

HITCHING

This project is composed of 8 tiles of photo transfer on a large panel of found glass (83 St / Riverside Drive) depicting an image of the 96 St northbound entrance ramp to the Hudson Parkway (taken March 29, 2024), mounted on a metal easel with two chairs on the "glass" side of the panel, and craft paper and tape extending from the easel towards the end of the room. A cartoon figure giving a "thumbs up" sign is etched out of the photo transfer, creating a transparent space. Viewers are invited to sit down and walk around the easel and paper.

The glass and easel act as the windshield and driver/passenger seats of a car, with the paper approximately following the curvature of the road from the perspective of the image. From the passenger seat, the viewer can look through the glass silhouette of the thumbing figure to see other audience members as they move around the space.

My focus with this project was the visual relationship between the driver and hitchhiker in the few moments as the car drives towards then passes, or stops, for the hitcher. Though there are often just a few seconds, the driver's decision to ignore or stop for the person asking for a ride is necessarily a complex one. We can distil it into three main components: 1) openness to picking up a stranger, 2) assessment of this particular person on the side of the road, and 3) ability to accommodate the hitcher in the moment.

A driver's openness to hitchhikers will have been formed by their previous experiences. While hitching was far more common and accepted by society until the past thirty years or so, it is now mostly seen as a sure-fire way to be assaulted or killed. The idea of transporting someone to somewhere for free seems far-fetched in the age of rideshare applications. Furthermore, the car is often a personal space in which people can spend thousands of hours and accepting a stranger into this space can be an act of vulnerability. Yet many people do continue to pick up hitchhikers and their reasons are varied. In my personal experience, the majority of drivers either used to or continue to hitchhike and are happy to welcome fellow hitchhikers as a matter of principle. Some drivers, older women especially, seemed to feel a humanitarian impulse to help a young man in need of help. Younger drivers, meanwhile, may have a romanticized notion of hitchhiking -- which I am not totally indifferent to -- that would have its origins in the famous bourgeois hitchhikers of history, namely Jack Kerouac (2008 [1951]), Christopher McCandless (Krakauer, 1996), and David Choe (Vice, 2009). It is conceivable that hitchhiking will make a comeback as a predominantly young middle-class phenomenon in line with "alternative" lifestyles and "slow tourism".

Even if the driver is willing to pick up the hitcher, racial, sexual, and economic biases usually come into play (Langellier, 2014). Black and Hispanic hitchhikers are unlikely to have success. Appearing poor or dishevelled can also hurt one's chances. Women have it easier, in terms of attracting drivers -- but also tend to be at higher risk of danger. In fact, the more likely you are to really need the ride, the less likely you are to get it.

Finally, even if they want to stop, drivers can be in a hurry, have a full car, or cannot stop for the hitcher because of a poor choice of location. Conversely, sometimes the drivers want a companion for their journey and will go out of their way to clean up the passenger seat or make time to take me somewhere. It is with these drivers that I have often had the most personal and profound conversations and arguably the primary reason why I continue to hitchhike at all. The human connections made while thumbing for a ride are unquestionably transient and unique.

If you are on a tight schedule, have no desire to speak to anyone while you travel, and do not want to tolerate any risk for danger, hitchhiking is not for you. The drivers I have met while hitching in the US and Europe were completely outside of my usual bubble of highly-educated middle-class suburb kids and, as such, broadened my understanding and appreciation of the world.

While my installation here would not have conveyed all of these thoughts, I hope that viewers would at least have thought about the driver-hitcher interaction that remains incredibly uncommon today. In freezing the moment where the driver has a good view of the person on the shoulder, I aimed to provoke viewers in the "car" seats to re-examine their opinions of hitchhiking by reframing their peers with the shape of a hitchhiker. I wanted viewers standing by the paper "road" to feel slightly exposed; aware of being observed but unable to see the observers.

POST-CRITIQUE REFLECTION

People seemed entertained by the project. It was helpful to see that others found my setup playful and that they "got" the theatricality of the car/road pieces. As the audience walked around the paper road and sat in the chairs they appeared to enjoy the various perspectives and cartoonish figure etched on the image. The visual relationship was successfully conveyed.

I am unsure that this work alone could have led viewers towards any deeper reflections. Perhaps if they had been primed with other literature or art on the complexities of the driver-hitcher encounter, this piece could have given a material realization of their mindspace. I liked using a large space as my "stage" and may want to explore this further.

REFERENCES

Kerouac, Jack. 2008 (1951). *On the Road: The Original Scroll*. Penguin Classics: New York.

Krakauer, Jon. 1996. *Into the Wild*. Villard: New York.

Langellier, Robert. 2014. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to Traveling*. Vox Magazine [online].

Vice. 2009. *Thumbs Up!* Youtube [online].

APPENDIX: IMAGES

