

On the Road

MIKAEL LUNDBERG | ANNICA KARLSSON RIXON | LISA SELIN

If we chart the history of modern travel and photography, they would follow the same curve. The year after the world's first railway line was opened, Nicéphore Niepce placed a processed tin plate in a camera obscura and shot what is usually regarded as the world's first photograph.

Annica Karlsson Rixon, Mikael Lundberg and Lisa Selin are three contemporary artists, each with a unique approach to portraying different forms of traveling.

A journey does not have to be long. Lisa Selin depicts Raggare (Swedish "greaser" youth) who adopt symbols of American life style - cars, clothing and music — and make them their own. Their ride may be no longer than a couple of turns around the block. Mikael Lundberg's trip lasts 506 days and creates a lifeline. Free from any geographical coordinates, movements grow like an abstract drawing in one uninterrupted path. Annica Karlsson Rixon's work has been created in the United States. Through what appear to be snapshots, she has created a collection of Trucks and Truck Drivers, all of which has been shot from ground level making the driver's cab of the large trucks appear even bigger than they are. Rixon's travelers often follow a long, fixed route, sometimes covering a whole continent. Lundberg's lifeline exhibits a chaotic almost haphazard trip. Lisa Selin's photos focus on circumstances where the journey has become a myth, a mirage. The journey and the pictures of the journey are closely related. The pictures create dreams and the journeys create pictures. This exhibit explores new ways of looking at different images of journeys.

Lisa Selin is a photographer working with subcultures such as Skaters, Surfers and Raggare. The series on Raggare came about as part of her Masters of Photography work in 2004. The Raggare culture is strongly inspired by the American Rock'n'roll culture with its big cars, Brylcreem, etc. Subcultures similar to the Raggare have appeared in most West European countries, but nowhere has the phenomenon been as enduring as in Sweden. Lisa Selin avoids the clichés that characterize so much of this genre of documentary photography. She is one of the innovators in this genre.

Annika Karlsson Rixon works as an artist, specializing in photography. She has a Master of Fine Arts degree from California Institute of Arts. In the mid-nineties she lived and worked on the American West coast. Now she usually exhibits her photos in large installations. The installation Truckers and others from 1999 shows American truckers and truck cabs which Karlsson Rixon shot just as the car in which she was traveling passed the truck. Karlsson Rixon is adjunct professor at the Swedish College of Photography since 2003.

Mikael Lundberg is an artist working with themes like time, memory, entropy, tracks and the written word. For 506 days, Lundberg carried a GPS-device, which registered his geographical position via satellite signals every ten seconds. The raw data from the GPS-receiver has been translated into pictures, maps of his movements, published in book form and as an animated film. The patterns look abstract but behind them lie a person's everyday movements: promenades, car trips, boat trips.

Traveling, especially traveling by car, is not the same in America as in Europe. Robert Venturi's study from the seventies

shows that American society is created “to respond to speed, mobility, and the superhighway”. European society is almost the opposite, with overgrown, cramped cities, where even the simplest journey can take an endless amount of time and where ever-present history implies continual stops. Another statement is that the automobile culture, and not just American car culture, is almost without exception created by men for men. Of course there are women, but always as individuals, never as a homogenous group. The Raggare Lisa Selin portrays in her photo series are, by definition, men. Women are not Raggare but the Raggare’s women: Raggarbroads. In Annica Karlsson Rixon’s collection Truckers and others, men are also the norm. In Sweden, a country with one of the highest levels of gender equality in the world, a new study shows that more men than women drive cars, even though some can hardly afford a car and do not need it. Even today cars are associated with manhood.

Travel engages all of our senses. Imagine the smell of burning metal and rubber, coffee in a plastic cup, wet wipes, sweat and the single-sex smell of diesel. In literature, there are many great travel narratives, from Odysseus to Phileas Fogg. The title of the exhibit – On the Road – was initially a provisional name. Jack Kerouac’s 1957 novel, which gave a face to the beat culture, was so burdened by its own history that we feared the name could be a liability. That proved to be wrong, as the portrayal of a trip as nothing but a trip is what is so brilliant in Kerouac’s story. Only in the USA, where “the patterns of parking lines give direction”, can literature like On the Road be created. Just as it took more than a century for photography to be considered an art form, it would take more than a generation for Kerouac to be accepted as a serious writer. After spending seven years on the road, he needed only three weeks to write On the Road. “That isn’t writing; it’s typing”, Truman Capote sneered.

Kerouac, photography and automobiles share a cultural handicap: speed. Not until the car was demolished through compression (César) or by using the body as material for sculptures (Johan Chamberlain) did it, towards the end of the fifties, gain access to museums. It would, however, take time before the car was displayed for what it represents: streamlined design and innovative technology. In 1970 Moderna Museet (the Museum of Modern Art) in Stockholm acquired a Lotus 25/33 R8 Formula 1 racing car for its collection. The acquisition was a first step toward the goal of integrating design into the activities of Moderna Museet. But no other examples followed, and for a long time it was the exception that proved the rule. No car was exhibited again at Moderna Museet, as just a car, until 2000, in the exhibit Utopia and Reality - Swedish modernism 1900 -1960.

There has always been more in the world than people could see, no matter how slow or fast they were traveling. What really matters is the thought and the glance, not the speed. In a society where we are becoming increasingly superficial and try to distance ourselves from our inner beings, great and flamboyant journeys can have the effect of a tranquilizer. A happy pill that helps suppress the hard, inner and often short trips. The images of these short trips tend to burn themselves into our consciousness to such an extent that they become impossible to visualize. The pictures of the great journeys are the fragments left behind. But the most important trip a person can make does not require any displacement. As the Spanish author de la Fuente put it, “The real journey is that of a man who is thirsty to travel towards his own center”. Buddha understood this when, in competition with his globetrotting brother, instead of traveling searching for answers; he simply sat down to meditate.

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