SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

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Review: Sitting in the Back of a Car
by Chip Lord
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Image by Jesse Sugarmann

Entering the darkened gallery we encounter an object on the floor—it is a PONTIAC sign, an actual dealer sign but facing down. It is lit and emitting a red glow. This is the centerpiece of "We Build Excitement," by artist Jesse Sugarmann, and the premiere gallery exhibition of his ambitious on-going project. On three walls of the Southern Exposure gallery in San Francisco are large video projections that were shot in Pontiac, Michigan, at abandoned Pontiac sites. One video shows former autoworkers, re-enacting the physical movements that they repeated thousands of times while building Pontiacs. A second video shows former owners re-enacting the movements they experienced during car accidents. The third screen presents various temporary sculptures Sugarmann has made using Pontiacs as displaced objects—held aloft by poles, in angular and gravity-defying poses, or stacked two or three high. All of these "arrangements" and "performative collisions" are on the grounds of his "unsanctioned Pontiac dealerships."

Sugarmann has arrived too late to be included in *Automotive Prosthetic: Technological Mediation and the Car in Conceptual Art* by Charissa N. Terranova, but his work is a perfect fit with her scholarly and theoretical treatise. Terranova begins by dismissing outright art cars, pimped out cars, the BMW car art series, lowriders, custom cars, and the like, all meant to be "looked at." Instead she is interested in exploring the idea of "looking through," wherein "the automobile functions as an apparatus—a prosthetic connected to the body and systems of infrastructure—through which to see and experience the world. Here the car is fathomless. It is a mode of communication roving through a system of roads and within the culture of conceptual art."

The idea of "looking through" can easily be applied to art works with no cars involved, but it seems a smart way to define seemingly unlikely connections across decades and generations of artists. Throughout six chapters Terranova surveys the condition of the "automotive prosthetic" (what McLuhan called "extensions of man") from 1951 to the present. The book thinks in the context of the "conceptual turn"—"a new take on conceptualism that is chronologically broader and, rather than being an –ism limited to a few years in time, is a decision-making process and sensibility that came to the fore in the post-World War II period, and that is now normative." This is a smart strategy because the "conceptual turn" was a paradigmatic shift in artmaking that has affected all areas of art and in particular art education.

Chapter titles lay out a progression of arguments for the automotive prosthetic and its affect: Chapter One, "Rethinking Conceptualism through Technology," gives us a historical framework connecting Brian O'Doherty's essay, "Highway to Las Vegas" (1972), with sculptor Tony Smith's account of a famous drive on the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike in the early 1950s, which occasioned a shift in his thinking about the experience of art. She also links the Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage print, *Automobile Tire Print* (1953), with the original scroll manuscript famously typed by Jack Kerouac for *On The Road*.

Chapter Two, "Mobile Perception and the Automotive Prosthetic: Photoconceptualism, the Car, and Urban Space," shows how the conceptual turn unfolds in the perceptual experience and the photoconceptual work of Margaret Lawther, John Baldessari, Ed Rushca, Jeff Wall, Martha Rosler, and others. Terranova states, "These photos and photo-text pieces are not journalistic accounts or straight-shot views to the road, as for example, the photos in Robert Frank's *The Americans*. Instead, they cast that view to the road and its accouterment of freedom in doubt.

Particularly notable is her close reading of Ed Ruscha's *Every Building on Sunset Strip* (1966), and a little known 1970 work by Jeff Wall,*Landscape Manual*. She writes, "Ed Ruscha captures the zones of entropy," citing Robert Smithson's essay, "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art" (1968), that describes the landscape of Los Angeles as a "pointless phenomenon which seems inhabitable, and a place swarming with dematerialized distances." And with Rosler's 1995 work, *Rights of Passage*, a series of photos in and around New York, shot with a disposable camera. Terranova states, "The car becomes precisely the connector here—linking aesthetic experience, both perception as the unmitigated intake of sensual knowledge and the construction of how one approaches the world, to politics."

In Chapter Three, "The Nows of the Automotive Prosthetic: Moving Images, Time, and the Car," Terranova introduces connections between time-based art works and literary commercial movies in respect to temporality. (Full disclosure: A project I did with Ant Farm in 1971, *The World's Longest Bridge*, is discussed here). Works by Gregory Crewdson, Julian Opie, Charlotte Posenenske, Nic Nicosia, and Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler are discussed in relation to the films of Wim Wenders and Robert Altman to frame a larger window on cultural reflection.

Other chapters are devoted to the work of Dan Graham and Richard Prince, and the iconic symbolism of the Hummer. Terranova, an assistant Professor of Aesthetic Studies, University of Texas, Dallas, writes well and brings to bear a wealth of theoretical positions, but it is her lively original thinking and comprehensive knowledge that make this book important. She has found less known works to support her arguments and to flesh out a truly significant collection of art works made in and around the car during the long peak period of its existence: 1950 to 2014.

We Build Excitement will travel to the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art in September, then across the country to the Space Gallery in Portland, Maine in October, and finally to MOCA, Indianapolis, in April 2015.

Chip Lord
Chip Lord's more recent book is *The New Cars*. He was a founder and partner of Ant Farm from 1968–1978.