

## Horizontally Backwards (and other lines)

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We lost the path and followed the dog, trudging together through fluorescent glowing ferns, caterpillars and under roots. We paused, to listen for the distant sound of the ocean. The sound was ever present, as we spiralled, deeper and deeper into the forest. The dog bounded off again, through the mushy undergrowth, marsh moss, and fallen trees. We followed, getting caught in the tangle of thick bush. Bodies connected to the earth, dwarfed by the hugeness of nature. A bunch of molecules surrounded by another bunch of molecules.

*Figure 1: Still from video and accompanying narration<sup>1</sup>*

Between 2011 and 2014 I made a series of overland journeys partly on foot and mostly by hitch-hiking, experimenting with the idea of using a journey as a performative methodology in my artistic practice. I used those journeys, and the encounters with people along the way, to create psycho-geographic documentation of the places through which I passed. My first journey was along a series of lines through Europe (Diagonally Backwards, Diagonally Upwards) and later I travelled along the longest (imagined) straight line in the world – the border of the United States and Canada (Horizontally Backwards).



Figure 2: Map showing the borderline between the United States and Canada



Figure 3: Hand-drawn map of my journeys across Europe



Highway 4, Pacific Rim, Departure Bay. I could stay here forever, but I remind myself that I am just passing through. I am a tourist, an observer.

I waited for her outside the visitor centre. 'We are still very much a settler culture', she told me, after she had picked up a coffee from the building with goats on the roof, 'especially out here, history for us white people goes back only 200 years or so'. We stared at a map measuring its contours, imagining the flow of humans, flocking birds, like herds of cows, moving from one space to another. Migrating vessels to greener shores, for the melting of the ice sheets, for the promise of a job, or the dream of a lover from another world. She reminded me that our presence on earth is only temporary, before nature takes over, or greed, or money.

*Figure 4: Still from Horizontally Backwards and accompanying narration*

Influenced by Marc Augé's notion of 'non-place', the Horizontally Backwards (and other lines) project focused on transit routes, rather than on places of noted significance.<sup>2</sup> I worked on the principle that a road, while literally being a space between somewhere and somewhere else, contains and embodies the many different stories of those who pass through it. Rather than wishing to dictate that a particular story and a location were intrinsically linked, I wanted to explore the ideas of movement and staying still, and reflect poetically on the idea of passing through; the disconnectedness of doing so, and the idea that these liminal landscapes embody multiple subjectivities.



'What are you doing out here?' I ask the girl with the pierced lip in the car with Utah plates. 'Well, I'm running away actually...'

'Yeah? Well, it's a beautiful place to run away to... I guess I do that frequently as well. I suppose I am doing something like that right now too.'

I feel like I want to share something human with her. 'What are you running from?' I ask. She is cagey and smiles, 'Life, I guess', she sighs peacefully, and pulls over into a gas station. 'Sorry to dump you here, my parents live just back there.'

'Go Your Own Way' by Fleetwood Mac comes on the radio. 'I hope you figure it out', I say. She smiles and drives off, back in the way we came.

*Figure 5: Still from Horizontally Backwards and accompanying narration*

The experience of looking at a map and seeing lines that resemble transit routes leading from one place to another, leads to a certain anticipation, or an imagining of what that space might be like; while physically being somewhere enables such fantasy to become normality. Google Maps Street View affords the same fantasy function: to literally drop yourself into a line on a map and find yourself surrounded by a landscape. You do not get the visceral element of physically being there, but you could imagine yourself there.

The video clips and narrative of *Horizontally Backwards*, only give vague clues as to the location they relate to. I like to consider the images of the locations in the video as universal spaces of recognition; universal in the sense that they contain the metaphor of a route which leads from somewhere to somewhere else. In the imagination, this route could perhaps lead from anywhere to anywhere.

A transit route's function is to support the movement of those who use it to pass through a landscape, thus its embodied attachments are changed at each moment that someone else passes through. Like a Google Maps Street View image – which presents images taken at the time of the camera vehicle passing through – my documentation is also highly specific to that one moment of waiting to hitch a ride, and ultimately the transition through that place.



He picked me up at 6am and we cruised through the morning mist, round the winding avalanche lanes. We talked about the destruction of the planet, the love of money over the sustainability of the earth, the corporatization of marijuana production, and the overfishing of the ocean. Pulverized fish tangled in their nets and turbines. Collateral damage for the power generation.

'The problem over here is that we have jumped into bed with fucking Uncle Sam over there, only seeing dollar signs.'

Red, gold and blind.

'They have forgotten about Pachamama. Their hearts are closed..., some are barely breathing.'

*Figure 6: Still from Horizontally Backwards and accompanying narration*

I chose hitch-hiking as a format as it can offer a particular kind of intimacy to encounters with people. You share an enclosed space with a stranger, in which a mutual degree of trust is necessary. In such spaces, people often feel safer to share things that they may not normally share, since they are unlikely to see each other again. For the duration of the journey, these strangers are in a transit space, in a bubble of unplanned togetherness. They sit side by side with eyes facing forwards, rarely making eye contact. The landscape unfolding through the windscreen becomes significant based on the interaction they share.

You cannot choose who you meet, the encounters are determined by whoever stops. This may be someone who has stories to tell about that particular place, or about themselves, or about someone or somewhere else.



'I guess I can show you because I don't know you. Oh man, you know what, I've been out all night at a party with some friends at the casino, I picked you up so that I can try to sober up talkin' a you, I've just done a frickin' line of cocaine to try to straighten out... Y'know, I never do this, really I promise, I jus' never have the chance... oh man I'm so embarrass'... I'm on my way to work. I got kids. Man, you know what, I screwed up, I made the wrong decisions at the wrong time. I bet you don't have kids? Man I'm jealous of you, I'm a great moma, my kids love me y'know, but I just wish I had waited. I keep telling 'em: "don't you have kids 'till you're are at least 30, or 40". I had mine when I was 19. I mean I love them, and it was my choice.'

She paused for a moment, and concentrated on the road ahead.

'Everything was fine..., I had gotten used to it, and then las' year my husband, he cheated on me. And then, fuck! I just had to get away, so we moved away, together, I couldn't handle it anymore.... but... I wish I had never met him, my life would be different.'

*Figure 7: Still from Horizontally Backwards and accompanying narration*

In the narrative of *Horizontally Backwards*, I am both an observer and a participant. I am a vessel for the stories of other people, but as such, I am intrinsically connected to the narrative and thus the only constant character. The subject is a different person for every clip of the video, but is always referred to as 'he' or 'she', as if they could be constant companions along the journey. The merging of stories from clip to clip forges a narrative structure within the video as to make it a story in its own right. The relationship between

image and text is left ambiguous. The narration is always personal, and sometimes intimate, yet the images are devoid of people. The landscape in this sense could be considered as a visualisation of inner space. A space which contains the combined lived experiences of those who inhabit and pass through, the fantasies of the visitor and by proxy, the imagination and subjectivities of the viewer.



'A Cherokee elder once said', he told me, 'that a man lives through his dreams, and if a man works then he kills his dreams. Hunting and fishing is not work, because the elk and the fish are just there, we just need to collect them'.

His dream was to be the mountain man and he laboured under the sun. His body worked and his muscles tore and he came home to his life in the dream, in his lonely cabin on the hill.

He told me that he wished he had worked in an office and then enjoyed his spare time in the woods. But instead he chose to live in his dream and in time it became his life.

*Figure 8: Still from Horizontally Backwards and accompanying narration*

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The full versions of the videos can be found at <https://www.kimbalbumstead.com/projects#/journeys/>

<sup>2</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Translated by John Howe, Verso, London, 1995