have sought to emphasise the
ambiguous and transitionary character of the motor car. Throughout this dissertation I have
argued that creative engagements with the automobile offer valuable insights into the
conditions of contemporary life. In order to discuss the material, socio-cultural, and visual
properties of car culture and art more fully I proposed an interdisciplinary methodology,
enfolding visual anthropology, art theory and the archaeology of the contemporary.

Alongside the scholarly literature, my own field observations reveal that creative processes
are at work across a broad spectrum of car enthusiasms. Such creative practices are evident
on an individual basis in the way people choose to modify their vehicles, and they are
apparent in the conventions of display and performance witnessed at car events. My
observation and participation at various automotive venues revealed that customs of looking,
talking, driving, photographing, performance and display are key ways in which car cultures
are made. Through the methods of visual anthropology and survey approach of contemporary
archaeology I have shown that such practices as looking are an embedded and embodied way
for car enthusiasts to produce and convey knowledge. Central to such practices of looking is
the understanding "that all seeing is doubled with the being seen."687 The car is not simply the
subject of our vision. It is also a way by which we are seen, and a way of seeing ourselves. It is
this potential reflexivity of vision, engendered in the automobile’s invitation to see and be
seen, that makes the car such an effective source, subject and media for art.

While recognising that car design, styling and a diversity of potential car modifications may be
regarded similarly as forms of creative engagement in which practices of aesthetic, sensory
embodied relationships between cars and people are enacted, I elected to direct this study
along two specific lines of enquiry. The first involved creative engagements with the car that
emerge in the institutional domain of the art gallery, the second concerned creative

687 Rane Willerslev 2007. ‘To have the world at a distance’: Reconsidering the Significance of Vision for
Social Anthropology’ in Cristina Grassani (ed.) Skilled Visions: Between Apprenticeship and Standards.
expressions that emerged from within a single car enthusiasm: the culture of art cars. In building my argument from the general to the specific I have used both my fieldwork experiences and grounding in the literature of automobility and contemporary art to guide my selection of artworks for detailed analysis. Three of the artworks I selected were made within the context of the contemporary Western art arena, while another three were generated under the more localised circumstances of the American art car community. These choices reflect my desire to investigate creative engagements with car culture as both an artistic activity and an act of car enthusiasm. Pairing these different case studies allowed me to consider creative engagements across complementary, albeit distinct, institutional settings. They are on and off the road, as it were.

Art as Car Culture and Contemporary Art
Each of the case studies (Chapters 4-6) offers a compelling elucidation of my argument, that creative engagements with the car communicate insights about the conditions of contemporary life. In the first instance each artwork unpacks an aspect of car culture that is often taken for granted or overlooked, drawing attention to the opportunities and anxieties made explicit in automobility research. They address different aspects of the car and its role in Western culture, whether that is as a personal object, a symbol, a mode of transport, an apparatus of different resources and industries, or an economy. At the same time, by analysing the works in detail, I have demonstrated how each artwork communicates issues of broader relevance. For instance, climate change, consumption, and the freedoms and limitations of movement, are all matters of increasing global significance.

*Your mobile expectations* is a powerful statement about the environment and global warming that addresses contemporary fears about the role of human agency in endangering the health of the planet. The car is an effective medium for Eliasson’s expression because of the wide-ranging impacts that automobility has had upon the environment. Not only has it been responsible for significant resource depletion, the automobile is considered a major cause of anthropogenic induced climate change. As if to reinforce just how tenuous the viability of life has become, and the fact that the future of all living beings is dependent on a sustainable climate system, Eliasson has altered a BMW such that the artwork is reliant on an ideal temperature if it is to remain intact. With a twist of irony, *Your mobile expectations* can only be preserved in a frozen vitrine that is hostile to the human body. By using the car as the genesis for a dynamic and fragile artwork, Eliasson urges us to question what we may be prepared to give up for what we expect and want. Which is the most threatened ‘species’, the automobile or us?
W.T. Burge’s *Phantoms* is motivated by a related topic, reminding us that death always haunts the car. While the artwork alludes to the destructive potential of excess, *Phantoms* also represents the ghost of an earlier era. Stylistically inspired by the elite racing cars of the early 20th Century, *Phantoms* recalls a time when speed, forward movement and autonomous freedom were the attainable myths of modern progress. For Burge, *Phantoms* is the last gasp of a nostalgic and unfettered automobility, for he is certain that the car cannot survive into the next 50 years. His thoughts echo the sentiments of numerous scholars who argue that automobility cannot be maintained as it currently operates.\(^{688}\) The sense of inevitable demise that beleaguer the auto industry is what gives *Phantoms* its prescient character. It is this same spectral presence that makes the artwork particularly evocative in the current century. In a period where migration, diaspora, homelessness and transience are dominant settings for the experience of life, mobility can no longer symbolise the unfettered liberty and independence it once promised. It is, instead, formidably tied to freedom’s antithesis; those conditions under which movement constrains human life and rights, where it is forced and never ending, or where it is impeded.

Just as *Phantoms* is a reflection on death and the passage of time, Mark Bradford’s art car *Thomson* is a commemoration of past and future life. Initiated as a personal response to loss, *Thomson* reveals the depth of emotion and attachment that people can forge with vehicles. By manifesting his feelings through the substance of the vehicle Bradford has created a memorial. What makes the car such an appropriate medium for Bradford’s gesture is that the automobile is often used to mark important occasions and rites of passage. Whether it is a high school formal, a wedding or simply a family holiday, in various ways the car has come to mediate our lives and our biographies. *Thomson* makes this link transparent. Moreover, *Thomson* may appear as a playful metal creature but he is also a human being-car-turtle figure, in the sense that Haraway deploys the term to mean a material-semiotic knot “in which diverse bodies and meanings coshape one another.”\(^{689}\) By amalgamating references to machines, animals and specific individuals within the single entity, Bradford provokes heady questions that are appropriate to an age in which genome sequencing has become possible. What kind of organism are we? What is it that makes us human? What is our relationship with

---


technology and our companion species? How are our lives and our biographies constituted through the inter and intra-action with other beings?

With *Inopportune: Stage One* Cai Guo-Qiang makes a political comment about the violence of war, the desperation of terrorism and the distancing effects of telemediated conflict. The car itself is a terrible reminder that hostility is waged at the level of the everyday. In its capacity as improvised incendiary device, the automobile has become a key tactic of terrorism and symbol of a new kind of warfare. The artist makes use of the car’s latest function as a weapon to raise questions about how war is represented. In particular Cai Guo-Qiang uses the car bomb’s element of disguise and apparent anonymity as a metaphoric trigger: who exactly are the villains, the victims and the heroes in the battles of the 21st century?

*VainVan* is a cogent creative expression addressing the politics of body image, consumption and identity. By adorning her car with motifs traditionally associated with the women’s cosmetic industry artist Emily Duffy urges the viewer to consider how ideals of beauty and female identity are negotiated. Precisely because the car has been so trenchantly affiliated with masculinity, it is an ideal instrument for challenging how images of woman are constructed. Significantly, Duffy drives her car on a daily basis. As such this artwork is sincerely performative, working to claim the site of the car and the space of the street as a place for women to exercise their selves as gendered beings.

In as much as it is aimed at questioning the role of consumption in constructing identity, Duffy’s *VainVan* shares terrain with the *Fat Car* of Erwin Wurm. *Fat Car* is a declaration of excess, a reflection on commodity fetishism and consumer desires for more. And as the overburdened frame undermines the sports cars’ designer purpose, *Fat Car* would seem to suggest that too much of a good thing may be threatening to one’s health. The car is an especially effective format for communicating ideas about 21st century consumption practices because it has long been regarded as a sign of wealth, fashion and status. What’s more, since it first emerged as an industry the automotive sector has been a critical site for contemplating capitalism, human labour, political economy and corporate management. Aside from its early and instrumental role in establishing key models of mass production, distribution and franchising, the car industry remains a significant player in the development of marketing strategies and fashion cycles that guide consumer preferences and behaviour.

---


258
More than any of the other case studies discussed Fat Car most closely resembles the human form. It is as a result of this anthropomorphic state that the viewer can relate to the body of Fat Car as if it were his own. We recognise ourselves reflected not only in the surface sheen of the paint, but in the folds, flaps and curves of skin that constitute the Porsche’s shape. In drawing this line of connection between the car as a consuming body and the car as a human form, Fat Car calls for realisation and responsibility for our agency as individual consumers and as global citizens. Moreover, by establishing an alignment between the human body and the body of the car, Fat Car invites us to contemplate both the limitations and the future possibilities of living in a post-humanities world.

Importantly, the case studies as a whole reveal that the car is more than merely a canvas or structural support. It cannot be treated as an empty vessel or neutral medium. Rather, the automobile is a highly charged material encoding a plethora of personal and societal significations. As such, the car is a vital integer in the value-creation process and meanings that each artwork generates in its audience.

Implications of Research

In Chapter One I outlined the interdisciplinary field of automobilities, a body of scholarship that aims to understand the dominance of the car not merely as a technology of transport but as a system of actors, materials, objects, ideas and infrastructure. Despite recognising the pervasive influence of automobility within industrialised economies, this field has largely overlooked the many cultures of the car that exist throughout the world. More importantly, in the context of this thesis, automobilities scholars have failed to examine in any detail the role that creative expression plays in the manifestation, maintenance and communication of car-centred societies. This dissertation redresses that lacunae and makes a significant advancement in the scope of automobilities research by demonstrating how artists and their creative works shed light on the influences and impacts of the car in the contemporary Western world.

Through a detailed discussion of key artworks I have clearly established that the practice and study of creative arts offers an important contribution to automobilities scholarship. In addition to rectifying this notable gap in the knowledge and discourse of car culture the present study identifies how creative engagements with the car provide valuable insights into the conditions of 21st century life. I have argued that the artists achieve this by incorporating the automobile, holistically, as an essential feature in their work. In doing so they recognise that the car cannot be treated as an impartial or ordinary substance. Instead they work with the vast gamut of ideas, values and connotations that the car carries at both the individual
and societal level. I have argued that the practice by which this is achieved is one of transformation. Processes of modification, elaboration, customisation and disassociation of the car from its everyday purpose, transform the car both metaphorically and materially. These creative acts of transformation urge the viewer to consider the implications and associations of the car beyond its utilitarian convenience.

In creating *Your mobile expectations*, Eliasson turns a BMW into a glacial preserve for a frozen fossil: an environment that cannot be sustained in its own right. With *Phantoms*, Burge transmutes base metal and an array of VW parts into the face of death, the Grim Reaper of modernity. Duffy’s *VainVan* becomes a mirror while Wurm’s *Fat Car* metamorphoses into a bloated human body. While Bradford converts a Miata into both a memorial and metal mammal named Thomson, Cai’s *Inopportune: Stage One* transforms a sequence of Fords into an image of terror and a rite of purification.

These artworks have the effect of interrogating, challenging and even thwarting “the design, function and aesthetics of industrial production.” And in so doing question the very values and systems of a society in which the car has come to dominate. These artistic processes of transformation mirror the practices of modification engaged by car enthusiasts, who through the use of technical alterations, aesthetic conventions, mechanical know-how, manual dexterity and artistic imagination engage in a creative project that simultaneously “participates with and disrupts the standard methods of fetishistic automotive consumption and signification.” In both cases, through enthusiasm and through art, the remade car becomes a prism through which we may encounter our world in a new light.

In addition to shedding light on the intersections between cars and art, I have demonstrated that an interdisciplinary methodology can realise significant insights. My decision to work with the three fields of contemporary art, visual anthropology and archaeologies of the contemporary past was not arbitrary. Each of these disciplines is concerned with contemplating the human condition, our surroundings, our ways of being and inhabiting the world, and our ways of relating to one another. They achieve this through the application of different techniques, modalities and ‘ways of seeing’. Put simply, archaeology directed my attention to the context and material histories of the cars as artworks, contemporary art enabled me to focus on techniques and processes of making, and visual anthropology urged

---

me to see the human relationships that flowed through and around these vehicles. By bringing these fields together in this dissertation I have highlighted their relationships, and proven how they can be applied together as a productive mode of study. The photo essays that comprise Chapter Three are testimony to how an interdisciplinary approach may work in concert with the distinctive analytical and communicative capacities of art-practice based research. In identifying this methodological contribution to scholarship, I am also urged to recall how my own embodied experience as a researcher is necessarily woven throughout the narrative structure and tone of this dissertation.

Future Directions
In undertaking my analysis I have focussed on the specific enthusiasm of art cars, however this novel interdisciplinary approach might also be applied to other car enthusiasms. To what extent, we might ask, do the transformational practices enacted by low rider, hot rod or custom street machine enthusiasts contribute to our understanding of automobility and the car as art? Moreover, how do these enthusiasms and their modifying practices challenge, maintain or reinforce the standard uses and meanings of the car? And to what extent do their adaptations of this commodity reflect their personal, political and social needs? A more detailed analysis of some of the aesthetic practices identified in my fieldwork would also prove informative. For example, I touched on the importance of vernacular photography as a tool for display, commemoration and the communication of know-how. One might extend this line of questioning to a more specific analysis of the role of photography. How are photographs used and disseminated as objects? How is the practice and exchange of photography experienced by car enthusiasts? What aspects of the car do enthusiasts seek to capture and represent? What does this photography tell us about what people value and how they learn to see? What are the conventions of this practice and what role does it play in the recording, communication and dissemination of car enthusiast knowledge and sociality?

Another possible trajectory for future research would be to look beyond the car itself as a focus of artistic engagement to other expressions of automobility in visual art. Pictorial representations of cars, driving and the apparatus of automobility occur through a variety of media, but particularly in painting, photography and sculpture. How do these modes of practice contribute to our understanding of specific car cultures and what might they tell us about human relationships to automobility?

In conclusion, this research has made an original contribution to the understanding of both car culture and art. It has demonstrated that both the materiality and the symbolism of motor cars is elastic and responsive to the performative gestures and creative practices to which it is
subjected. With an investment of time, money and aesthetic vision, artists and enthusiasts transform the way the car as commodity, object, and symbol is encountered and perceived. Whether as customisations that operate in the space of the street or art that resides in the gallery, creative formulations of car culture are interventions that interrogate systems of valuation and validation. The reclamation of the car, for creative purposes, might well be regarded as a reclamation of the ‘power’ of industry itself. This creativity is understood as a practice of transformation that shapes substance, meaning and value in a manner that is recursive.

Transformation is made possible through the car’s capacity to incorporate meaning multivalently, a capacity due in part to its ubiquity and its everyday presence in Western cultures. Operating in various ways – as a symbol, an indicator of status and individuality, a device of aspiration, a barometer of economic ‘progress’, a technology of movement – the car is a site of projective possibility. It is a means and mode for reflecting, fantasising, remembering and dreaming. It is a way of envisioning and creating. Hence, the power of the car as art resides in its ability to be transformed and in the reflexive process it stimulates in the artist and audience. In working with the automobile the artist is also working with a vast gamut of associations. In removing the car from its everyday currency, through creative engagement, the artist throws a spotlight on the linkages that we might otherwise take for granted. As such the car is a highly productive subject for communicating and contemplating the perplexities of contemporary art. Insofar as the car as art and art as car is both a reflection and response to the conditions of the present, it reveals the dialogical core of contemporary practice: art makes society and society drives art.
REFERENCES


Adler, Dennis 2000. Chrysler. MBI Publishing: Osceola, WN.


266


Blank, Harrod 2007. Art Cars: the cars, the artists, the obsession, the craft. Douglas, AZ.: Blank Books.


Høyem, Martin ‘Southern California Lowriders’ American Ethnography Quasimonthly, Retrieved February 17, 2012 from http://www.americanethnography.com/gallery-2.php?id=106#.UOE0JeY0OgQ


274


Paré, André-Louis 2006. ‘Pourquoi et comment la sculpture est devenue humoristique / Why and how Sculpture has become humorous’, ESPACE 76 (Summer): 5–14.


Rashidi, Maryam 2010 (February 3) ‘Cars as Conversation Pieces: an anthropological analysis of the art object in dialogical art.’ Unpublished presentation to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Graduate Forum, Canada.


**Filmography**

Matthew Bright (dir.) 1996. Freeway, (USA).


To give some sense of the fieldwork I undertook I provide a representative sample of car shows I attended over the course of this project. It does not include any of the art galleries, garages, car yards, auto shops, museums or sites I visited.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classic Car meet</td>
<td>16 March 2008</td>
<td>Old Parliament House, Canberra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Car Nationals</td>
<td>27 September 2008</td>
<td>Queanbeyan, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monster Trucks</td>
<td>7 February 2009</td>
<td>Newcastle, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Classics</td>
<td>8 February 2009</td>
<td>Newcastle, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Coast Show ‘n’ Shine?</td>
<td>22 February, 2009</td>
<td>Gosford, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holden and Ford Day</td>
<td>1 March, 2009</td>
<td>Foreshore Park, Newcastle, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirty Rat</td>
<td>14 March 2009</td>
<td>Tumbi, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurri Kurri Nostalgia Fest</td>
<td>28 March, 2009</td>
<td>Kurri Kurri, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art Car Ball</td>
<td>8 May 2009</td>
<td>Houston, Texas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Street Drag</td>
<td>9 May 2009</td>
<td>Houston, Texas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovery Green Pre-parade event</td>
<td>9 May 2009</td>
<td>Houston, Texas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston Art Car Parade</td>
<td>10 May 2009</td>
<td>Houston, Texas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston Art Car Parade Awards</td>
<td>11 May 2009</td>
<td>Houston, Texas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seattle Art Car Blowout</td>
<td>20-21 June 2009</td>
<td>Seattle, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenwood Car Show</td>
<td>28 June 2009</td>
<td>Seattle, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twin Isles Car Show</td>
<td>29 June 2009</td>
<td>Stanwood, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Chevy Day</td>
<td>6 July 2009</td>
<td>Burien, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model T Ford Coast to Coast</td>
<td>13 July 2009</td>
<td>University of Washington, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinactment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LaConner Cadillac/La Salle Car Show</td>
<td>19 July 2009</td>
<td>La Conner, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowrider Car show</td>
<td>13 July 2009</td>
<td>Rainier Valley, Seattle, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowrider Car show</td>
<td>20 July 2009</td>
<td>Sandpoint, Seattle, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodguys Car show</td>
<td>August 7, 2009</td>
<td>Puyallap, WA, Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Car Nationals</td>
<td>27 September 2009</td>
<td>Queanbeyan, NSW, Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kid’s Car Art Day</td>
<td>3 October 2009</td>
<td>National Museum of Australia, Canberra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electric Car Show</td>
<td>4 October 2009</td>
<td>Near Questacon, Canberra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chromefest</td>
<td>17 October 2009</td>
<td>Gosford, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mooneyes 18th Annual Yokohama Hot Rod Custom Show, 2009</td>
<td>5-6 December 2009</td>
<td>Yokohama, Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pumpkin Sally’s Hot Rod event</td>
<td>21 December 2009</td>
<td>Odawara, Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Ford Day</td>
<td>25 March 2010</td>
<td>Old Parliament House lawns, Canberra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Car Nationals</td>
<td>26 September 2010</td>
<td>Queanbeyan, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yankalilla Cruise</td>
<td>21 November 2010</td>
<td>Yankalilla, South Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uraidla Hot Rod Show</td>
<td>5 December 2010</td>
<td>Uraidla, South Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power of the Past</td>
<td>6 March 2011</td>
<td>Mount Barker, South Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston Art Car Parade</td>
<td>23 May 2011</td>
<td>Houston, Texas, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summernats launch event</td>
<td>6 December 2011</td>
<td>Civic, Canberra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Car Nationals</td>
<td>2 December 2012</td>
<td>Queanbeyan, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summernats Cruise</td>
<td>3 January 2013</td>
<td>Northbourne Ave, Canberra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26th Summernats</td>
<td>4 January 2013</td>
<td>Exhibition Park (EPIC), Canberra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shannons Wheels: Celebrating 100 Years of Motoring in Canberra</td>
<td>17 March 2013</td>
<td>Exhibition Park (EPIC), Canberra</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DRIVING BY: Encounters in Automobility and Art

Ursula K. Frederick

An exegesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of The Australian National University.
Statement of original ownership

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at any other higher education institution. The work is my own, accept where otherwise acknowledged.

Signed: [Signature]

Date: April 17, 2014
Abstract
This exegesis discusses how I came to develop a body of work that engages with the influence of automobility in our daily lives. I identify my working practice as one that is strongly inspired by objects, images and materials that already exist in the world. This enduring interest in the way people make their worlds is informed by my training and sensibility as an archaeologist. I explore this idea as a general influence on my art practice and more specifically through my investigation of car cultures. The signature of the automobile is all around us, but through its very ubiquity it often goes unnoticed. It is this effect of the everyday – the power to hide in the light – that has especially influenced my approach to the subject. How might this presence in our lives be envisaged without representing the car itself? By abstracting the auto from automobility I aim to reflect upon the contradictory ideas and emotions that underlie our relationships to the motor vehicle. The story of the car is also allegorical. From the point of purchase to the aftermath of its obsolescence, the automobile is a site for the projection of our desires. My photographs and video work are an expression of this sweet melancholy; the beauty of hope and the spectre of unfulfilled promise. In discussing how I came to develop my practice in response to this topic, I conclude that many different modes of being and making – from driving, to talking, to photography – may constitute art as practice-based research.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prologue: Starting the Car</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving My Practice</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming a Revhead</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encountering Braddon</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searching for Mobility</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photography and Cars</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detours, U-turns and Roundabouts</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Mattress Mountain</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excavating Vinyl</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Archaeological Record Re-visioned as Art</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing the Archaeology in Everything</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginning to Look</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation and Display</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crashing into the Book Studio</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovering Crash Treasure</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving as Research Practice</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car Yards</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roadworks and Motorscapes</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nearing the Destination</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue: The End of the Road</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Prologue: Starting the Car

The process of any large-scale project or life-changing experience may be likened to a journey. But I hesitate before turning the key to start the engine. I am conscious that the metaphor of ‘research as journey’ is overused and I don’t want this to sound like a cliché. So instead I just sit with my hands on the wheel and stare out of the windscreen into space. But this isn’t just another narrative metaphor, I remind myself, my practice-based research really was a series of road trips. So perhaps it’s best to recall it as such.

Framing this exegesis as something of a road trip refers to the fact that my own mobility and position in car culture has influenced my creative practice. Quite simply, driving is one of the practices that has led me to make my art (Figure 1). By embracing the road trip as a structuring device I aim to signpost the exploratory tone and non-linear episodic chronology. I also mean to capture “the mobility of the gaze and the swings between immersion and detachment”\(^1\) that comes with driving. A space in which ideas, associations, visions and memories flow through me stimulated by the sights and sensations I experience in the present moment. Isn’t any personal account of creative practice similarly fleeting and disjointed?

\(^1\) Here I am drawing an association between driving and flânerie as discussed by Mike Featherstone 1998 ‘The Flâneur, the City and Virtual Public Life’, Urban Studies 35 (5): 909–925.
Like all good road trips, it has not been without incident. I have faced various interruptions, diversions, and roadblocks. I have had to stop and refuel and sometimes seek direction before I could go any further. That is, the emotions experienced throughout the making process are not unlike the range of feelings I have encountered as I have travelled, literally, through this project. The road trip creates its own space/time continuum. When I drive on the highway my mind also moves along, flitting back and forth through time in a series of glimpses, “fragmented yet allegoric” (Figure 2).

![Image of a road trip scene](image)

Figure 2 David Hockney, *Pearblossom Hwy., 11-18th April 1986*, #2. J. Paul Getty Museum.

I find that seeing the horizon ahead turns my mind to future orientated thoughts while simultaneously reflecting on past events. The course of my own creative process, as unfolded in this exegesis is not so different. It wanders and skips about in terms of temporal logic, forwards and backwards, but eventually arriving at its destination, the body of work that forms my graduating exhibition.

**Driving My Practice**

The aim of this exegesis is to present the key questions, influences, and context of my research. In parallel with my dissertation, I have set out to explore how artists engage with

---

2 Featherstone, 'The Flâneur', p. 915.
automobility and what such artistic encounters communicate about contemporary life. Approaching this project as practice-based research, I discuss the ideas, methods, challenges and resolutions that trace the process of encountering automobility as an artist. In doing so I situate my practice within a broader tradition of art. My original contribution may be identified through my working method: an archaeological vision and sensibility which gives me a unique way of seeing car cultures and making art.

In the pages that follow I discuss the three threads that have shaped my creative process. The first thread provides an account of my development and general practice as an artist. I begin by describing my approach to making, not as artworks relating to automobility, but as a process of discovering my own creative methods of seeing the archaeology in everything. Three specific bodies of work produced during my candidature demonstrate how my methods and visual sensibility is strongly influenced by archaeology. Only once I had identified my way of working creatively through this lens, was I able to face the challenge of exploring car culture in my own way. The second thread in my research process came from questioning my subjectivity as an artist-researcher. As an exploration in reflexivity, it outlines the challenge of positioning myself in relation to car culture generally and auto enthusiasm specifically. Neither an opponent nor devotee of cars, per se, I had to question where my motivations and inspiration for this topic lay. Ultimately reconciling that my identification with car cultures was experienced through practices of driving, I began to consider how mobility affects my vision and imagination. This way of working extends beyond the particulars of my designated topic to include the practice of art and the process of research as a continual dialectic. The third thread of this exegesis reveals my deepening engagement with car culture aesthetics and in many ways represents the intersection of the other two lines of practice. Together these three directions clarify how my research culminated in five bodies of art.

The five bodies of work in my graduating show will comprise two artist books, Motorama and Spare Parts. These books aim to convey the vast constellation of places, people, objects, ideas, networks, technologies, bodily practices and thought processes that make up the culture of the car as I have come to know it. At the same time, these photographic collections express my understanding of the pattern, order, display and arrangement through which car culture aesthetics are comprised and reiterated.

Three other works Car Yards, Empty Car Yard and Crash Treasure exist as individual entities that have been arranged as an ensemble. Independently each body of work addresses the car and its consequences as a quintessentially everyday subject: overlooked and virtually absent from our thoughts. Each of the works reflects my desire to explore automobility without
making the car a focus. By removing the car from the picture my intention is to draw the viewer away from the car as a familiar entity and to see it in other ways. Simultaneously I seek to pull the viewer into the details, drawing attention to the web of places, people, materials, networks, technologies, bodily practices and thought processes that underlie its existence. In this sense my photographs are a response and also a reflection of a vast ‘system’ of automobility that lies outside the frame of the image.

_Crash Treasure_ is a series of photographs that details the detritus that results from automotive collisions. Each image is brooding and theatrical, encapsulating the mysterious circumstances and the unforeseen outcomes of auto accidents. The _Car Yard_ sequence is a visual survey of the bunting that decorates automobile sales yards. Exposing the diversity that exists within a structure of standardisation, this latter suite of images may be regarded as a metaphor of the mass production and consumption of the car itself. _Empty Car Yard_ is the video piece that links the two series of stills visually and dynamically. Together, through their formal linkages and combination of stillness and animation, this ensemble represents the ambiguities inherent in automobility: the liberatory sensation of moving and the devastating impact when such ‘freedom’ is brought to a standstill. Furthermore, when read together these works communicate the ‘life cycle’ of the car. Through allusion to different temporalities and emotional states they point to issues of deeper significance: the desire and despair, birth and death upon which the world pivots.
Becoming a Revhead

Not long after commencing my PhD I was faced with an embarrassing admission—I have no particular passion for automobiles. Confessing this sometimes came as a relief. At other times it was tinged with disappointment. The realisation of how little I know about cars dawned on me dauntingly on several occasions. How could I write or make art about car culture if I knew little of how automobiles worked? In my deepest moments of doubt I felt like a fraud. Mechanics was an arcane language I had never been taught and knew nothing about.

In reflecting on this I am reminded of a comment that the historian Donna Merwick once made. She observed that a scholar’s identity is often perceived in accordance with the nature of their research. Because Merwick’s own area of specialist enquiry, the Dutch of early America, was considered a marginal area of historical interest, she found herself, as an historian, operating on the peripheries of the discipline. Needless to say the presumptive association between me and my topic has continued throughout my candidature. With this association, I’ve learned, come other sorts of value judgements. I have noticed a tendency for people to assume that you are either into cars or not, there is no middle ground. I have found this oppositional framework confusing. After all, I drive, don’t I? So where does this place me?

Donna Merwick made this point in the context of the Challenges to Perform Visiting Scholars Program that she co-convened with Greg Dening at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, ANU 2005 at which I was a participant.
This uncertainty became important because it urged me to interrogate my own subjectivity. If I am not that into cars then where am I placed? What is my position in this car culture that I inhabit?

Throughout the course of my research I have increasingly become aware of the extent to which my own life has been influenced by the motor vehicle (Figure 3). I can now look back and recognise the car as a silent witness to defining moments in my own biography (Figure 4). Moreover, the conversations I have had during my fieldwork tell me that such memories and experiences are not peculiarly my own, they are shared by people from all walks of life. The car, as well as being integral to our daily lives, in many societies is also an important feature in the staging of key life events, such as christenings, school formals, weddings, family reunions and funerals.

Interestingly, this biographical relationship goes two ways, as the metaphor of the life cycle is also applied to motor vehicles. It is a common convention amongst car enthusiasts to record different stages in a car’s ‘life’ history, almost as though it were a member of the family. Viewed in temporal sequence these photographs sometimes reveal the mutual ageing of the vehicle and its owner. However, vernacular photographic series don’t always follow a strictly linear progression from the car’s production to its disposal. Indeed, it is quite commonly reversed, particularly when a car has been re-birthed from ruin to a restored classic.

Artists have been instrumental in capturing the presence of the car through mundane routines and the monumental rites of passage. Whether it is John Brack’s or Norman Rockwell’s (Figure 5) representations of family outings or Bill Henson’s portrayal of teenage bodies sweating under the starlight. These artworks along with many others relay experiences that most of us can identify with.

---

Figure 4 Snapshots from my early life with cars.

From top left: Mom (7 months pregnant with me) at Redwood Forest, California, just before leaving for Australia. Below left, captioned “UKF Christening, St Marys Church, Feb 8 1970”. Below right, me with my first car, purchased by Dad in Wyoming, 1974. Bottom, sitting on Mom’s car at home in Perth, circa 1976.
Ultimately I have come to realise and accept that my limited understanding of the internal combustion engine doesn’t really matter. What my research is concerned with is how cars and culture intersect through art. As such I am as much interested in the people behind the machines as the machines themselves. Cars are simply the focus for considering how people make one thing into another by investing it with creativity and meaning. So after five years of fielding the same question I can now say unequivocally, “Yes, I am into cars... really.”

**Encountering Braddon**

My interest in car culture first piqued as I drove along the streets of inner city Canberra. I began to notice that every Friday night a particular street would fill with activity. People milled up and down the footpath and stood on roundabouts while others clustered together on street corners and in car parks. Even in winter this pattern of gathering persisted. In time I found myself driving down Lonsdale Street slowly and intentionally, to watch people in puffy jackets huddled around a car as if it were a hearth. This activity was all the more noticeable because Canberra streets are notoriously empty after dark. Naturally, I was curious. What on earth were these people actually doing? What would motivate you to stand around in the cold on a Friday night? Were they waiting for something to happen? Is Canberra really that boring?
Is this misspent youth in action? These were some of the many questions that passed through my mind, until one night I went to find out.

I have to admit that at first it was a daunting experience, driving into the throng with my station wagon and not knowing where I should or shouldn’t park. Then stepping out into what felt like someone’s turf, even though it was a public street. There was a lot of activity that first night. At the petrol station on the corner cars moved in and out to fill up their tanks while people hovered around them to talk. Away from the petrol pumps, cars were parked anywhere there was space, next to the car wash and air hose, behind the shop, on the verge and under the radiance of the Caltex sign (Figure 6). People were talking and wandering about between the vehicles. Some of the cars had their doors open or their bonnets up. One hatchback had its boot open while rap music throbbed through the woofers in the back.

What struck me at the time was how engaged everyone was with the vehicles they surrounded. Heads popped in and out of open windows, while others gazed down into the engine bay as a young man narrated its contents. I decided to get closer and when one bloke thrust his head deep into the boot of a car I awkwardly followed. As the bloke next to me turned his head from side to side searchingly I took a quick glimpse. Perhaps it was the darkness, but to my eyes there was little more than a black void, some bluish lights and something indeterminately chunky. As I watched the guy peering so intently I began to wonder what it was that had sparked his interest. So I asked him, “What are you looking at?”
He said something like "I do this for a living so I like to look at other work – it’s a pretty sweet job" indicating with a toss of his head towards the boot’s interior. Then he flitted off.

It seems absurd now to put it in such clichéed terms but in that moment the idea that there are different ways of seeing the world and investing value in labour, suddenly crystallised. I realised I didn’t know how to see what he had seen. I didn’t even know how to begin. Even though my eyes were seeing what was before me, I did not know what to look for. I believe it was in that instant of awareness of my own utter unknowing and perplexity at what I was observing that this research project was born.

Mieke Bal has described this kind of experience as a “true encounter” in which one realises that “the object can speak and speak back”. She relates how she witnessed Lucretia’s head turning in a painting of Lucretia by Rembrandt, and how that vision – “a sign of movement in a still image” – urged her to ponder the image more closely. My own true encounter with the rear end of a vehicle had similarly sparked an impulse to learn more. But there is a subtle distinction in how we both came to this point. Bal’s research was triggered by a desire to understand what she had seen, whereas I was keen to determine what I had missed. Bal could not immediately account for her vision and searched to understand why. My impulse to research was stirred instead by a kind of blindness—a sense of simply not recognising what was before me, a disconnect with what my eyes saw. This was, like Bal’s insight, a revelatory moment. I realised not only that the car can speak and speak back but also that looking was knowledge and that learning to look was a form of research practice.

Searching for Mobility

In the distance between those first Braddon nights and commencing my doctoral research I thought more deeply about the role of cars in the workings of everyday life. It seemed to me

---

7 Ibid.
8 Throughout this exegesis I place considerable emphasis on practices of looking, seeing and making photographs. It is important to note that I do so in the knowledge that these are complex embodied actions which as Pink points out “involves the convergence of a range of different social, material, discursive and moral elements in a multisensory environment, rather than being a solely visual process.” Sarah Pink 2011. ‘A Multisensory Approach to Visual Methods’ in Eric Margolis and Luc Pauwels (eds) The Sage Handbook of Visual Research Methods. Los Angeles: Sage, p 602.
9 I participated in two conferences where this Braddon research was discussed. Ursula Frederick and Katie Hayne 2004 ‘Buying Someone Else’s Dream’, in ‘Four on the Floor’ (Glen Fuller, Convenor), Cultural Studies Association of Australasia annual conference, Everyday Transformations, Murdoch
that the motor car was one of the most powerful artefacts of the 20th century—symbolically, economically, technologically, politically and socially. Of course transport historians and cultural theorists had recognised this long before me. Barthes had witnessed it in Le Goddess (Citroen)\textsuperscript{10} while Baudrillard saw the sign of speed rising out of a Cadillac tailfin.\textsuperscript{11} Adorno and others asserted that the automobile, or more rightly the mass-production methods it employed, was instrumental to both the oppressions and aspirations of the working classes.\textsuperscript{12} Not only did the car affect patterns of work and leisure, it reconfigured the architecture of rural and domestic life, spatially reconfiguring the city and impacting the ecologies with which humanity coexists. The motor vehicle also recalibrated our sensory experiences, radically revising the way we perceive space and time. The car changed the nature of vision.\textsuperscript{13} The car quite literally changed the way we could see the world.

\textbf{Photography and Cars}

The perceptual shifts brought about by the development of automobility may be likened to those attributed to photography. It is this similar ability to “rupture habitual modes of perception” that they both became an influence on other arts.\textsuperscript{14} Although the early fascination with velocity that automobility offered is commonly associated with the Futurists, the role that speed played in the transformation of time and distance is evident across the arts.\textsuperscript{15} Danius, by way of example, has argued that “machines of vision”\textsuperscript{16} deeply influenced the writing of Proust. Proust’s article \textit{Impressions de route en automobile} in particular sought to represent “the lived experience of speed and movement”.\textsuperscript{17} Proust’s words are an early phenomenology of driving that reveals “how speed transforms the surrounding landscape into


\textsuperscript{12} For a detailed analysis of car culture and the Frankfurt School of thought see David Gartman 1994. \textit{Auto Opium}. London and New York: Routledge.

\textsuperscript{13} This point has been made by numerous scholars, see for example Lynda Nead 2008. \textit{The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, and Film C. 1900}. London and New Haven: Yale University Press; Jonas Larsen 2001 ‘Tourism Mobilities and the Travel Glance: Experiences of Being on the Move’ \textit{Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism} 1:2, 80–98.

\textsuperscript{14} Larsen, ‘Tourism Mobilities’, argues that just as photography stilled the world of movement the car mobilized landscapes into chaotic spectacle.


\textsuperscript{16} Danius, ‘The Aesthetics of the Windshield’, p 100.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p 113.
a phantasmagoria.” In the same piece we are introduced to the car window as a framing device. The optical sensations that Proust and other writers sought to express are exemplified in the racing car photographs of Robert Demachy and Jacques Henri Lartigue (Figure 7).

![Figure 7 Jacques-Henri Lartigue, Grand Prix of the Automobile Club of France, 1912.](image)

Such images are a reminder that right from the car’s emergence art has been an important lens through which to view the cultures of automobility. Likewise the image of the car and the travelling it affords has been of enduring interest to photographers. In fact the technologies of photography and automobility have more than a little in common. While both have contested and drawn out origin stories, they have also been instruments of political ideology and popular delight. They are companions in modernity, and it is in their shared ability to stimulate new practices of seeing, framing and rendering that they first make their mark on the world. In time the view from within the car has become normalised, and the various vantages it generates (from panorama to fleeting glimpse) has become a natural position from

---

18 Ibid.
19 Larsen, ‘Tourism Mobilities’, makes a connection between photography and cars in tourism.
20 Both photography and automobility are popularly conceived as emerging during the 19th century, although the constellation of key principles and components that led to their respective developments may be traced further back. As Geoffrey Batchen points out in the case of photography, origin stories are freighted with cultural and political currencies, which is one reason why the history of these technologies remains contested. Batchen, Geoffrey 1999. *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*. Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, p 18.
which to experience the world ‘outside’. Artists have been instrumental in making these practices of seeing explicit. Robert Frank and Lee Friedlander for example are especially adept at utilising the optical devices of the vehicle (Figure 8).

Figure 8 Lee Friedlander, America By Car series, 2008.

The first experiments of creative practice I undertook at the beginning of my candidature were directed along these lines—in the knowledge that mobility has historically altered our sensory appreciation of our surroundings. I decided to try taking photos with the camera in my mobile phone. I made a few ‘mini’ photo essays (Figure 9) and a few short videos that I thought of as ‘chance ethnographies’. I liked the idea that the phone-camera, as a mobile device, was with me all the time. I thought this may be some kind of contemporary equivalent to the changing vision brought about by the car. The other synergy that appealed to me was that a technology designed with a specific utilitarian purpose (telecommunications) could instead be used to make art.

Figure 9 Mobile phone photographs taken while driving. U.K. Frederick

Reliant on pre-Smart Phone technology, the resulting images and video were inevitably low resolution. The pixelation and colour values gave my images the appearance of a painterly, impressionistic and faded photograph. This rudimentary and semi-nostalgic aesthetic suited
me to some extent, but in the context of this project the process left me dissatisfied. This was mainly because I did not have sufficient control over the camera to produce the images I wanted. Another reason why this approach didn’t work was that it seemed to be a hollow exercise. The whole idea was to think about how my practice, as an extension of my vision, might be shaped by being on the move. But this didn’t really seem to eventuate. Perhaps I was overly conscious of the whole process. But I found, for the most part, I consciously sought out photographic subjects instead of allowing my own mobility to generate images fluidly. Ultimately I decided to use my phone camera purely for note taking, personal use and exploring other subject matter (Figure 10).

In other photographs made with a digital SLR I sought to capture the motion I was experiencing directly myself, by exploring sensations of blur and transience. At the same time taking photographs from the car allowed me to think about framing, journeying and the horizon (Figure 11). I observed the way text and image can become blended conceptually as we travel and how so much of what we see is lost in an instant. Is it worth going back for those images or is the act of disappearance a fundamental part of the experience? Baudrillard talks about disappearance and absence as a seductive force in art. I think the same
“compulsion to nothingness and to erase all the traces of the world and reality”\textsuperscript{21} may be what lures us onto the road in the first place. To my mind the desire to drive – as a way of ‘getting away from it all’ – is a similar way of connecting with a fertility that rests in the void. It is this sensation of immanence that I feel when I glimpse something from the car and just as quickly it is gone. I don’t usually go back to see what I saw again, in order to capture it in an image. Maybe this is because I like the momentariness of the encounter, and I intuitively know that to try and seize this sensation would prove futile. Some things, some images, are better left alone in the mind and on the side of the road.

Through these early experiments in mobility and in not capturing it to any great effect, I came to recognise nonetheless that automobility offers unique possibilities for discovery. Possibilities that are distinct from the perambulations of walking or other technologies of movement such as flying or sailing. The extended car journey seems to me to facilitate both a particular type of fragmented vision and a reflexive strategy. It is a strange inward-outward observation that occurs all-at-once, captured quite effectively by Agnes Varda in her “wandering road documentary”,\textsuperscript{22} The Gleaners and I. In a particular sequence in the film


\textsuperscript{22}The Gleaners and I, presskit.
Varda repeatedly uses a hand gesture of grasping at vehicles and talks about attempting to capture things as they pass.  

Figure 12 Dorothea Lange *The Road West, New Mexico*, 1938.

Figure 13 Excerpt from *Royal Road Test* 1967 by Mason Williams, Ed Ruscha and Patrick Blackwell.

---

Of course, the road trip has been well utilised as a narrative device in literature and cinema alike.\textsuperscript{24} Artists have also used driving and the spaces of the road as a mode of creative practice. From early 20\textsuperscript{th} century photographers like Dorothea Lange (Figure 12), Walker Evans and Edward Weston through to subsequent generations,\textsuperscript{25} including the performative work of Mason Williams, Ed Ruscha and Patrick Blackwell’s \textit{Royal Road Test}, 1967 (Figure 13), and Andrew Bush’s more recent \textit{Vector Portraits} (1989-1987) (Figure 13),\textsuperscript{26} the road and automobility has long been a site and method for enacting art.\textsuperscript{27}

\textbf{Detours, U-turns and Roundabouts}

During my first year of experimenting with how to research car culture through my art practice I engaged in a variety of projects that seemed, at first glance, to have nothing to do with my topic. At first this work felt like a detour, a wrong turn or a roadblock. Wasn’t I meant to be focusing on cars? At the time I felt overwhelmed by the immensity of car culture as well as a little daunted by the art of automobility that I already knew about. The car and automobility are such familiar photographic subjects, how might I approach them with any


\textsuperscript{25} Other examples include Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, William Eggleston, Michael Ormerod, Stephen Shore, Garry Winogrand and in the Australian context Victoria Cooper and Doug Spowart.

\textsuperscript{26} According to the artist these images were made while travelling 50-75 mph in Los Angeles and other parts of SW USA. http://andrewbush.net/vector%20A.html

\textsuperscript{27} For a recent take on \textit{Royal Road Test} see \textit{Tested (vaio road test)} 2012 by Paula Roush, Teresa Paiva & Maria Lusitano. A work that documents the throwing of a laptop from a moving car and the aftermath. For the blurb edition of the book \textit{Tested} visit http://www.blurb.co.uk/b/3604925-tested; Outside of photography there have been many other artists who draw inspiration from automobility and its discontents, e.g. Vija Celmins’ \textit{Freeway} (1966); Christo’s \textit{Closed Highway Project for 5000 Miles} (1969); Shaun Galdwell’s \textit{Apologies 1-6} (2007 – 2009); William Kentridge’s \textit{History of the Main Complaint} (1996).
originality? What kind of creative investigation might I undertake to yield insightful and innovative artwork? I started to worry that I might never make art about my topic. I commented on this to a friend and fellow student, Lee Grant, who offered me some great advice. Follow your instinct and just go where it takes you and it will be right.

One particular body of work that evolved out of this time was *The Dragon, the Smurf and the Wardrobe*. This series focused on the bizarre variety of stickers children collect and use to adorn their furniture (Figure 15). I found it fascinating to look closely at the first exposure that children have to making or inhabiting an environment all their own. As the title suggests it was originally intended to have a light-hearted focus. I wanted my photographs to capture the strange characters and fantasy realm that children become immersed in when they are young. But over time the photographs also acquired an unanticipated poignancy. This was because most of the furniture was found in second-hand stores. It was also because the ‘authors’ of these highly individual compositions remained anonymous and, presumably by now, all grown up.

Figure 15 Photograph from the series *The Dragon, the Smurf and the Wardrobe*, U.K. Frederick

---

28 This body of work was exhibited in *Suburban Zeitgeist*, a group show of ANU photomedia postgraduates, as part of Vivid: National Festival of Photography held in Canberra.
For me, the discarded furniture came to evoke the passage of time and a sense of childhoods past. My own personal nostalgia trip eventually came when I encountered a bunny on a wardrobe at the Salvos (Figure 16). Ultimately I wanted my photographs to balance the emotional tensions that come with reminiscence, so that a sense of loss would run alongside the joy of carefree expression communicated in the bright colours and haphazard arrangements of childhood creativity. A notable strength of this work was that the emotional currency of the series was not too closely tied to any particular age group. The furniture and the stickers were of different eras so that different periods of childhood were effectively represented through different photographs.
On Mattress Mountain

In the same year that I began the ‘wardrobe’ series I came across an amazing waste disposal facility in Jindabyne, New South Wales. It was not long after the local ski season had finished and there was all kinds of interesting trash. There was a car that had once been used as a jump by the local snowboarders as well as piles of skis, poles and lift tickets and an incredible mountain of mattresses. While I was there people dropped off mattresses by the truckload, in what turned out to be an annual Spring cleaning of motels, chalets and homes. Most of the mattresses were old and worn but a few were absolutely intact. The scale of ‘Mattress Mountain’ (Figure 17) alone was visually compelling, but there was also something strangely picturesque about the way the mound of foam and springs and pretty fabrics melded into the surrounding landscape.

![Figure 17 A glimpse of ‘Mattress Mountain’. Photograph U.K. Frederick](image)

Of course everyone these days is used to seeing the odd mattress lying in parkland or propped against a charity bin. They are often disposed of carelessly or with little consideration for the intimacy that the mattress once shared with the body. This sight always seems incongruous to me. Maybe it is because the mattress is a reminder of a body that is now missing, but I also think it is because the mattress symbolises the unguarded privacy of sleep, something you generally don’t do in public, unless you are sleeping rough. That shift in context, from the

---

29 Jindabyne is the gateway to the ski fields of the Australian Alps.

22
private to the public domain, lies dormant in the abandoned mattress. This transition is part of what intrigued me. That the value of the mattress can change quite literally overnight from a means of good sleep to a blight on suburban appearances.

This series of work developed over a couple of years during two-day trips to Jindabyne. At first I took photos of the mound itself, with its little crevices and caves. But then I began photographing the mattresses individually. It was then that I really noticed the slight imperfections and the larger stains and tears (Figures 18-19) that gave the mattress a whole new meaning, a history that you couldn’t read if you were too distant from the subject. So I decided to focus on capturing this relationship between the ‘prettiness’ of the fabric and its abject state. My close view of the subject also returned the focus to the intimacy of the sleeping body. As such, discoloured fabrics and padded stitching mingle with stains and rips. My approach to the series as a whole was to show the mattress in multiple, reflecting the

30 The first iteration of this work was exhibited under the title Sleepwalker, at the Huw Davies Gallery, Canberra in January-February 2013.
31 During one visit I trialled a Mamiya RZ medium format camera so that I could make large prints. However, this proved to be inadequate. Because I wasn’t able to move the mattresses I needed maximum flexibility to manoeuvre securely over, and in between each mattress. The camera required a tripod and this proved too unwieldy in an environment of uneven and deteriorating surfaces.
massive dump from which they came, while still retaining an emphasis on the particularities of each mattress as an index of the human and the personal agency in throwing something away.

**Excavating Vinyl**

One of the most productive roundabouts I ventured onto during this period of experimentation was a printmedia project that emerged out of a group show on climate change. In my efforts to make a circular etching I discovered that I could print vinyl records using an intaglio process. By carefully inking up a 45" record *à la poupée* and running it under an etching press, I was able to capture the lines of a song on paper. As well as the grooves embedded in the vinyl, the printing process captured scratches and other marks and sometimes the trace of the label. This was something of a revelation to me because I realised that what I was working with was not only the song itself, and all of its emotive potential, but also the object biography of a particular vinyl record. Because the history of the record is present in its wear, my prints were effectively an indexical trace of every time the song was played and heard.

When I thought about the records themselves and their possible history it seemed sad that something that was once a source of enjoyment could now be discarded. I felt if I could reanimate these records I would rekindle something of the spirit in which they were first treasured. So I began salvaging discarded 45's and printing them as etchings.

After playing around with different methods of inking and wiping down, setting the pressure of the press and using a variety of blankets, I found an optimum way of capturing detail without destroying the record. I didn’t worry about dust or small hairs catching in the ink because they seemed to me to be the visual equivalent of the static and skips you hear when you listen to music on a record player. Once the prints were dry I scanned them at a high resolution. I then cleaned up the digital files and had them printed as large format inkjet prints (Figure 20). Both the intaglio and digital scanning/printing processes are technologies of reproduction, so I made reference to this copying process and titled the series *Bootlegs.*

---

32 This is "a method of inking intaglio prints in which two or more inks of different colours are selectively applied to different parts of a single copperplate. The inked plate is then printed in a single pass through the press." Retrieved from http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/clrlimplr-tech.shtm

33 I remembered how much I used to love playing records as a kid so it was easy to connect with this process emotionally. I began with songs of heartbreak and chose other songs accordingly.
Figure 20 Bootlegs: Brahms’ Lullaby (2010), U.K. Frederick

Figure 21 Detail from Lament: Ian Curtis, 2011. U.K. Frederick
I felt like a visual DJ trying to convey the feel of the song with the coloured inks I made up. I also liked uncovering the little messages hidden in the vinyl that until closer inspection I hadn’t even known were there (Figure 21). Finding these signs of wear and tear, names and notes embedded in the vinyl became a process of discovery that I liken to excavation. The retrieval and selection of records was an extremely important part of my working process.\footnote{As mnemonic devices, songs have the potential to carry you back through time and space – to other places and experiences. Working on this idea I selected songs that were either iconic or personally evocative.}

Through my choices I sought to communicate something of my own experience or impression of music and what it meant to me. When I made the work I thought about the song, the mood it carried, the tone and words and the time and place it engendered for me. Of course this experience would be different for every person but I hoped that by ‘playing’ the record visually this experience of teleportation – to another time and space – might also occur for the viewer. In short I hoped that the image I made of the song might trigger other images (and
memories) in the minds of the viewer. In recognising the connection between music and memory I was also consciously tapping into themes of nostalgia and revival. The choice of song, like the scale of the prints, would reflect their iconic presence in our culture.

Four of my *Bootlegs* were shown in an exhibition entitled *Photo/Not Photo* at the University of Canberra art gallery. My participation in the show urged me to think of my process as a kind of photography and I developed this idea, when I was invited to have a solo show at Megalo Print Studio, by also incorporating photograms (Figure 23). I called the show *Easy Listening* (Figure 22) as a pun on the fact that I was making visual images from songs. In considering the materiality of song in this way, I am reminded of Adorno's observation that "it is not in the play of the gramophone as a surrogate for music but rather in the phonograph record as a thing that its potential significance - and also its aesthetic significance - resides."  

Aside from using sonic media, the art I produced for this show shared several similarities with the practice of artist and musician Christian Marclay. Although only one of many artists to have engaged with the challenge of representing or reflecting upon sound visually, Marclay has had a sustained practice of working with records and tapes as a medium (Figure 24). I was unfamiliar with this aspect of Marclay's practice until sometime after I had finished *Easy Listening*, but I have found many resonances since. Aside from some of the formal qualities and a kind of collagist mashup sensibility his titles and approach imply that he too regards 'dead media' as melancholic objects of contemporary culture: "I'm interested in the sounds that people don't want." One way in which our approaches differ is that I was perhaps more reluctant to destroy the abandoned media I was working with. In fact my working process led me to develop an intimate appreciation for the materiality of vinyl and how it translates into sound and memory.

I discuss *Easy Listening* in detail because it reflects my interdisciplinary approach to making art and my attraction to using different techniques depending on what I seek to communicate. The success of the show was also a great affirmation and confidence builder. It allowed me to trust my instinct and feel comfortable experimenting – to make the work I was drawn to

---

36 Ibid, p 58.
37 For example Ed Ruscha, Robert Rauschenberg, Cornelia Parker, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Moholy-Nagy, Marcel Duchamp have all used the record in some way. Contemporary artist Cory Archangel has also used the CD.
Of course there are formal similarities that the *Bootlegs* evoke. The disc-shaped prints resemble particular car parts like rotors or wheels. In fact cars and vinyl records have more connections than I first thought. Both played a vital role in the emergence and mass popularity of rock’n’roll throughout the 1950s-70s, a period that was greatly influential in the development of leisure activities and youth culture. This link persists today and is evident in the perpetuation of key motifs and themes that have been absorbed within many car enthusiast communities (e.g. Elvis, American Graffiti, Grease).39 In terms of their materiality,

---

both cars and vinyl are dependent on the petroleum industry and mass-production manufacturing. But there are also specific linkages. For example, Berry Gordy Jr, the founder of Detroit-based Motown records has said that his concept for the Motown Production System, a factory of musical hits, was influenced by his experience of the Lincoln-Mercury assembly line.  

My own process plays on this convergence of the mechanically produced and the individually consumed. Like the transformation of a ‘stock’ vehicle through customisation, records were mechanically pressed but subsequently re-inscribed with the signs of individual use. The scratches, cracks and messages are the marks of attrition that make the product of manufacturing into a unique object. Moreover, my own process reinforced this metamorphoses by turning a mass-produced object into something hand-made. Each print was made through a combination of mechanical processes (the pressing, scanning and printing) and human actions (record selection, inking up, and so on). This methodology of working has had subsequent iterations throughout my candidature and helped me to realise how much my practice is driven by a desire to recapture the lost, the fragmented, the overlooked and the redundant. It is an exploration borne of archaeology.

The Archaeological Record Re-visioned as Art

My attraction to abandonment, ruin and discard comes directly from my training as an archaeologist. Yet ruins have always been of interest to artists and continue to hold a strong fascination for many contemporary photographers. As I have noted in the accompanying dissertation, the auto industry and the car have become key metaphors of ruination in recent decades. Artists have long been drawn to the broken vehicle for inspiration (Figure 25). In many ways these artistic renderings, whether manifested in photography, paint or sculpture,
are also contemporary studies of landscape.\textsuperscript{43} Extending this fascination to the urban environment, professional photographers\textsuperscript{44} and tourists alike\textsuperscript{45} have also sought to capture the large-scale decline of ‘rust-belt’ cities like Detroit. It is interesting to compare the eroding surfaces of the Motor City alongside those images that capture the industrial heyday of automobility.\textsuperscript{46} But in discussing its crumbling significance Geoff Dyer suggests that contemporary Detroit “could never have looked more magnificent than it did now. Rather than make you think of the past, ruins direct you towards the future ... This is what the future will end up like.”\textsuperscript{47}

While it has been suggested that archaeologists should reframe their photographic impulse away from the image of ruin,\textsuperscript{48} others have argued that modern debris and the ruins of modernity require further critical investigation.\textsuperscript{49} Arguing that the aesthetic appreciation of ruins also has research merit Paul Mullins suggests that:

\begin{quote}
We should obey our own fascination with and curiosity in these old spaces ... and accept that there is something far more consequential in that curiosity ... If “ruin porn” helps us see those spaces in new ways, then photography, narratives, and material analysis might collectively provide us an exceptionally powerful way to interpret such places and dissect the concrete social and material forces that create abandonment and ruination.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{43} For an example in the Australian context see Bronwyn Wright’s Swamp Dynamics series and Pam Loft’s Country Love, day one; Other artworks exploring the abandoned car as Australian outback include the works of photographers Deb Clarke and Jon Rhodes and painters Kim Mahood and Mandy Martin.\textsuperscript{44} See for example Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre with essays by Robert Polidori and Thomas J. Sugrue. 2010 The Ruins of Detroit. Steidl: Gottingen; Sean Hemmerle’s ‘The Remains of Detroit’ http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1864272,00.html; Andrew Moore with essay by Phillip Levine 2010 Detroit Disassembled. Damiani Editor: Bologna; Akron Art Museum: Akron, Ohio.\textsuperscript{45} Mark Binelli ‘How Detroit Became the World Capital of Staring at Abandoned Old Buildings’, The New York Times, Nov 9, 2012.\textsuperscript{46} See for example Robert Frank’s Detroit portfolio and in the context of the Australian auto industry Wolfgang Sievers.\textsuperscript{47} Geoff Dyer ‘Detroit: where the wheels came off...’ The Observer, 9 July 2000. http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2000/jul/09/life1.lifemagazine\textsuperscript{48} Rodney Harrison ‘Surface Assemblages: Towards an archaeology in and of the present’, Plenary lecture presented at the Theoretical Archaeology Group, USA conference Archaeology of and in the Contemporary World, TAG Berkeley, May 6, 2011.\textsuperscript{49} The Ruin Memories project aims to redress what they see as the “marginalization and othering of the derelict materiality of the modern”. This project takes an interdisciplinary approach to the archaeology of the contemporary past. See http://ruinmemories.org/\textsuperscript{50} Paul Mullins ‘The Politics and Archaeology of “Ruin Porn”’ Aug 19, 2012 http://paulmullins.wordpress.com/2012/08/19/the-politics-and-archaeology-of-ruin-porn/
Seeing the Archaeology in Everything

While I certainly agree that ruin may be a productive site for creative-based research, I feel that my own art practice is better characterised as an investigation of the fragment and the trace—both of which are key to archaeological practice.\(^5\) The fragment is a survivor and incites the imagination because “the only thing that is truly immortal is the lost whole that we reconstruct on the basis of fragments, that never existed in reality”.\(^2\) The trace is similarly compelling because of the tension between absence and presence that it communicates. It is a “proof that something was there but no longer is”\(^3\) and is therefore a manifestation of time’s passage.

As an archaeologist I have had a long-term interest in mark-making practices as a form of communication and as tangible signatures of engagement with place. Similarly, traces of intentional mark-making and other human activities had captivated my imagination as an artist. What I came to understand through my artistic development\(^4\) is that my archaeological

\(^1\) It could be argued that the trace and the fragment, amongst other concepts and principles such as stratigraphy, underpin rather than exemplify archaeological discourse as it is communicated.
\(^4\) The first time I was conscious of bringing my art and archaeology practices together was in making, with Katie Hayne, an artist’s book called Excavating Georgia. It tells the story of a car being stolen,
interests are central to my practice as an artist, and in fact that this influence is recursive. As tools of archaeological interpretation and reconstruction, imagination and creativity offer valuable insights on the worlds of the present and the past. As the archaeologist Michael Shanks has observed:

Both photography and archaeology are about relationships ... an act of connecting traces of the past and present interests. Both photography and archaeology are primarily mediating, translating, transforming practices.

This process of discovery was less about solving technical problems than it was about recognising my own vision and personal aesthetic. My working process or method was, if you like, a mode of seeing the archaeology in everything. There are many artists that share a synergy with the work of archaeology. Increasingly archaeologists have come to appreciate the interpretive visions that art work can offer and:

further that artistic intervention can sometimes capture the character of contemporary places and their social fabric and meaning better than any conventional record produced by archaeologists and historians.

With this new insight I began to think of my research practice both as a mode of making art and as a way of doing an archaeology of the contemporary. So I decided to discuss my project and photographs within forums of archaeology in addition to audiences involved in art.

---

recovered and subsequently 'excavated' in an effort to find out where and why it was taken. The book was also made into an e-format and may be accessed at: http://cloudforest.com.au/excavating-georgia

See Janet D. Spector 1993. What this Awl Means: Feminist Archaeology at a Wahpeton Dakota Village. St Paul, MINN.: Minnesota Historical Society Press as a key example of how the imagination can be used to great effect in archaeology.

Michael Shanks archaeology and photography, Aug 30, 2012
http://documents.stanford.edu/michaelshanks/82

'See the Archaeology in Everything' is the byline of Love Archaeology Magazine,
http://lovearchmag.tumblr.com/about


Ursula Frederick and Katie Hayne, ‘Excavating Georgia’ exhibited at WAC Fringe, Dublin Ireland 24 June- 4 July, 2008. Ursula Frederick, ‘Enter Sandman’ unpublished conference presentation in Materiality and Narrative: Constructing Stories of People and Place from Objects, The Australian Archaeological Association Annual Conference, Bateman’s Bay; Dec 9-13, 2010; Ursula Frederick, Robert Maxwell and Anne Clarke (convenors) ‘Wastelands: Subversive Spaces and Landscapes of Contemporary Life’, unpublished conference session, The Australian Archaeological Association Annual Conference, Bateman’s Bay; Dec 9-13, 2010; Ursula Frederick ‘Archaeology at the Intersection’ unpublished presentation and exhibition in Dialogues in Archaeological Photography, Theoretical Archaeology Group, USA, Berkeley May 6-8 2011; Ursula Frederick and Anne Clarke 2014, in prep. That was then, this is now: Australian perspectives on the archaeology and material culture of contemporary life. Cambridge Scholars Publishing Newcastle upon Tyne.
Beginning to Look

Even though I found myself drawn to making art that seemed to circle my topic, from the beginning of my project I learned to look and enter into discussions at car meets. I attended a variety of events—the American Car Nationals, All-Ford day, the Electric Car demonstration, and many others. Some of the car parts and accessories I acquired from these events (and the side of the road) made their way into the studio (Figures 26-28). But for the most part I would walk around with my camera, photographing cars and talking to people. This documentary impulse was a way of thinking and note taking and also reflects the influences of archaeology and anthropology on my making. But it was also a process of learning to look at cars the way car enthusiasts saw them and understand where their values lay.

Figure 26 Vanitas test image, U.K. Frederick

60 These experiments may be developed further following this project.
In looking at other people looking I learnt to think about what I was seeing and importantly, how visual appreciation of the car is directed. For example, at many car shows the bonnet of the car is raised. This is both an invitation to look and a convention for ‘showing off’ the engine. By learning where I was expected to direct my attention I became aware of what I might be looking for and what questions I should raise. The engine bay, I came to understand, is its own little exhibition space. Its aesthetics are dictated by notions of power, ingenuity, neatness and innovation—all of which reflect on the degree of pride and workmanship taken by the car’s owner.
The case of the open bonnet is just one way in which car enthusiasts direct the spectator's bodily engagement with the vehicle. The way in which the architecture of the car is manipulated demonstrates further how some senses are provoked while others are discouraged. Appeals to vision and sound are strongest. Cars commonly play music on the stereo and occasionally movies on in-built LCD screens. By contrast, touch is the privilege of the car's owner and immediate family. With some exceptions in the case of rat rods, touching is largely a 'forbidden' act that is circumvented by signage and barriers or more subtle tactics like windows left only half-open. In fact to 'not touch' is a sign of reverence and respect and an accepted protocol. In most instances the haptic dimension of the vehicle is denied to the public all together. Instead, it is a privileged domain reserved for the car owner(s), their family and friends. Like access to the interior itself, the rumbling vibration and warm leather seats remains a private pleasure.

It was through my own photographic practice that I came to understand how car enthusiasts choreograph the viewing experience, in part because taking photographs alerted me to what I could and could not access. This sometimes left me frustrated but also helped me to grasp the conventions and values that operate within these communities. While photography and looking were entwined within my process of research it soon became clear just how embedded these practices are in the performance of car culture generally. In other words, my camera didn't make me stand out it made me fit in.

**Presentation and Display**

After several 'show-n-shines' and swapmeets, I began to notice certain conventions in the use of photography. When people take photos at car shows they show a preference for isolating a single vehicle. There is a tendency to photograph the car from the front or at a three-quarter angle in order to show its line and shape. People are very conscious of trying to stay outside of the image and if they realise they have stepped into the frame they often apologise. Occasionally, a person will be intentionally incorporated within an image, just as a tourist is photographed in front of an iconic building or scenic view, however, usually there appears to be an emphasis on maintaining the integrity of the car as a discrete whole entity. Sometimes photographs of specific details are recorded because they show outstanding workmanship or

---

61 As well as taking photographs, a lot of my fieldwork was also captured on video, with the assistance of Katie Hayne. Hayne has subsequently edited this video material, with my input, into a 50-minute documentary film, that is yet to be finalised. We wish to thank members and audience at the Centre for Visual Anthropology, ANU for their valuable input on a rough cut we screened there.
appear as something 'different', with the most popular focal points being the engine bay, the sound system, and any specialty paintwork.

As well as noting the way in which the camera was used by car enthusiasts, I gradually became aware of how my own practice and attention was directed. What distinguished me from many of the photographers and video makers I observed was that I tended to go in closer to the vehicle. Rather than photograph the car as a whole, I was drawn to the intimacies of the car in fragment and detail (Figure 29). This revealed an attention to form that I later understood as my way of abstracting the vehicle and, in a sense, removing it from the picture. This process of abstraction shows the first inkling of my desire to reduce the car to its barest features—a creative approach to car culture that I progressed, and will return to later.

![Figure 29 Photograph of engine casing and front fender skirt. U.K. Frederick](image)

My own proclivities of looking and encountering, as revealed through my camera, indicate how I was drawn to certain components and features of the vehicle. Moreover, I returned to particular types of things repeatedly. This inclination was unconscious at first, but after registering what I was doing and how it reflected my appreciation for specific design features I decided to actively pursue it as a method for learning more about cars. By focusing and isolating particular components, again and again, I became aware of the enormous diversity that is expressed through the same vehicle feature. I found these details visually compelling, but I also came to understand that it is on the basis of subtle variations in certain features that car enthusiasts are able to determine the model year of the car at a glance.
The main features of the car that I was drawn to photographing were: the badge and the tail lights because they work to signal the car’s ‘identity’; the dashboard because it is the vantage point of the driver; the backseat because of its latent links to desire (Figure 30); and finally the bonnet and the fuel gate because this is the entry to where the power resides. While I commenced this practice early in my candidature it was not until later in my candidature, just prior to my show Motorscapes, that I discerned these series as a suite of typologies or a kind of classificatory system. It is important to add that this process was also a conscious reflection on the patterns I was observing in car culture generally, because it became clear to me that repetition, ordering and categorising were key conventions of automobile display. This aesthetics of arrangement I refer to was not only evident at car shows but is also expressed in other sites and media, from car museums to books, advertising and window displays.

Over time I expanded my classificatory impulse beyond the car itself, to include other types of object, mark-making tendencies and modes of identification that enter into the broader, and often mundane, aspects of car culture. These ‘typologies’ included a variety of subjects which relate to car cultures but which do not generally presence the car directly: the car yards where vehicles are sold, the clothing that car enthusiasts wear, the covers that shroud stationary vehicles, and the traces left as a consequence of particular automobile activity, such as burnouts and road memorials (see Figures 31-32).
This suite of visual fragments developed over several years to form a collection or taxonomy. In many ways it reflects my archaeological vision, observing traces of human life and observing patterns in the environment. At the same time my photographic practice took another course. I began pursuing a kind of photography that would convey the broad diversity
of places, people, objects and environments I was encountering (Figures 33-35). I think of the thousands of photographs that reflect this practice as an archive of my immersion in car cultures. Hence, my process of engaging with the aesthetics of car cultures exhibit two key influences, one of which might be regarded as archaeological, the other as ethnographic.

Figure 33 Car hop contest at the Low Rider event, Seattle, USA.
Crashing into the Book Studio

Around the same time that I was pursuing my initial photographic explorations I ventured into the School of Art book studio. My time in the book studio was precipitated by my desire to make work that addressed the car crash—a prominent theme in creative responses to car culture (Figure 36). I sought out the letterpress specifically because I felt that it was becoming almost impossible to drive anywhere without seeing a road memorial. My experience had emerged out of all the driving I had been doing during my fieldwork in and around Canberra and Newcastle, NSW. A name on the edge of the road ruptured the landscape of every journey. Driving these days was an expanding litany of people I would never know: John, Rebecca, Paul, Chloe, Ulrich, Rian, Harry, Blake, Mum. I felt the urge to memorialise these people out of an anonymous empathy. So I started by making a list. Every time I saw a name I would write it down. I only wrote the names that I could see from the road, because the glimpse of the name was a powerful sensation of life being passed by.

In working into this idea, my first experimentation involved staining different kinds of paper with rose petals (Figure 37). Then I thought maybe I could do something with image and text along the lines of Hamish Fulton’s photographs and letterpress describing his walks. I would photograph the trajectory that this life was on when it came to an abrupt stop.

In preparing for this work I used the letterpress to produce a work on the theme of car crash celebrities. The first broadsheet was an exercise in learning how to set type and run the letterpress. After selecting which identities I would incorporate I chose a different font for each name I would use. I composed the wooden type as an assemblage of names, like a list or a cloud of letters: JACKSON POLLOCK, JAMES DEAN, MARC BOLAN, PRINCESS DI, and so on. These are names most people would recognise even if they didn’t know how they had died.

There was only one name that was out of place in a pop pantheon of this kind, the French filmmaker Jean Rouch. I included Rouch as both a point of intrigue and anchor of humanity. With a celebrity list such as this it is easy to forget that these icons were real people. Although the composition of the type was fairly ordered I used the printing process to overlay the text so that the names collided together. I chose a silver paper for the printing in reference to the metallic duco of the car and the ‘shining star’ identity. This was my first attempt at letterpress and concrete poetry and I was excited by my results.

The use of rose petals is a reference to the flowers left at ‘spontaneous shrines’.
I decided to produce a series of broadsheets that would focus on individual ‘stars’. It would evoke the form of a memorial stone or a newspaper headline—along the lines of ‘the day the music died’. I started with Tom Mix, the first cowboy film star, who was killed while driving his Cord Phaeton in Arizona. I succinctly summarised this story in one line of wooden type: TOM MIX rode his Cord into a washed out gully. I arranged and inked the type in keeping with the sentiment of the statement (Figure 38). A graphic element was added to tie the narrative clearly to the car crash theme. I reproduced the tread of a 1937 Cord tyre as though it were a skid mark. Although I was happy with the outcome, I was unable to continue with the series before I went on fieldwork to America. It was an important phase in the development of my practice because it led me to think how I might examine the car crash with sincerity and originality.

![Figure 38 Setting out wooden type in the chase, prior to printing. Photograph: U.K. Frederick](image)

**Discovering Crash Treasure**

Early one morning as I was driving near my house I was struck by the glimmer of car crash debris flickering with sunlight (Figure 39). I thought it was beautiful, in a sublime kind of way. The lenses used in car signal lights are designed to direct, deflect and distribute the light emitted from a small globe. In practical terms this means that they catch and refract light at an angle. Of course once it is separated from the car and scattered in pieces on the pavement, the lens no longer functions as it is intended. The plastic becomes dull and broken. Yet at certain times of day, when light hits it at a certain angle the shard of plastic momentarily
flickers. In this instance, something of its former purpose — to illuminate and make visible — is unmistakably revived.

Figure 39 Glimpsing Crash Treasure on the median strip. U.K. Frederick

My first impression was that these fragments of glass and plastic would be easy to locate. And certainly once I was attuned to their presence, the streets everywhere seemed to sparkle. So I set about trying to capture this accidental glimmer with my camera. I began by photographing the tiny shards of red and yellow that lay in a parking lot not far from my home in north Canberra. Over many mornings I awoke just before dawn, drove around the corner and waited for the light of the rising sun to break in rays across the bitumen. To capture the gleam of the plastic I needed the shard to catch the sun while minimal sunlight fell on the surrounding asphalt. The raked light of the sun rising behind Mount Ainslie was perfect.

In this first period of experimentation I didn’t venture far. Instead I returned to the same stretches of traffic island and road in order to play with different exposures, depth of field, focal distance, framing and angle of view. Many of these earliest attempts proved successful despite their differences, but by working through these variables I was able to develop an approach that consistently captured the impression and mood I sought. What I wanted these images to do was evoke both joy and pathos. The tension of this ambiguity would be apparent to those who recognised the subject. Yet, I didn’t want this recognition to be instantaneous. Instead, I hoped to preserve some sense of mystery and uncertainty, to create a beauty that was also unsettling.
Figures 40-43 Crash Treasure studio tests (unspotted), U.K. Frederick
After producing my first set of working images, I assessed what I liked and what I felt wasn’t working. I showed them to my colleagues and advisors who felt they had promise and we discussed what else I might try. Whether I should re-arrange the fragments to suit my purpose, or even simulate the street in the studio. Some felt I shouldn’t have to rely on natural light and chance. I had also been picking up the debris, so I conducted a series of tests playing with how I might use the collected \textit{Crash Treasure} in the studio (Figures 40-43). These experiments helped me to realise that I didn’t want the object status of the \textit{Crash Treasure} to dominate and that context was important. I was interested in the fragment, and what it conveyed, but I also wanted the images to carry a sense of place. I felt strongly that the serendipity of encounter, the specificities of place and even the dangers of the road itself would be lost under the controlled conditions of the studio.

Having decided to work with making \textit{Crash Treasure, in situ}, I first had to find the debris itself (Figure 44). This meant that part of my practice involved driving the streets in the early morning. I would also make notes to myself if I spotted crash debris on other occasions so that I could go back to it later. It eventually became clear that the best locations were streets that ran east to west which had no large buildings blocking the rays of the rising sun. Streets that ran north and south were at the wrong angle and even small buildings blocked the early morning light. There was also a difference in colour temperature according to season, with my preference for the softer Australian sunlight coming in the autumn and winter months. There were times when the streets were remarkably clean, generally coinciding with the aftermath of public events or festivals, when the street sweeping machines were kept busy tidying.

\footnote{This suggestion involved making a small section of false ‘road’, by coating a sheet of mdf with a layer of tar and gravel. A small hole drilled through these layers could be combined with a light underneath. This would allow the plastic fragment I placed over the hole to glow while the surface of the ‘road’ could be soberly lit from lights in the studio. This would have allowed me greater control of the setting and might have proved to be a good solution had I not decided to work \textit{in situ}.}

\footnote{This was especially noticeable in Canberra after the annual Summernats Car festival, when I expected to find more \textit{Crash Treasure} than usual, but could hardly find any at all. This might lead me to surmise that the car owners were being especially careful with their vehicles. However a lack of any debris from earlier incidents led me to conclude that the streets had been swept clean.}

\footnote{For this same reason I was unable to locate any \textit{Crash Treasure} on the streets of Beijing, despite looking hard.}
An essential aspect of my working method was to underexpose the image – in the order of 1 ½ to 2 stops. This ensured that the surface of the ground retained a sombre quality. The darkened hues and rich blacks create a sense of drama and ensure the jewel-like crash fragments stand out even further. “However splendidly the fragment gleams, what fascinates us even more is the darkness surrounding it.”67 The subdued tones of the ground are intended to impart a seriousness, and together with the texture of the surface generate a kind of primordial atmosphere. Although we are looking at a tiny section of road, I wanted to evoke a larger geological landscape, whether it be a field of coal, a lava bed or an eroded river valley. In seeking to expand the scale of the scene I hoped to metaphorically draw the viewer to consider automobility within the bigger picture, with its links to carboniferous fuels, climate change and suchlike. The disaster witnessed in the image may then be encountered at different scales: a minor bingle; a serious collision; a personal tragedy; or an ‘accident’ of global proportions.

In order to provide a greater degree of immersion in the image and the image as a kind of environment I sought to bring the viewer to street level, that is, on the ground with the

fragment. I also tended to use a shallow depth of field to evoke some sense of the chaos, disorientation and blur that comes with a car crash. At each place I had some 10 minutes to work before the sun had moved too high. The advantage of working in the morning was that the traffic was much lighter, and I soon became attuned to the time of day as the pulse of the traffic grew. This work required a high degree of concentration to ensure I kept out of the way of oncoming traffic. This was particularly challenging at intersections, where I had to look in several directions, ducking onto and off of the street, in intervals with the traffic lights. Kneeling or lying on the pavement and keeping my concentration also meant that this process was physically taxing. I could only work like this for about an hour and a half before I would have to stop. This was not a case for slow photography!

Driving as Research Practice

Discovering Crash Treasure helped me focus my practice, largely because I decided to pay greater attention to what I experienced as a driver. As many artists, archaeologists and anthropologists acknowledge walking is a tool for learning and thinking, a way of getting to know a place and a useful methodological enterprise. From the flânerie discussed by Baudelaire and Benjamin to the concepts of derive and psychogeography, walking has come to be regarded as an embodied way of learning, navigating and knowing. The growing awareness of walking as a mode of thinking and art practice led me to wonder whether practices of driving might also be regarded as such.

The work of Ed Ruscha would seem to suggest so, and art scholars have referred to his use of the automobile "as a medium" and "a kind of second studio". Ruscha himself admits:

---


71 While automobility is often deployed as a foil in celebratory writing about strolling and walking some scholars have entertained the idea of cruising and other states of driving as a kind of "motorized flânerie" to use the terminology of Larsen, 'Tourism Mobilities and the Travel Gaze', Featherstone, 'The Flâneur'; Nigel Thrift 2004. 'Driving in the City', Theory Culture Society, 21(4/5): 41–59.

72 Rosalind Krauss 2006. 'Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition', October 116 (Spring): 55–62.

I’m right there when I’m behind the wheel. I’m kind of serving my mental state. At the risk of my own safety I’ve got to concentrate on the road, but I think about all kinds of things while I’m driving ... I’m able to use a pad of paper and a pencil to cryptically annotate what I’m thinking as I’m driving.74

So once I was on my way from Seattle to Texas, I decided to actively think about my role as a driver. This road trip coincided with a process of questioning my own subjectivity. As I have already stated, I didn’t really think of myself as being a revhead, and yet I could not ignore that automobility is integral to the habitus of my existence in a 21st century society.75 How could I balance my own lack of knowledge and ‘enthusiasm’ for cars alongside this reliance? Was I inside or outside the ‘car cultures’ I was studying? And how might this uncertainty express itself creatively, other than through inertia. In eventually finding my place behind the wheel I recognised that I am a participant observer in car culture and at the same time I can identify with car enthusiasts in a way I hadn’t previously. So acknowledging that I am ‘the driver’ what is it that I know and see?

As I began to pay attention to what I experience when I drive, I noticed that I was drawn to certain qualities of light. It was through driving in America that I came to hone my appreciation of what catches the eye. There are things that we find hard to ignore: signals, flashing lights. There are also billboards, and neon signage, ‘gigantic’ sculptures, and the restaurants and various drive-in facilities that are uniquely designed to cater to an automobilised public. Along with the white reflector beads that make up glowing turn arrows by night, I noticed the use of various devices used to catch the eye of the driver. These devices are based on an aesthetics of movement, shimmer and shine that ranged from balloons bobbing in the sky (Figure 45) and ‘flicker beads’ glittering in sunlight, to moving inflatables, and ‘cat’s eyes’. There was one particular place I noted where many of these optical devices coincided: the automobile sales yard. In keeping with the ‘collecting’ strategy I employed for other signatures of automobility, I set about recording these sites. More specifically, I focussed on the bunting76 that flaps in the breeze and which is intended to create a sense of activity (Figure 46).77

---

75 As Urry and others have pointed out even those who aren’t explicitly automobilised are implicated in the system of automobility.
76 Bunting is also referred to as flagging or flicker tape, particularly in the USA.
77 Several of the car salesmen I spoke to were convinced that bunting had a direct influence on the number of people visiting their car yards, and therefore their sales. I have also recorded opinions and sensory responses relating to the presence of bunting, from the perspectives of the car sales yard.
owners and employees. They range from annoyance at the sound and waste they leave on the ground to an appreciation of their beauty and shade from the hot sun.
Car Yards

After choosing to focus on Car Yards as a substantive body of work, I decided to depart from the approach of my other typologies. While in some of those series I had introduced a degree of variability, such as distance away from the subject, others reflected a more rigidly consistent strategy (Figure 47). With the Car Yard series I was particularly conscious of not producing the work in a formulaic manner. As such I took photographs from different distances and incorporated lenses of varying sizes. I also allowed for variation in composition by seeking out different arrangements, colour combinations, and states of decay. This variability was important because it gave the series as a whole a sense of dynamism. Because I wanted to capture a sense of temporality and allusions to changing climate, I also sought to capture the flagging in different positions and in different states of weather.

Nevertheless, there is still a degree of consistency which threads across the series. The shape of the flagging has little variation, with strands for the most part comprising one of two types: the Hawaiian skirt (or fingered variety) and the pennant, triangular shape. Because bunting is generally strung between poles or lampposts my point of view was uniformly directed upwards. This reinforces the aspirational values of car advertising and consumption as well linking directly to the car yard as the mythological site where dreams come true. There is also an allusion to prayer flags.

Along with the still photographs I shot, I made a video of the shadow cast by bunting on a vacant car lot. Shot during the height of the Global Financial Crisis in 2009, the video is a direct reference to the state of the world economy, but the shadow is also a further distillation of the car as absent subject. As clouds pass across the sun, the shadow itself is of fleeting appearance. The ephemerality and movement that appealed to me when I first saw this shadow flitting with the sun and wind, carried further resonance as I continued my Car Yard series because what I didn’t know when I started was that the bunting itself was beginning to disappear.

While there is insufficient space for me to describe the many insights I have gathered as a consequence of this body of work, it is important to note that my art practice became a means for learning about the machinations of the car yard and industry itself. In the period of time from when I commenced this series, many of the car yards I photographed have

---

78 I learnt, for example, that most of the flagging that is used in car yards in Perth, Western Australia is made to order and sewn by hand.
closed down and the presence of bunting has diminished considerably. Yet like the bare pavement, outmoded signage and basic fencing, the partial pieces of bunting often remain as contemporary archaeology.

Figure 47 Example of the Car Badges 'typology'. U.K. Frederick

Without initially knowing that I had actually identified something that was becoming obsolete I photographed bunting in Australia, America and Japan. To take these photographs, to capture their uniqueness, diversity and also their uniformity I had to travel around. That is the Car Yard series, like the Crash Treasure stills were dependent on my mobility.

79 There are various reasons why this is the case. A primary cause is the implementation of legislation outlawing bunting in some areas. Another is the introduction of cheap digital printing and signage manufacturing. The latter reason may also explain why signwriting on car windows has all but vanished to be replaced by adhesive paper banners.

80 Harrison and Schofield describe “this approach to recording places while they are still 'in use...as a sort of anthropological archaeology a way of recording and responding to the material and physical dimensions of a place prior to its ruination.” Rodney Harrison and John Schofield 2010. After Modernity: Archaeological Approaches to the Contemporary Past. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p 124.
MOTORSCAPES
U.K. FREDERICK
23 May - 3 June, 2012
CCAS Manuka

Figure 48 Exhibition invite for Motorscapes
Roadworks and Motorscapes

In a deliberate attempt to work towards developing my final graduating show, I held an exhibition (Motorscapes) to show some of the work I had produced to date (Figure 48). Having made a variety of work I had to make decisions about paring back. As I viewed and collated my vast archive of photographs a series of comprehensive typologies emerged, that as multiples convey something beyond the singular image. I chose to show a selection of five of these sets: Car Covers, Oil, Burnouts, Car Yards and Backseats, along with a video and three Crash Treasure photographs. Having amassed numerous photographs of each ‘type’ my next task was selecting which images to show and how to arrange them.

As I noted earlier, my ‘survey strategy’ and the patterns I identify through my photography reveal a connection with archaeology. With this in mind the grid offered a sensible way in which to display my assemblage of visual fragments. The grid is a fundamental tool of archaeological survey and mapping. It is a system of sampling and measurement, effectively a way of isolating for study a portion of a site or landscape. It also allows for the documentation of the internal organisation and location of features and artefacts within a designated area. The grid is divisible and expandable as units, and allows us to think about things both as individual elements and as part of a larger system or site. I used the grid formation as a way of laying out my suite of visual fragments in order to illuminate both linkages and diversity within the type.

When seriation and the grid formation is used by photographers the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher become an obvious reference point (Figure 49). Their typologies of industrial architecture reflect a documentary imperative and a detailed attention to form. However, the precision and monumentality of their photography is less appealing to me than the typological approach practiced by other artists. I prefer the looser whimsical feeling of ‘typologies’ created by Susan Hiller (Figure 50) or the many photographic grids of Olafur Eliasson (Figure 51). Unlike the Becher’s rigid uniformity which seem to me to be cold, formalistic and distancing my intention was to invite the viewer to experience the subject, individually, up close and as collection of multiples (Figures 52-53).

Figure 50 Susan Hiller Night Waves, 2009. Image: Galerie Karin Sachs
During this show I received a lot of useful feedback. And following a subsequent iteration called *Roadworks*, exhibited in China, I had a lot to contemplate, not least questions of scale, number of images and various suggestions about an artist’s book format. Perhaps the most fervent discussion revolved around the strengths and weaknesses of the grid format. The difficulty presented by the grid is in the viewer’s tendency to see the grid as a whole without paying closer attention to each photograph. This raised an important challenge. How could I encourage the viewer to see each individual image and the assemblage of the images as a whole, without detracting from the power of either? Krauss refers to this problem as the schizophrenia of the grid structure: it can be read either centripetally as “an autonomous organic whole” or centrifugally as a “fragment, a tiny piece cropped arbitrarily from an infinitely larger fragment.”

---

81 Roadworks was exhibited at the *Pingyao International Photography Festival*, at which I gave two artist’s talks. Having to communicate through a translator helped me to consolidate my ideas about the work.

Nearing the Destination

As a result of these shows I decided to pare back the range of ‘wall work’ even further. The typologies I had developed would be collated together into a large archive I call *Spare Parts*. The sheer repetition of particular traces would allow the viewer to distinguish the formal threads and distinguishing contours of car culture, even though the car itself remains markedly absent (Figures 54-55). A companion compendium *Motorama* would comprise my other vision of glimpses and embodied experiences, an alternative mode of representation which nevertheless seeks a similar goal: to communicate the sheer expanse of automobility with which we grapple.
Figure 54 Selection from the Burnouts typology, U.K. Frederick
At the heart of the final exhibition there will be an ensemble of works that will connect through the absent presence of the car. Within each component of the ensemble there is both beauty and sadness. Some of the bunting is worn and weathered while the crash debris is pretty and jewel-like. Together they will imply a narrative and will pare car culture down to its paradoxical essence: hope and desire, life, death and disappointment.
A selection of *Car Yards* will comprise a large avenue of images, arranged in such a way as to mirror the stretching boulevard. Individual images will remain in close view, but the sheer number and size of the entire assemblage is designed to almost overwhelm the audience. Moving away from a square-like grid formation, I have elected instead to reinforce the rectangular flow of the boulevard, and the landscape dimensions of the photographic print. I believe there is a clearer logic to this long rectangular arrangement, because it follows the spatial flow of traffic as well as the linear strands of the flagging (often strung in rows of three). Because my photographic survey strategy also revealed that car yards are often clustered in groups, along avenues in particular suburbs or industrial precinct, this band like formation is also reflective of the car yard environment itself. One might then imagine that the viewer walking past this arrangement as if mirroring the motion of the car driving down a street. The prints themselves would be made on high-gloss paper. In part because the materiality of the flagging is so particular, the materiality of the photographs were important also. In deciding on what media to print the *Car Yard* photographs, I experimented with various paper stocks. I eventually selected a high gloss inkjet paper because it emphasised the aspirational glow and show I was seeking to convey. The glossy surface is also a reference to the plastic media of the flagging and the shiny surface of the cars for sale. The brightly coloured, slightly tacky resonance that car yard bunting carries for many people finds a deeper resonance with the choice of gloss paper. One issue that gloss paper can sometimes present is that light becomes reflected in the print. In this case it is not my concern because it corresponds well with the shimmering effect of the subject. It is precisely on the basis of sunshine and the shifting light that comes with movement that the optical quality of *Car Yard* flagging is designed to operate. Bunting is intended to shimmer with light in order to catch the eye of the driver. The car yard is the place where dreams become fulfilled, and this hope and false optimism and excitement is conveyed through the sensibility of a glossy impression. It is about buying the car after all, and this slickness is once again in keeping with the sentiment attributed to the car yard.

My video of the *Empty Car Yard* is the keystone, linking the sky and earth. When the lofty aspirations and promise of the dream purchase come crashing to the concrete and bitumen surface. The video brings further dynamism to the show and is employed as a subtle foil to the stills, cuing an impression of automobility as that which moves and which stalls. The third and final stage in this 'Icarus formation' is a small series of *Crash Treasure* images punctuating...
the space of the gallery. In contrast to the Car Yards, the Crash Treasure prints are larger in scale and limited in number, made on a fine rag paper. These qualities are to evoke a precious, intimate and elegiac sensation. The lighting is used sparingly with the Crash Treasure and boldly with the Car Yards, thereby reinforcing the two 'ends' of a theatrical cycle. The narrative arc of the whole ensemble might be viewed as three separate temporal stages: past, present and future. On the one hand it enfolds the life cycle of the car as a material entity with a history, through production, consumption and waste, from shiny newness to obsolete remnant. In doing so I endeavour to illuminate "the relationship between obsolescence and the redemptive possibilities enfolded within the outmoded itself."\(^{84}\) On the other it alludes to the myth and paradox of automobility itself: the bittersweet melancholy of unfulfilled desire and the despair of broken promise.

**Epilogue: The End of the Road**

This road trip of an exegesis began in Canberra one night with a single revelatory moment of unknowingness. It began out of a sense of curiosity, a desire to understand a little bit more about what motivated a bunch of revheads. That is, I was inspired by a group of people for whom the automobile is a passion more ardent and abiding than I had ever understood. One bloke I spoke to referred to this inclination as having 'petrol in the veins'. This expression of bodily identification with the automobile immediately struck me as a profound disclosure of the deep attachment that some people have with their vehicles. But I have since realised that this phrase, and its American variant, encapsulates other nuances. To have oil in the veins can imply an obsessive interest in cars, and it might also refer to a bond of familial association. 'Oil in the veins' not only expresses a connection with the automòible but implies a history or genealogy, a connection between motor cars and family expressed inter-generationally. It might mean, for example, that a particular brand allegiance is acquired and maintained as an expression of loyalty to one's nuclear family. It may also speak to a broader concept of family as community: one in which individuals are linked to an organisation and a wider section of society through their shared enthusiasm or affiliation to a particular type of vehicle.

\(^{84}\) Krauss, Rosalind 1999. 'Reinventing the Medium', *Critical Inquiry* 25 (2) "Angelus Novus": Perspectives on Walter Benjamin (Winter): 290.
As this project has unfolded I’ve come to realise the role automobility has played in my own family. The car can be a forceful agent in our lives and so often we don’t even recognise it. What I didn’t know when I started out was how much this topic would facilitate a new level of connection with my father. The car became a conduit for storytelling between us. I learnt that my grandfather had a garage in Wyoming during the lean years of the Great Depression and that as a boy my father would sell water coolant bags to tourists to hang in front of their radiators on their way to Yellowstone. It is also hard to forget the story my mom tells of crashing my dad’s Porsche while they were still dating (Figure 56). But there is one particular story that helped me to see the performative capacity of the vehicle and its role in shaping identity.

Late one night in 1967 my father was driving home from his work near Fairbanks, Alaska. The car he was driving was a glasstop Ford, the only one of its kind in that part of the world. As he came over a small knoll around midnight, he saw a large moose standing in the middle of the road. It was midwinter and the snow was packed hard some six foot high either side which meant that neither the moose nor my father had anywhere to go. Within seconds they collided, the moose hit the bonnet and flew up onto the glass roof of the car and came
crashing down into the interior. In the few moments between seeing the moose and having her land on top of him, my father slid himself across the front 'bench' seat and pushed open the passenger door.

Once the car had come to a stand still my father was able to get out. The moose was not so fortunate. When she came through the glass her neck was broken against the steel frame above the windscreen. Dad walked to the nearest neighbour, told him what happened, and they returned with a shotgun and a camera. Once they ensured the doe was no longer suffering, the neighbour took a few black and white photographs. In the end, my father was safe, the car was a wreck and the moose was dead.

When he talks of the incident today the one thing that still upsets my father is that the moose was wasted. It was about 1000 pounds in weight and in those days “the normal thing to do is

85 In this context it is interesting to note how Susan Sontag enfolds guns, cars and cameras as 'predatory weapons'. Susan Sontag 1977. On Photography. New York: Dell Publishing, p 15. Friends in Alaska tell my father that the images are still screened on local television to warn people of the dangers of encountering moose on roads in winter.
to give the meat to charities”. But even though my father had phoned the fisheries and wildlife game department they didn’t salvage the moose. He still recalls with disbelief that they later explained “we didn’t want to cut the car.” “Well then why didn’t you just cut the moose!” he replied.

I can’t recall when I first saw this sad mass of fur and steel captured in a photograph (Figure 57), but I have felt the ghosts of this event – the moose, the car and that strangely remote place Alaska – throughout my life. I am reminded of it now because it also speaks to an impulse that motivates my research project—putting the lost, the dead, the abandoned, the forgotten to some good use. This tale of my father’s encounter with a moose also helped me to feel, in a deeply personal sense, how an object or fragment can acquire particular relevance and meaning.

Forty something years after my father hit the moose I arrived in Seattle to commence the American leg of my PhD fieldwork. On our way to dinner at a friend’s house, dad took me on a surprise detour past a classic car dealership. There in the showroom was a fully restored Ford “glasstop” Skyliner. It was the same model and year of the car that dad had driven in Alaska, the only difference was its colour. A few days later dad asked me what I thought of the car. “Well Dad, it is beautiful and if you like it you should get it for yourself” I replied. “Oh, I’ve already had mine”, he said “this one is yours.” So this is how cars become a part of family. Not only through the history and memories they prompt but in the ongoing negotiation of relationships and lives.

I think my father wanted me to have this car out of an expression of continuity and connection between us, it was a gift of something we could share. It was at that point I realised in some respects that is what I was doing with this PhD, forging a bond between my family and friends, but particularly my dad, in a way that other topics simply could not. This is a sentiment that other artists engaging with automobility have pointed out. In one way or another, the car is accessible to all of us.

I mention this event not only because it was a personal revelation about my own subconscious motivations but also because it demonstrates how cars and objects more broadly can acquire meaning beyond their functional purpose. It helped me see how deeply cars interpenetrate our lives. But the car dad bought me was a gift in another way because it contributed to my understanding of the performative aspects and power of car culture.

Roger Frederick (Personal communication, January 2013).

See for example, the accompanying dissertation, Chapter Six.
Not long after returning from my fieldwork in Texas, I heard there was a classic car show in the town where my father lives. We decided we would take the car along and ‘show’ it amongst the others. I soon learnt that over the intervening months I had been away, many of my father’s friends had heard about the purchase of the ‘new’ Skyliner and the backstory to its significance. In the lead up to the car show they dropped by dad’s place and would want to see it, we would talk and visit with the Ford as a conversational centrepiece. One friend had taken Dad’s original print of the accident and had it reproduced, and another bought me a fluffy toy moose. I began to see how a car can develop an identity and how that identity can become enfolded in one’s own persona. Even though I had not yet been born at the time of the moose incident, I was now part of the picture. I found that when I went to the car show I almost unconsciously took on a performative role. Like so many others, I sat there in my lawnchair, next to my car and told ‘my story’. Dad put the fluffy moose under the windscreen wiper, and I had the photos on the backseat to show anyone interested. As I answered questions and had conversations with passers by I realised that I had a role in the theatrics and that this car had become a part of my identity and life (Figure 58).

![Figure 58 Me with my glasstop Ford, which is currently garaged at my Dad’s house in northern Washington, USA.](image)

It was a clear and warm Summer’s afternoon when dad and I eventually drove home from the car show. Dad was explaining that the car has some distinctive characteristics that he would have to show me because it could be a bit tricky to operate (Figure 59). And then just before we got home he pointed to a particular feature of the car – the metal support that runs
between the windscreen and the roof – and said “That’s what saved my life”. And in that instant I realised it saved mine also. For me this was a powerful moment that revealed how a simple piece of metal can become freighted with meaning and how a car can be so much more.

As if mirroring back the ‘Icarus formation’ that forms the core of my final work, it would seem that car crashes and car purchases come together in more ways than one. In reaching the end of this road I have communicated my working process and conveyed some sense of the multifaceted nature of my creative research. Whether it is driving, talking, making prints, shooting films or taking photographs, art – as a way of acquiring and sharing knowledge – is a suite of embodied practices. By deploying these different modes of being as practice-based research, I have demonstrated how my art, as reflected through the prism of archaeology and within a system of automobility, contributes to an understanding of contemporary life.

Further to this my father is adamant that the fact that he was not wearing a seatbelt saved his life.
References


Gartman, David 2012 Culture, Class, and Critical Theory: Between Bourdieu and the Frankfurt School


Frederick, Ursula and Katie Hayne 2004. ‘Buying Someone Else’s Dream’, in ‘Four on the Floor’ (Glen Fuller, Convenor), unpublished conference presentation, Cultural Studies Association of Australasia annual conference, Everyday Transformations, Murdoch University, Fremantle, 9-11 December.


Frederick, Ursula and Anne Clarke 2014, in prep. That was then, this is now: Australian perspectives on the archaeology and material culture of contemporary life. Cambridge Scholars Publishing; Newcastle upon Tyne.


Krauss, Rosalind 1979. 'Grids' October 9 (Summer): 50–64.


