

I-5 PASSING ... 2002–2007

by

Christiane Robbins &
Katherine Lambert

CHRISTIANE ROBBINS


Director /Artist/Professor

Founding Director, Matrix Program for Inter-Digital Media
University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA

KATHERINE LAMBERT

Associate Professor, Architecture Division

California College of the Arts, San Francisco, CA

*To go nowhere,
even to ride around in a deserted quarter or in a
crowded freeway,
now seems natural* 

I-5 Passing, an experimental cross-disciplinary digital media project, examines the ways in which speed alters one's experience of space, time and environment. The title references vehicular motion and locative technologies that interrogate notions of mobility, its induction of mind travel and the yearnings of an overexposed telematic imaginary. Our databanks of memory, themselves transport devices, destabilize and reposition notions of linear time and fixed identities. The earlier phases of *I-5 Passing* (2002-2005) spoke of a hybrid digital media and locative project utilizing the intersections and commonalities of physical and virtual spaces created along Interstate 5, known as I-5, in California. In 2005-2007 (a pre-smartphone App world) we developed a proprietary software program offering a live sensor-based tracking of increasing levels of air and water pollution along the four-hundred mile stretch of I-5. It depicted an evolution of hyper-urbanism through rethinking



Figure 1. *107° Series*, Christiane Robbins, 2002-2003. Video still. © Christiane Robbins, *Jetztzeit*, 2002-2003. Used with permission.

(and representing) our relationship to the swarming dynamics of (auto)mobilized psychogeographies. The strategies inherent in *I-5 Passing* (re)imagined a public realm of passing-through culture(s), a kind of passing productive of frictions and fictions. This project summoned perspectives of mobility via a cross-disciplinary platform. Its underpinnings lie with cinematic practices, photographic imaging, digital media and locative technologies. Mobility serves as a sectional sequence transgressing the boundaries of cultural practices, urbanism and the psychogeography of the state of California itself.

Interstate 5 is the central artery running through central California – the connective tissue linking Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area. A six-hour drive along this freeway offers an opportunity to rethink our presumed mobility and our movements; and in so doing to take a drive through the recent past and the near future. We ventured into food marts, foreclosures, parking lots, feedlots... scanning the ever-present Aqueduct system that bisects the state, as well as earth-toned Big Box distribution centers and outposts

of Google, Apple, and Oracle – all amidst the cul-de-sacs of time and space.

It has been said that our 21st century global existence is one of perpetual motion. Certainly that notion mirrors our own lives in California today. The ability to be mobile – to possess the mobility, if you will, of people, commodities, information, and services – confronts, permeates, saturates, and defines our daily existence. The degree of our mobility is the measure by which we value our place in contemporary society. Mobility is thus an indicator of the quality of life and links with broader concepts of social theory and environmental practices. ²

Our prosthetic capacities to relocate 'wherever,' 'whatever,' 'whenever,' 'whomever,' suggest that mobility forms a doppelgänger of contemporary society. For many in California, mobility remains more than a privileged vista – a 'buena-vista point' alongside the freeway. The all-pervasiveness of contemporary mobility is one that is perched on a crescendo of Western impetus and sited within the mythic poetic narratives



Figure 2. *Pacheco*, Christiane Robbins, 2005. Digital image, 48" x 60". © Christiane Robbins, *Jetztzeit*, 2005.

that have embellished the 20th century. As such, in *I-5 Passing*, the contemporary is realized as only intelligible when viewed from the conditions and praxis of mobility. Within this context, one must keep in mind that to roam is to travel over or through a broad space. However, to commute is to travel within a vortex of an externally compressed and urgent interiorized bandwidth of time and space. ³

Arguably, more than any other form of transportation, the automobile is the modus operandi that has shaped the modern city. 'Central casting' has provided us with the penultimate sampling of Los Angeles, universally recognized as the city of asphalt: the surface area of its street network surpasses that of its actual city area. Its landscape is one of intersections, guardrails, bypasses, commuter lanes, toll-roads and overpasses – it is an artificial, continually cultivated and reconfigured topography.

The dialectic space between pressing environmental concerns and cultural practices is constantly invoked,



Figure 3. *Last West|Kern Co., Calif – Lettuce Strike*, Dorothea

Lange, 1938. Silver print, 8" x 10". © The Dorothea Lange Collection, Oakland Museum of California, City of Oakland; gift of Paul S. Taylor. Used with permission.

rified and (re)created within the presence of this project. With a nod toward artist Dorothea Lange's *US 99*, an iconic photographic series of California's Central Valley during the 1930's and Ed Ruscha's *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations*, ⁴ this project re-imagines cultural, urban and environmental concerns. These are envisioned via specific legacies of experimental narrative and documentary media practice associated with art-



Figure 4. *Bonsai America*, Christiane Robbins, 2005. Digital image, 48" x 60". © Christiane Robbins, Jetzzeit, 2005. Used with permission.

ists such as Robert Frank's *America* and Sophie Calle's *No Sex Last Night*.

I-5 Passing embraces issues endemic to historical land-use and its representations; contemporary land remediation, nomadic conditions and the market/exchange values of commuting. These are positioned in direct, and at times contradictory, relation to personal narratives and subjectivities unfolding through the real-time experiences of travel and commuting.

There have been numerous cultural legacies invoked in the creation of *I-5 Passing*, primarily Ed Ruscha, Mike Davis and Reyner Banham. The 52 Food Marts segment comprises a proprietary software program, digital images series and video installation. This title, which riffs and doubles back on Ruscha's *26 Gas Stations* (1963), addresses the deteriorating 20th century myth and promise of the great American road trip. It has now been supplanted by the quotidian nature of the round trip and the commute/commuter. To this

Figure 5. From *Twenty-six Gas Stations*, Ed Ruscha, 1963. Texaco, Vega, Texas. © Ed Ruscha. Courtesy of the artist and Gagolian Gallery. Used with permission.



Figure 6. *Westley*, Christiane Robbins, 2004. Digital Image, 48" x 60". © Christiane Robbins, Jetzzeit, 2004.

day, the residents along I-5 remain overlooked and undervalued – existing within an ever increasingly arid landscape that inexplicably reveals a beguiling presence.

As Ruscha did with Rt. 66, we mapped the route along the I-5 with a series of photographs documenting the Food Marts sited along the freeway, thereby creating an alternative portrait of the highway, titled *52 Food Marts*.

Figure 7. Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles, 1972, BBC, Video still.



Perhaps known to many from his 1971 text, British Architectural theorist Reyner Banham famously accepted a challenge posed to him by architectural iconoclast Cedric Price to write a treatise on Los Angeles. Within this text, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, Banham schematizes Los Angeles as a field generated by the superimposition of transportation networks, electronic infrastructure, and landscape. ⁵

An underpinning of Banham's reading of Los Angeles,

Heading South On Interstate 5



Don't try this at home, I'm a trained professional! There is no trick photography involved here. This has not been photoshopped. I really am sitting in the middle of Interstate 5, somewhere in the San Joaquin Valley. I'm not sure of the exact location but I believe it is somewhere between Kettleman City and Los Baños. The year was 1971 and Interstate 5 was under construction. There were 20 or 30 mile stretches like this that were open to the public but they would suddenly end in the middle of nowhere. Because the freeway wasn't completed all the way, hardly anyone drove on it. This photo demonstrates how little used it was. Photo by *Homer From Springfield* (film, possibly a Kodak Instamatic)

a key point that distinguishes his interpretation of that city from a metropolis such as New York City, is the principle that mobility takes precedence over monumentality. Banham quipped that as earlier generations of English thinkers had become fluent in Italian in order to read Dante, he now learned to drive in order to read Los Angeles. Taking his cue, driving is also the means by which *I-5 Passing* reveals the same convergence of mobility, networks and vehicular prosthetics that were of interest to Banham.

There is an inverse effect of the predominance of mobility in California that is an over-abundance of negative space. By definition a void is an absence. The most concrete example of absence in Los Angeles – in much of urbanized California, for that matter – would be the omnipresent, stereotypic proliferation of parking lots and pervasive freeway infrastructure. Many of the digital images of the I-5 Project concisely encapsulate this rather frictionless spatiality. These images feature the freeway, the stops, and little else. The protagonists in this project: the freeway, the food marts, the vast consumable inventories embedded in permanent transit, the off-ramps, the exit and brand-scape

Figure 9. *Bobby in Lost Hills*, Christiane Robbins, 2005. Digital Image, 24" x 30". © Christiane Robbins, Jetzzeit, 2005. Used with permission.

Figure 8. *Somewhere Between*, Christiane Robbins, 2005. Digital composite image, 11" x 14". © Christiane Robbins, Jetzzeit + Homer From Springfield, 2005. Used with permission.

signage are the only operational fictions and navigational gestures represented, save empty static fields that serve as nostalgic alibis for this convergence.

Each signifier enables the reader a rather idiosyncratic focal point upon which to construct a body of individuated and collective pertinent references of urban, cinematic and mobile spatialities. This hybrid indexing results in a dynamic collision of data-driven particles representing speed, visual kinetics and narrative fictions situated within the passage of locative and augmented realities. Accordingly, I-5 offers discrete narrative spaces; an archive of California's fleeting realities. Considering the homogenous nature of the built environment in much of California, these freeways could be any freeway, anywhere. These images are constructed within a binary frame – an almost oppositional elucidation of mapping – articulating the vacuum-like, vampiric, unrelenting character of Southern California's infamous 'noir' space.

Topographical space has been truncated to that of a reductive landscape with no real landmarks and no

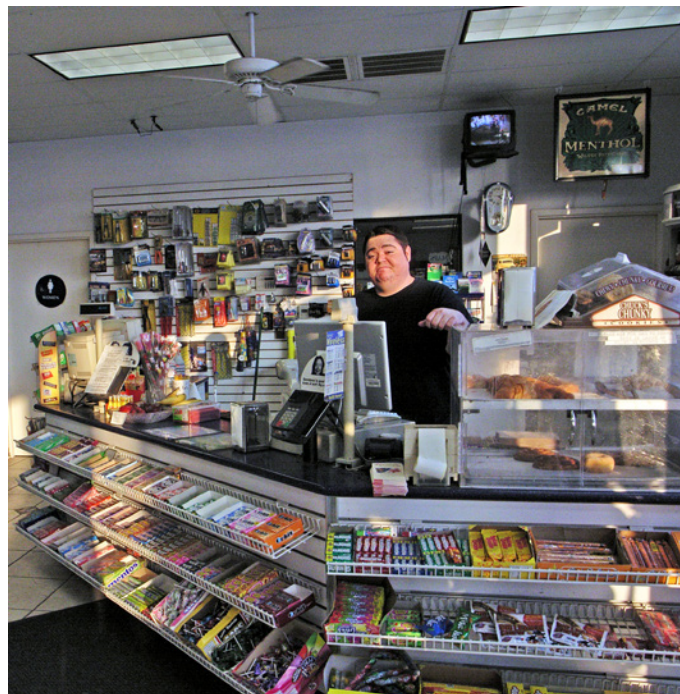


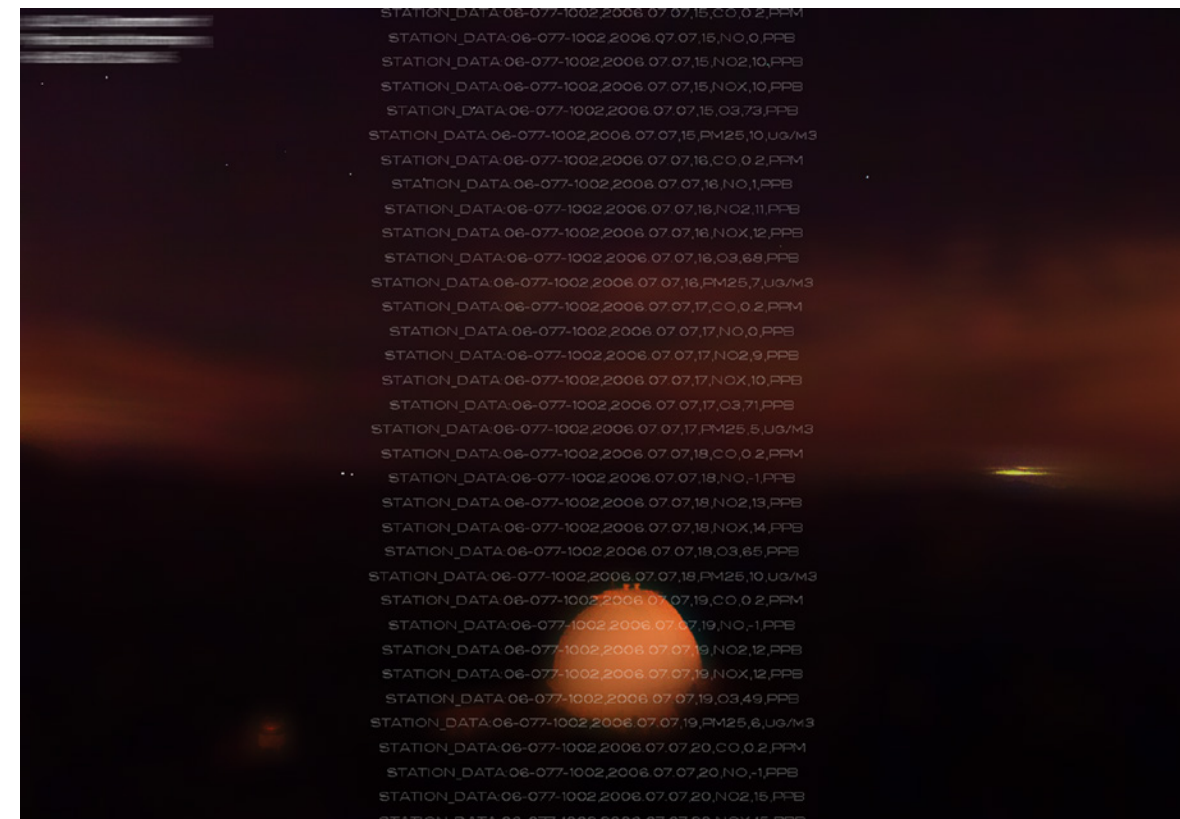
Figure 10. *I-5 Passing*, Christiane Robbins and Katherina Lambert, 2007. Media installation, within the exhibition *Edge Conditions*, San Jose Museum of Art, 2007. © Christiane Robbins, Katherina Lambert, 2007. Used with permission.

real frame of reference, save the freeway. I-5 exploits the contestations resulting from our own intimacy with, and alienation from, these shared locative spaces and re-positions them as variables informing a media analysis of locative, mobile and temporal space in 21st century California.

It is worth noting here that the lynchpin of Californians' very existence rests upon an uneasy and often contested alliance between urban and natural systems. Urban centers were built in the midst of desert terrain,

over geological formations prone to seismic activity and that are solely reliant on a water supply redirected from the Owens Valley or buried in the now privatized, corporatized aquifers, deep underground. Much to its dismay, Southern California has found itself incapable of suppressing the natural. The infinite horizon is often depicted as the signifier of California's manifest destiny. As represented in Julius Shulman's iconic mid-20th century portrait of LA, it is just as illusionary as is the suggestion that Los Angeles is a complete totalized urban system.

Figure 11. *107° Series*, Christiane Robbins, 2002-2003. Video still. © Christiane Robbins, Jetzzeit, 2002-2003. Used with permission.



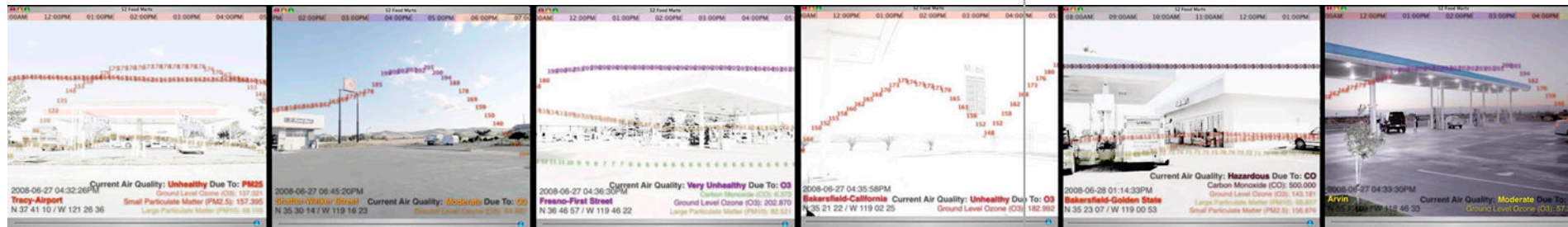


Figure 12. Visualization composite, 52 Food Marts, AQ Monitoring Stations Data: o6.27.o8; Proprietary Mobile App, 2005-2007. © Jetzeit Studios. Used with permission.

Conversely, the northern boundary of *I-5 Passing* is the San Francisco Bay Area. The Bay Area is a 19th century nostalgic nod toward European neo-traditional, Victorian architecture and city planning; one that gave birth to a rather twisted late 20th century Walden-Pond-on-LSD populated by libertarian, dead-head hackers who cultivate capital and logarithmically re-inscribe the financial vortex of the West Coast. Ironically, the Bay Area has also long been considered the laboratory from which the future – at least the digital future – has been launched ... and re-launched ... and re-launched once again.

Driving along I-5 (as do thousands of commuters) it is not immediately obvious that the car has been replaced by another machine as the instrument and iconic presence of notions of progress. But the evidence is there if you only look, or hear the once familiar “Can you hear me now?” branded by Verizon Wireless in 2002. It is possible to drive south along this, if you will, “information highway,” and be tethered to the space of the “digital,” a continuous virtual interior (and interiority), a micro-world of flexible work times and user friendly sociability (you have the whole network behind you ...). A whole host of pseudo freedoms converge in the scenario of satiated commuters driving 2-3 hour one-way commutes, attached to wireless networks, hurriedly consuming ethnically diverse prefabricated happy meals at the ubiquitous 24-Hour Food Marts and espresso drive-thru’s – all in the interest of total integration into today’s “CA lifestyle.” It becomes readily apparent to this new generation of migrant workers that there is no outside to this lifestyle, only a range of pre-determined choices within it. One may easily draw analogies to the virtual realm of online interaction.

As a technology of space, cities galvanize both

human and non-human metabolisms, channeling them, amplifying them, concentrating them into centers, domesticating them into suburbs. The question that would animate much of Virilio’s subsequent work is: how have these core functions of the city been assumed by other dromological media? ⁶

What we have come to find is that a new kind of (edge) city is being incubated within this scattering, and is projected back into the two hubs: the metropolis of the Bay Area and the Los Angeles Basin, accelerating their tendency towards entropy while also multiplying their density.

A familiar strangeness and a dense emptiness are their greatest assets. It is not that ex-urban sprawl and today’s lifestyle are that alienating; it is simply that they are not alienating enough. To manage their dislocations, both actively seek out integration into the greater whole of what has been called a village – suburban or global – in the interest of maximum performance and output with a minimum of dissent.

In California we find ourselves now living in a “flat-space” where 20th century notions of living have taken on wholly different and contested meanings. Whereas “flat space” once evinced a topographical description of the Central Valley, it now references an intensified agglomeration of big box stores, highway infrastructure and parking lots in which space is corporate, a Tyvek wrapped sophisticated self-image of hyper-efficiency. It is a space now teeming with power centers, car-cooning, dashboard dining and fast-food clusters, which vainly impersonate the edges of quaint 20th century towns and clusters along Highway 99.

The question soon becomes, “Where does one find

oneself amidst the multi-channel, hermetically sealed, and wired living fueled by such an existence?” This “Main Street of California” ⁷ finds itself in a cultural moment hinged on the precipice of an unprecedented and dramatic, almost carnivalistic, upheaval. One could easily state that it is a moment which may become unrecognizable in the next; a future that houses residents alien to themselves; a moment from which the future has been launched; and a future that remains strangely familiar, almost as if it had been scripted for our consumption. Hovering in the cloud is a promise of a counter-future to that which has been projected by the values of consumer confidence and technological progress.com. As we pass through miles of over-fed Tyvek Home-wrapped structures amidst pastoral fields of cotton, almonds, oranges and grapevines, we’ve seen flashes of a new form of urbanity that gazes back on the modern metropolis – the city of strangers – with a fond respect, all the while looking toward this strangely familiar future that remains a work-in-progress. It has been one hundred years since the archetypal subject of that metropolis was discovered: “the Stranger,” cousin of the aimless streetwalker, the Flaneur. Now, with the eclipse of the modern period and attendant to these changes, a dialectical tension has arisen between modernism and early 21st century critical practices. It is possible that the archetypal subject of the new post-metropolis is the Resident Alien, a subject on the run but stuck in traffic, going nowhere in particular, but not quite standing still. ■

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, trans. Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991). Annotation by Adam Weg (Theories of Media, Winter 2004); <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/annotations/virilioaesthetics.htm>.
2. Anthony Hoete, ed., introduction to *ROAM: Reader on the Aesthetics of Mobility* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2003), 20.
3. Ibid.
4. Photos of *U.S. 99* by Dorothea Lange were shot from 1936-1937 for the Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Collection, Library of Congress; Ed Ruscha, *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations*, 3rd ed. (Alhambra, CA: Cunningham Press, 1969).
5. Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).
6. Benjamin Bratton, “Logistics of Habitable Circulation,” a brief introduction to *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology*, by Paul Virilio (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006).
7. The Rebuild California Plan, “Governor Schwarzenegger and Valley Leaders Applaud Rebuild California Plan’s Focus on Highway 99,” n.d., the website of UCLA Library Digital Collections, http://digital.library.ucla.edu/websites/2006_995_155/INDEXooC.HTM (accessed February 14, 2014).