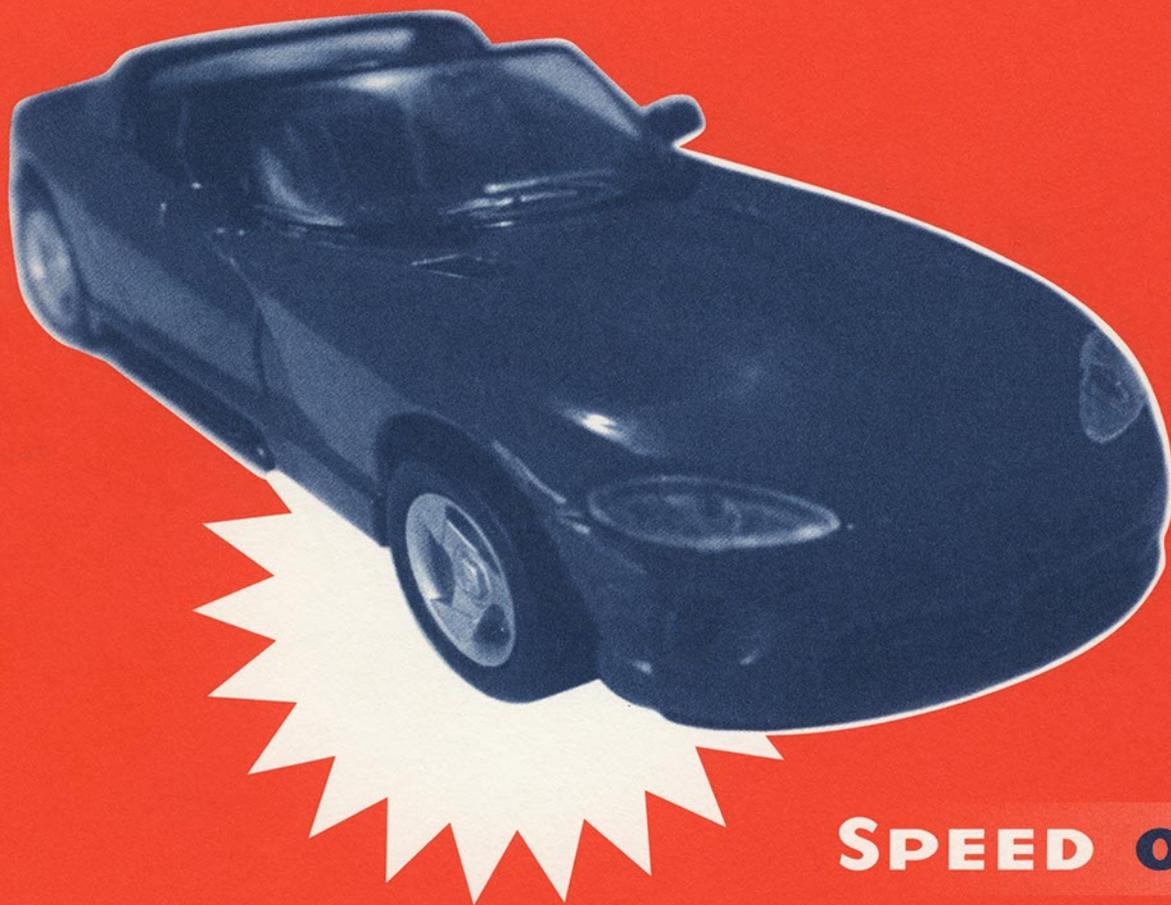


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MERGE

MAGAZINE



SPEED OF LIFE

XAVIER VEILHAN

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speed and auto-eroticism
in contemporary art

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- Tony Smith, 1966

I LOVE YOU WITH MY FORD

BY BO MADESTRAND

However slow, Claude Monet's Impressionist paintings of a train arriving at the Gare St.-Lazare in Paris are probably the first depictions of speed in art. In 1877, modern society was still in its infancy, and the fascination with the gadgets and engines of the new era was composed out of equal measures of utopian expectation and fearful superstition. A few years later, frightened on-lookers rushed out of the cinema houses where the first film of a speeding train was shown.

One of the paradoxes of modernity is that while we are able to constantly move faster and faster, life itself is becoming slower. More speed means more time to kill. With a life-span expectancy of around 80 years, life itself becomes a slow and tedious process. In the old days, you had your first child at 15 and died at 40. Talk about living fast and dying young. Today, you have to add speed to life in order to make it interesting.

Enter the car. In art, as in life, the automobile is a potent metaphor - of sexuality, power, and modernity. If somebody tells you, "Baby, you can drive my car," they may or may not be talking about rubber, steel and asphalt. In any case, it's a truly erotic statement.

In his infamous manifesto of Futurism, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti delivers an equally delirious celebration of everything machinic - cars, locomotives, airplanes. Marinetti does away with 2,000 years of Western culture in an often-cited passage about a racing car being more beautiful than the *Nike of Samothrace*. A violent car crash does nothing to diminish this enthusiasm; quite the contrary:

"When I came up - torn, filthy and stinking - from under the capsized car, I felt the white-hot iron of joy deliciously pass through my heart!"

Since that furious joyride, the car has managed to maintain its lurid sex appeal - despite the fact that thousands of people die in traffic every year. And ever since the first T-model Ford rolled off the assembly line and onto the canvas, cars and speed have stayed important themes within the visual arts.

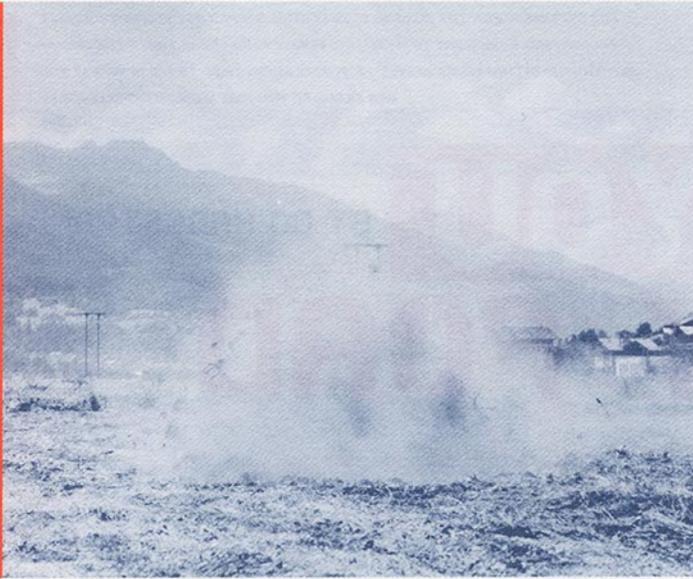
This relationship climaxes with the Pop Art movement in the 60s. James Rosenquist's *I Love You with My Ford* may be a critical mockery of consumerism and capitalist culture, but it's still treating the car as a valid aesthetic entity. The same holds true of John Chamberlain's assemblages of



James Rosenquist: *I Love You With My Ford*, 1961. Photo courtesy of Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

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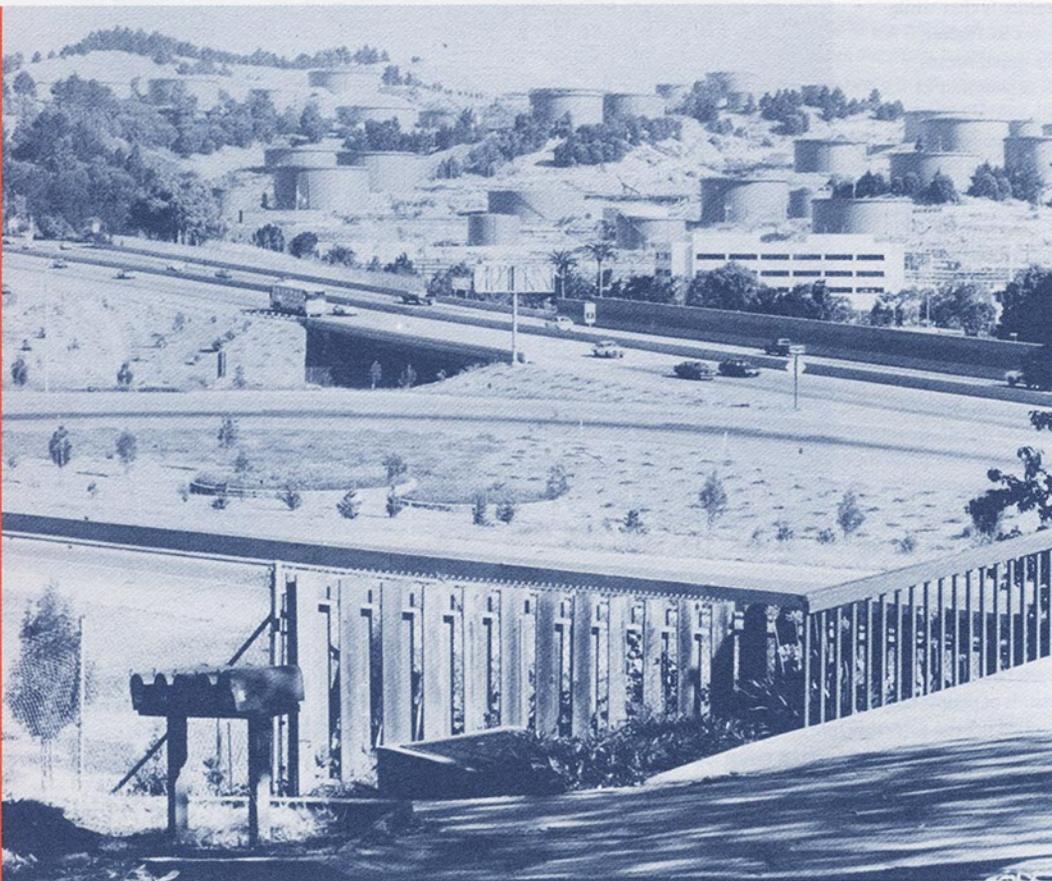
The Futurist movement didn't survive the horrors of World War I, but its objects and paintings are, quite literally, some of the fastest in the history of art. Just look at Giacomo Balla's *Speed of an Automobile + Lights + Noise* from 1913 – a violent outburst of raw energy, movement and power. In a similar vein, Constantin Brancusi's streamlined sculptures of birds in space shoot like missiles towards the sky, but they substitute Futurism's predilection for war and violence with a poetic sensibility.

With Futurism and onwards, the focus is still on the vehicle. But in the 1960s, when sculpture does away with the base, the interest simultaneously shifts from the car itself to its fundament – the highway. The car is the means; the road the end. Following in Jack Kerouac's tracks, we're literally on a road to nowhere; nowhere being the utopia for a generation with no roots outside of the here and now.

The postmodern condition, *dig?* Abstraction and speed is what makes modern art modern. With postmodernism, abstraction is rendered unfashionable, but speed is still a viable concept. In his porn-metal flick *Crash*, David Cronenberg acknowledges this fact. The protagonists of the story are constantly driving in circles, cruising the

Mikael Olsson, Untitled. Photo courtesy of the artist.

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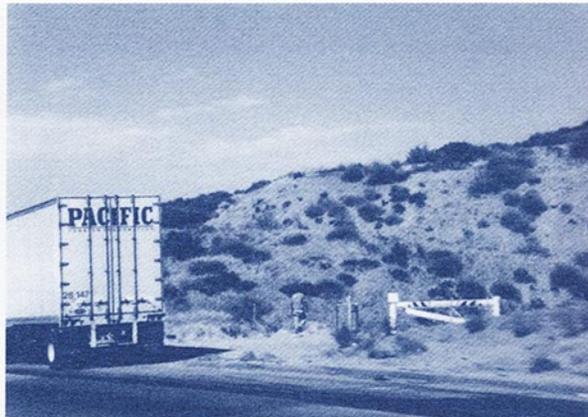


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Colleen Hennessey, *Fake Documentary: Freeway Abnormalities*, 1998. Photo courtesy of the artist.

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When, in the late fifties, sculptor Tony Smith took three of his students on a night ride of the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike, it was nearly a religious experience for him. The black asphalt, still lacking lines or shoulder markers, was such a convincing depiction of the void that Smith felt it did something to him art had never done:

"At first I didn't know what it was, but its effect was to liberate me from many of the views I had had about art. It seemed that there had been a reality there which had not had any expression in art."

A few years later, Robert Smithson had a similar experience when he made an excursion to the duller parts of New Jersey. Examining bridges, dredges and roads, he found these to be as beautiful as the ruins of ancient



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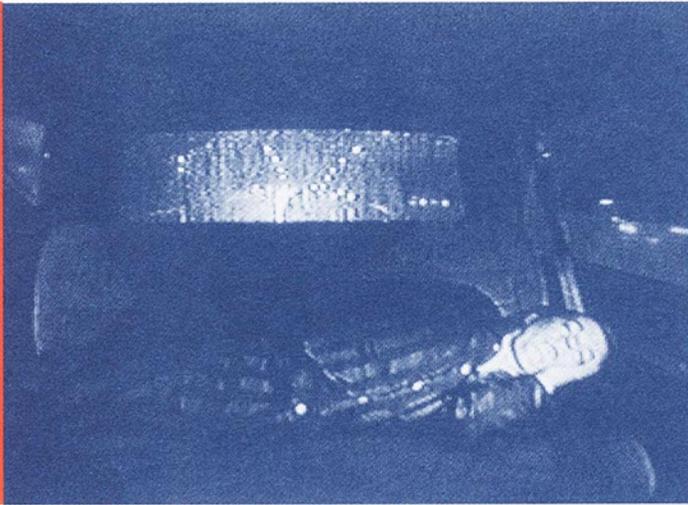
Today, young artists are less romantic in their attitudes towards the mechanics of speed and speeding. See, for example, Rodney Graham's video *Halcion Sleep*, in which he re-enacts one of his earliest childhood memories – that of returning home from a party sleeping in the backseat of his parents' car. Heavily sedated by drugs, Graham lies fast asleep, cuddled up like a puppy, while the flickering lights of meeting cars refract in the rain that's dispersed on the window pane.

Set in black and white, this non-action movie lasts for a good half hour. When it ends, absolutely nothing has happened. Speed is external, in the eye of the hurricane there is absolute stillness.

Similarly, Mikael Olsson's photographs from roadside non-sites are veritable excesses in non-legibility. All the different components of his images are perfectly legible, but as a whole they don't quite match. We



Colleen Hennessey, *Fake Documentary: Freeway Abnormalities*, 1998. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Rodney Graham, still from the video *Halcion Sleep*, 1994. Photo courtesy of the artist.

inevitably try to construct narratives out of photographs, but Olsson denies us this possibility. The linearity is broken, as is the plot. Life is fractured, vague, without directions or master plan.

All that remains are fragmentary snapshots, a series of still images from some obscure dream. Contrary to most photography, Mikael Olsson's pictures don't function as keepsakes; instead, they are images of oblivion.

It's like suddenly waking up in a foreign place, the light blazes your eyes, a sharp image is instantly engraved on the retina – the people, the cars, the buildings, everything is simultaneously well-known and alien. Life goes on around you, but you are no longer part of the events.

This uncertainty is shared by Colleen Hennessey, whose images of still-standing cars along the highway vacillate between the tragic and the mundane. Her series *Fake Documentary: Freeway Abnormalities* is a collection of snapshots taken of roadside incidents, some banal, others fatal.

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Maria Friberg, *confront me back*, 1997. Photo by Anna Hallin.

Maria Friberg's photographs of a man stuck between the driver's seat and the passenger seat of an archetypically boring car questions the properties of manhood as we know it. This particular driver isn't headed towards destiny; he can't move at all. He is everything but sexy. He's a little boy, trying to adopt-to adulthood. Once, he put daddy's suit on for a laugh – now he can't get out of it.

Mortgages, 9 to 5, wife and kids, endless lines on the motorway back home. The next time you find yourself behind the wheel of a large automobile, you may ask yourself, "Well... How did I get here?", and you may tell yourself: "This is not my beautiful house! This is not my beautiful wife!"

These artists have very little to do with Marinetti's exuberant celebration of speed. Instead, they examine what happens when speed turns on you, when somehow, life starts going backwards. When, every day, you stare into the mirror and see an aging stranger. At this point in life, speed somehow loses its attraction. It's just plain ugly.

Makes you wanna holler: "Hey, stop that train – I wanna get off!"

NOTE: RODNEY GRAHAM, MIKAEL OLSSON, MARIA FRIBERG AND COLLEEN HENNESSEY WILL TAKE PART OF *MERGE'S* TRAVELLING ART EXHIBITION *SPEED OF LIFE*, OPENING MAY 2 AT THE ART NODE FOUNDATION IN STOCKHOLM. THE EXHIBITION ALSO FEATURES WARREN NEIDICH, ANNICA KARLSSON RIXON, NINA KATCHADOURIAN, PALLE TORSSON AND XAVIER VEILHAN, WHOSE WORK CAN ALL BE FOUND ELSEWHERE IN THIS ISSUE OF *MERGE*.

Bo Madestränd

is an art critic, editor of *Merge* and journalist. He doesn't have a driver's license, so none of this applies to him.



Annica Karlsson Rixon / Untitled 1998



MARIA FRIBERG
confront me back, 1997
photo by anna hallin



speed and auto-eroticism in contemporary art

< I LOVE YOU WITH MY FORD >

Bo Madstrand enters the car and experiences speed and auto-eroticism in contemporary art. Without a driver's license of his own, he captures the fast vehicle as a metaphore of sexuality, power and modernity. Join him along the road passing Filippo Marinetti, James Rosenquist, David Cronenberg, Keanu Reeves and the speed limit.

by BO MADESTRAND, [Merge](#) #1, 1998

"The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that's the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it."

Tony Smith, 1966

However slow, Claude Monet's Impressionist paintings of a train arriving at the Gare St.-Lazare in Paris are probably the first depictions of speed in art. In 1877, modern society was still in its infancy, and the fascination with the gadgets and engines of the new era was composed out of equal measures of utopian expectation and fearful superstition. A few years later, frightened on-lookers rushed out of the cinema houses where the first film of a speeding train was shown.

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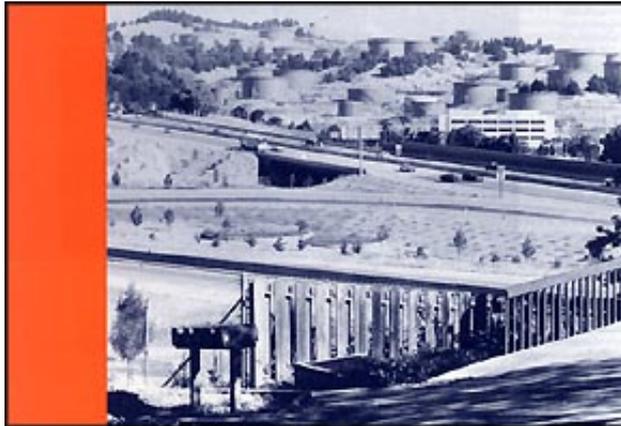
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MIKAEL OLSSON
untitled. photo courtesy of the artist.

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Merge with us at: <http://www.mergemaq.com>

Visit Speed of Life, June 6-August 9, at Bohusläns Museum, Uddevalla