

REIMAGINING ROADS THE FICTION AND FUNCTION OF INFRASTRUCTURE

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The text and photographs in this essay are a further iteration of my artistic project Bearings (2016) which documents rural highways in the southwestern United States. This conceptual project uses my photographs in tandem with a fictional narrative to reposition roads within the canon of the Land Art Movement. The use of fiction acts as a connective thread to communicate an alternative understanding of roads, drawing on artistic concepts such as Dennis Oppenheim's permeable demarcation between gallery space and 'real world' and Richard Serra's steel sculptures reorienting one's experience of a site. Simultaneously, my own goals in deploying fiction can be elucidated by theoretical concepts such as Donna Haraway's 'speculative fabulation' and Langdon Winner's question: "Do artifacts have politics?". This text, like the project as a whole, conceives highways as art objects, inviting a reimagining of the function of roads and their effects on surrounding landscapes.

Bearings has taken multiple forms, though it exists primarily as a gallery installation of photographs and wall texts. One panel of text lays out the conceptual underpinnings, the other gives a brief biography of Arnold Mueller, a central character in the project. The viewer is presented first with text, followed by photos displayed in groups of three. In this essay, I utilize the narrative and conceptual background, interspersed with photographs, to present a new iteration of my artistic project.

Bearings is about roads: particularly highways that run across the non-urban landscapes of the western United States. The project is also about my attempt to find my bearings in landscapes that are alien to me, finding – through the roads and the act of photographing them – connection, direction, and a sense of place. The project grew out of a discomfort I felt while travelling these roads. As a born-and-raised city dweller, I felt a sense of out-of-placeness in these vast landscapes, to which roads brought feelings of comfort and direction. From this, I imagined a history within which the roads are sculptures intended to affect a traveller’s experience of the environment through which they are passing. Finally, this project is about appreciating roads as infrastructure, as well as aesthetic, sculptural objects. Towards this aim, let us begin with a story.

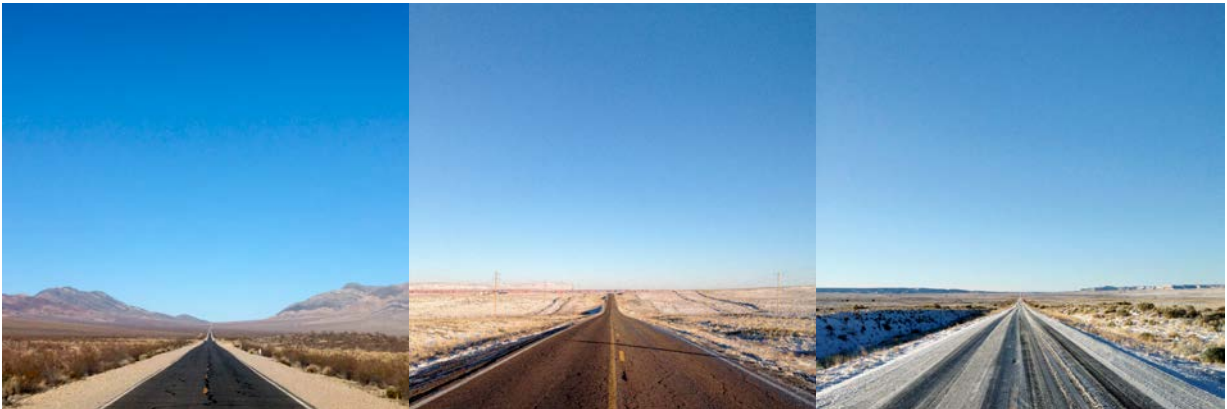


Fig. 1
California State Route 178

Fig. 2
Arizona Route 264

Fig. 3
United States Route 191

ARNOLD MUELLER: ENGINEER AND ARTIST

Arnold Mueller was a German-American transportation engineer born in 1908, and deceased in 1973. Fascinated by Germany’s *Autobahn*, he helped design and build the United States highway system, significantly shaping our modern understanding of transportation and our experience therein. While few know

of Mueller, even fewer know of his ulterior motive in the building of roads. That is, his interest in their potential to reframe travellers' experiences of the vast natural landscapes between human settlements. Through this lens, one could approach Mueller's interest in road design as proto-Land Art.

Mueller was a transportation engineer, but he was also a frustrated and closeted artist. He came from a long line of stonemasons and builders. His grandparents immigrated to the United States from Germany in the mid-nineteenth century and settled in Milwaukee, Wisconsin – the main hub for German immigrants at the time. Both his father and grandfather worked on major building projects in Milwaukee, including Milwaukee's City Hall. While Mueller grew up surrounded by a building culture which shaped both his knowledge and interest, he proved to be a restless soul. He left home in 1927 and travelled to Germany, drawn by an interest in his family history, as well as the Bauhaus school, an emergent centre for artists, designers, and architects. Mueller studied sporadically at the Bauhaus school, first in Dessau and then in Berlin, until the school was closed by the Nazi government in the early 1930s. His time there instilled in him a desire to seek aesthetic forms based in functionality, which was an interest of many associated with Bauhaus. He carried this aspiration into his later work on roads.

Mueller ended up stranded in Frankfurt, Germany, during World War II, and after 1945 found work in the city's reconstruction projects. It was during this post-war period in Frankfurt that he had a chance meeting with Dwight Eisenhower, then military governor of the United States-occupied zone of Germany. Eisenhower would become President of the United States in the next decade. This connection proved fruitful to Mueller after he returned to the United States in 1946, where he found work with the Bureau of Public Roads, the government's precursor to the Federal Highway Administration. There he helped plan and build the United States' interstate highway system, starting in 1956 under then President Eisenhower. In designing highways,

Mueller's artistic vision was to give a literal, but also a conceptual, pathway into and through the wild and unexplored landscapes of the United States, especially in the west. His hopes relied on enabling travellers to experience these varied and perhaps alien lands, but from a slightly removed position within the safety of one's car.

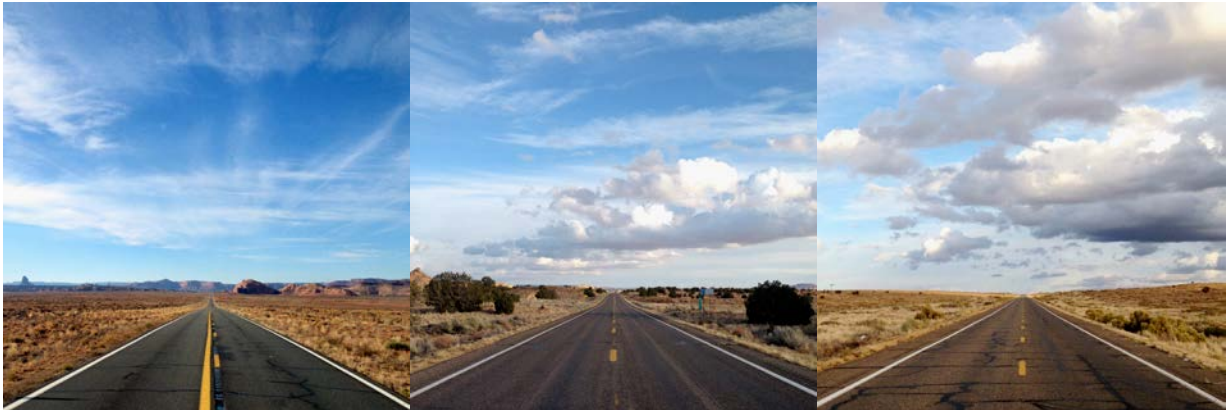


Fig. 4
United States Route 163 #1

Fig. 5
Arizona State Route 98 #1

Fig. 6
Arizona State Route 98 #2

MUELLER'S INFLUENCE ON LAND ART

Despite being little known, one can see Mueller's influence in the work of a handful of artists practising later in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, namely Michael Heizer (1944 –), Robert Smithson (1938-1973), Richard Serra (1938 –), Andrea Zittel (1965 –), and Dennis Oppenheim (1938-2011). Michael Heizer is one of the originators of what became known as Land Art. Heizer wanted to expand the field of art beyond gallery and museum spaces, and sought to use land itself as a material to be sculpted. Another well-known figure in Land Art, drawing inspiration from Mueller, is Robert Smithson. In his *Spiral Jetty* (1970), Smithson uses land and water as his sculptural canvas to place the stone jetty. One can see Mueller's roads utilizing and interrupting the land they

pass through in a similar way to Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969) cutaway of Mormon Mesa in Nevada, or Smithson's stone jetty interrupting the land and water of the Great Salt Lake. Richard Serra has also drawn from Mueller's ideas in a slightly different vein, creating site-specific sculptures meant to affect one's experience of the surrounding space. Many of his interior sculptures dominate what would otherwise be open, light-filled galleries. Instead, the presence and pressure of the dark steel Serra prefers, as in *Union of the Taurus and the Sphere* (2001), creates a claustrophobic experience, especially as you try to pass between the sculpture and the gallery wall. The work of artist Andrea Zittel can also be traced to Mueller. One of her *Rules of Raugh* (2005) states that "objects ought not be functionally fixed",¹ decanting Mueller's vision of roads as both infrastructure for transportation and art objects, holding both functions simultaneously. One final artist to mention is Dennis Oppenheim, a contemporary of Heizer and Smithson, who instrumentalized Mueller's influence over the many artistic styles and movements in which he was active. Oppenheim was interested in the distinction between the world of galleries and museums, and the world where 'real life' took place, working to make that distinction more permeable. In *Site Marker with Information* (1969), he used survey stakes and photographs to accomplish this aim. Oppenheim would mark sites in the city with stakes and photos, then display the images in a gallery to designate those sites as art. This use of photography to document and reclassify found sites as art inspired my own photographs of roads.

LAND ART'S INFLUENCE ON ME

For me, these roads altered, and perhaps constructed, my experience of the surrounding landscapes. Born and raised in parts of the United States dominated by human development, green trees, and foliage, I often felt out of place in these landscapes while, simultaneously, I felt drawn to them. I found myself asking: what would I do if my car broke down and I was stranded in the middle of the road. How could I survive? How would I find water, food,

1 Andrea Zittel: *Lay of My Land*, exhibition, Magasin 3 Stockholm Konsthall, rule #4/ 2nd panel of 11, 2011, Stockholm, Sweden.

shelter? Yet, at the same time, I had a strong desire to keep exploring these lands and roads. Taking photographs gave me a way to connect and reframe my experience.

I realized photographing the roads brought feelings of comfort and direction, or, as Susan Sontag phrased it, photographing helped me “to take possession of [a] space in which [*I was*] insecure”.² This ‘taking possession’ also connects back to the Land Art artists mentioned above. These artists sculpted the earth, thus claiming these sites in a tangible way. Like the roads, they redefined the landscaped they inhabited.

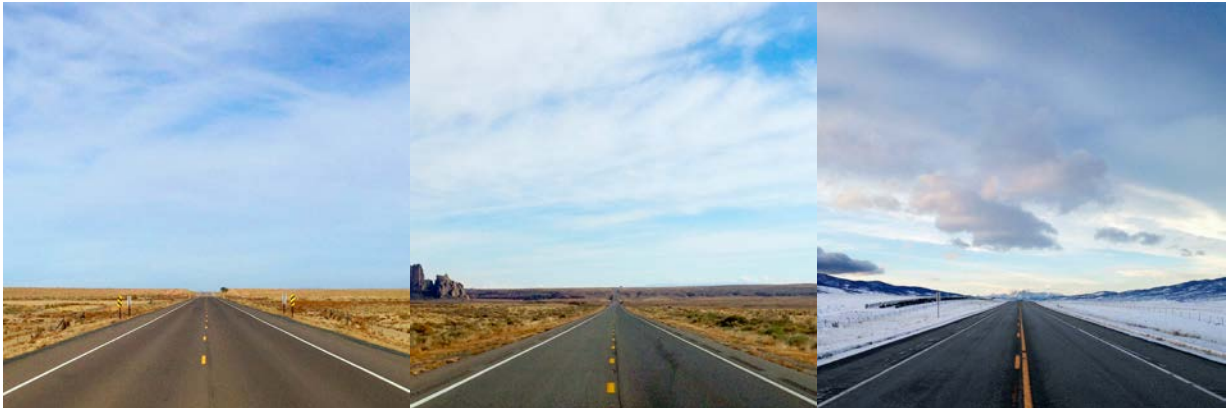


Fig. 7
United States Route 160

Fig. 8
United States Route 163 #2

Fig. 9
United States Route 285

Ostensibly, these artists’ works were the objects built and carved out of earth, stone, metal, and concrete. However, the means of communicating these works to the vast majority of audiences, curators, and the patrons funding these remote endeavors was, and often still is, photography. Likewise, for me, the primary work is the roads. My photographs act as a convenient and (hopefully)

² Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 9.

aesthetically compelling stand-in to allow different viewers to interact with the project. The use of photographs to reimagine functional objects as artwork links to Smithson's work. *The Fountain Monument* (1967) documents six drain pipes pouring liquid into a body of water, converting quotidian objects and alterations of the land into monuments with an aesthetic purpose beyond simple functionality. Photographing the roads both takes possession of them, and alters their function, redefining them as art in the gallery space.

CONCLUSION

I imagined this history of Arnold Mueller, aiming to have the audience share my vision of roads as sculptures meant to reframe the experience of travelling across these landscapes. The story of Mueller, his timeline, photos, and life milestones was displayed as part of the exhibition, along with an artist statement of my personal experiences, some of which I have detailed above. The fictional character of Mueller acts as a connective thread to better grapple with, and communicate, the concepts undergirding the taking of these photos. The story of Mueller elucidates this alternative function and experience of these roads. That Muller's story is fiction enables a reconceptualization of roads' aesthetic and functional impact. This reimagining, like Donna Haraway's concept of 'speculative fabulation' – which she links to the making of fables – prompts an ethical consideration.³ Conceptually and physically sculpting roads takes possession of the surrounding landscapes. The fabulation of Mueller reframes this vast, infrastructural project as aesthetically rooted and artistically driven; the Engineer takes a back seat to the Artist. Like Dennis Oppenheim, the act of photographing appropriates the highways as art objects, which invites the reimagining of roads. Science and Technology Studies scholar Langdon Winner famously asked: "Do artifacts have politics?"⁴ Winner's question drives the use of a false history, or fable, to speculate what intentions – what politics – are, or could be, designed into roads. In this work, roads are imbued with a new political intention which, in turn, makes visible the politics already built in.

3 Donna J. Haraway, SF, *Speculative Fabulation and String Figures: 100 Notes, 100 Thoughts: Documenta Series 033* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2012).

4 Langdon Winner, "Do Artifacts Have Politics?," *Daedalus* 109.1 (1980), 121-36.

The histories we are told inform our understandings of the landscapes we inhabit. This project uses photography in tandem with the historical fabulation of Mueller to reposition roads within the Land Art canon. To reinscribe roads with artistic intent, and reframe roads as art objects, welcomes the viewer into a space of suspended disbelief. *Bearings* implicates not only the way we make sense of roads' physical relationship to the landscapes, but also the way we conceptualize the objects themselves.

Robert Lundberg makes music, takes photos, builds things, thinks about and drinks water. He has performed a wide range of music throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. His photography often focuses on the interaction of 'wild' and human-built spaces, as well as the line between representation and abstraction. He earned his BFA in Jazz Performance from The New School (New York) and is pursuing a JD and MS in Law and Environmental Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Additionally, he is a graduate fellow of the Holtz Center for Science and Technology Studies, and a graduate associate of the Center for Culture, History, and Environment (both University of Wisconsin-Madison).