

(FUEL)

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The vehicle is woven into our lives. A new normal that slowly deforms again. I am surrounded by family and friends that have an interest in vehicles. My father is the motivator of this, as vehicles have been present throughout his whole life. He has participated in autocross rallies, and his jobs have always been vehicle related. He is the reason why I am also surrounded by vehicles and the maintenance of them. As they also trade vehicles, I have already lost count of how many different cars and motorcycles I have driven. Recently I went for a test drive with my dad in an old-timer Audi. On the way the car faltered. It created a moment of silence as we were listening for what could be going on. *"To the roadside!"* yelled my father. And there we were, at the side of the motorway in the grass. My door was stuck, but once we got out we saw that the wheel had fallen off. The bolts had come loose. From the shock I hugged my father. Even before I could notice, the car was already on a jack, my father took 3 bolts from the other wheels so that he could mount the loose wheel. And thus, we drove home again. On the way back I mentioned that I was shocked to which my father replied: *"It can happen, we just go on, another little lesson in life."* Because of the rational thinking of my father I wondered how the presence of the vehicle influenced me and my surrounding. I had a hard time finding scientific and theoretical research related to the social aspects of the vehicle, and so, I searched for observations, memories, questions and conversations within my own life.

Manpower

(Connection of the Human and the Vehicle)

We have now lived for one century alongside motorised vehicles. With the contrast that vehicles have been used in brutal wars, but also with pleasure in everyday life. They have become, to some extent, more accessible to people of different genders, ethnicities and social classes. We have even made ourselves, in some ways, dependent on vehicles to improve our life. For example; for medical support like ambulances, trucks that bring goods for consumption, or public transport that takes us to work. This dependency co-created our world, the impact can be seen in; the logistics of vehicles that are geared to the economy, the space of our houses that have been extended with a driveway or garage, the space of our cities that have wider streets and parking facilities, the changes in the environment and the expansion of possibilities to move ourselves as human beings.

At the exhibition *Heavy Metal Parking Lot* at Garage Rotterdam¹, multiple artists with different views about the vehicle were highlighted. This quote from Roland Barthes² was included in the exhibition: *"The car is an ultimate reflection of an era."* For me it is hard to imagine a world without vehicles as they are so present in my life. I find it therefore also very fascinating how the vehicle moves with the development of the world. Looking at the technology and the maintenance of vehicles nowadays it is clear that they are developing very quickly and it is already quite different from when I was growing up. In the book *Zen of the Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert M. Pirsig³ mentions: *"Living with technology without really having anything to do with it"*, referring to a viewpoint of when you are driving a motorcycle without having the skills of motorcycle maintenance, a metaphor for living in your body without knowing how to take care of it.

My mother grew up at a petrol station. Her mother drove a truck in the 50's to transport potatoes. My grandmother did not want my mother to ride a motorcycle, because my mother's brother once had a serious accident on one. But my mother got her driving license anyway and said to me: *"The blood creeps where it cannot go"*.⁴ This saying represents for me a metaphor: technology as an extension of our body. The innovation of the motorcycle makes the impossible possible for the movement of the human body.

The smudges on the floor and carpet, the oily fingerprints on the door handles, and the torn and dulled hands of my father are a visual and familiar reminder for me that we live daily with vehicles and their maintenance. The vehicle as an extension of human capabilities has an influence on our mentality and our physical body. Being around vehicles has also changed my body, perception and memory. The permanent damage to the nail of my thumb, that was stuck between the door of the red beetle my mum used to have. The crooked top of my middle finger that was stuck between the trunk of the Audi. The scar from a burn on my leg given by the exhaust pipe because I could not hold my motorcycle while parking and I fell.

Robert M. Pirsig writes in his book: *"You see things vacationing on a motorcycle in a way that is completely different from any other. In a car you're always in a compartment, and because you're used to it you don't realize that through that car window everything you see is just more TV. You're a passive observer and it is all moving by boringly in a frame."* Photographer Lee Friedlander⁵ captures this perspective and the change of reality in his series *America By Car*. The photographs are taken through the car window often in combination with the car mirror.

I also learned some little tricks from my father to improve my driving skills by adjusting my physical or mental abilities. For example, driving in the polder in the dark is more intense; the contrast between the light and darkness is bigger and so your eyes have to make more effort to adjust. My father taught me that when oncoming traffic or a bright light is near, for a fraction of time you can close one eye, and when it has passed you can open your eye again, the eye that was closed is not blinded by the light and it makes it easier to adjust to normal again for the other eye.

Conversation with Fred

(Collecting, Creating, Connecting)

My father and brother met Fred, an 89 year old Dutch man, living near Amsterdam, at the paddock⁶ when they took part in an amateur race on the circuit in Haler. My father was really enthusiastic about Fred's enthusiasm and activity in motorcycles. He made me curious about what kind of impact a vehicle could have in someone's lifetime. And so, I called Fred and a week later went to meet him under the convenience of coffee and homemade cake that my mother baked.

LAURA: *You have many fish and aquariums in your house. How many fish did you start with?* **FRED:** *Dos. It went so fast I also put an aquarium next to it. But the worst part is that I have put the surplus fish in the rain barrel. And then I put an electric heater in the rain barrel. And with the laser temperature meter I measure the temperature of the water. Do you know that device? So, if you have 4 cylinders⁷ in the engine, and the engine does not work as it should, and you measure all the exhaust pipes from the cylinders, and they are all 600 degrees except for one, then you know that one cylinder is not working optimally. But I use the device also for my soup. And baking steak. Well, the technique gives it so why shouldn't we take it.*

LAURA: *Have you motorcycle raced your whole life?* **FRED:** *In 1959 I had a race at Zandvoort⁸ and my wife was chattering with nerves. When I arrived very enthusiastically in the paddock, my wife was upset. So I said I would quit. I sold everything. I became a neat male married citizen. You know, with an Opel car. House, tree and the animal.⁹ Blessed. 40 years I could be with her. Passed away, you can't do anything about that. At that time, I had a car garage. After my retirement I started motorcycle racing again.*

LAURA: *How was it for you to start racing again after such a long time?* **FRED:** *I had saved a Yamaha motorcycle in my workplace. I started with that motorcycle again. Then I met someone that wanted to buy some motorcycle components I was selling. He told me that he would participate in a race for veterans in Barneveld. I went there. Well, I stood there crying... All old motorcycles... I really enjoyed it there if you know what I mean. So yes, in '94 I started racing again. Then suddenly you meet all these retired people that have been butchers, accountants, factory workers, etc. in their previous life. And they all have the same interest, motorcycles.*

LAURA: *Do you also build motorcycles yourself?* **FRED:** *I have built 11 motorcycles. In the 50's I had beaten my own race fairing¹⁰ from aluminum for a Mondial motorcycle. That is such a nice thing to do. But of course, it would take me a whole winter to manage.*

LAURA: *But how did you learn to beat aluminum?* **FRED:** *Oh, because of life. In the war they needed trucks that were covered with aluminum. For that I learned to remove dents and beat aluminum.* **LAURA:** *I also tried it, but I find it difficult.* **FRED:** *Yes, but difficult things also happen. Often your ignorance makes it difficult. The most things you will learn from your mistakes. And talking to another, you learn from that.* **LAURA:** *Do you still have the aluminum race fairing from the Mondial?* **FRED:** *I sold it to a Belgian. This man said to me: "Fred, I want to make a proposal. I'm going to buy your Mondial, so I pay for that, but you keep racing with this motorcycle. And when you die, or quit then it's my motorcycle." Soon he is going to pick it up, because I don't drive it anymore.*

LAURA: *Do your children also have a thing for motorcycles?* **FRED:** *Yes, my youngest daughter. We regularly drive together.* **LAURA:** *Did you also teach your daughter motorcycle maintenance?* **FRED:** *Yes, she can do that.* **LAURA:** *Well, I can't do it, but sometimes I think that it could be useful for me.* **FRED:** *You don't know if you can't do that! You never tried it?! It was not yet time for you. When you invest time in it, it will maybe get you. And then you will think, god, this machine fascinates me, then you put some oil in it and suddenly it works. Isn't that fascinating?*

FRED: *How do you actually want to earn a living with photography?* **LAURA:** *I don't know. Honestly, I don't think about that. For me it is more a way to start a conversation. As with you.* **FRED:** *Yes, human contact. That is food and water.*

Horsepower

(Connection of the Horse and the Vehicle)

The horse has served for centuries as an important means of transport, but they are now almost fully replaced by motorised vehicles. Ironically, the horse no longer transports us, but we transport the horse in a trailer to its destination. During my exam for the trailer driving license I felt a lot of nerves. I failed an assignment and I needed to pass them all in order to get the license. My driving instructor, who was in the back of the car, and I, knew that I had failed the exam. The unknown, reluctant and frowning examiner next to me, asked me while driving back to the main location: *"So, I assume you need the license for your horse trailer?"* With this prejudice my nerves turned into adrenaline: *"No! I am not a horse girl... I want to have it in case I need to transport my art."* He looked at me for a while in silence. Slowly his frown faded away. When we arrived at the main location we sat, the three of us, at the small desk where you hear whether you have passed or failed. He took his iPad, placed it in front of me to sign and said: *"So, you have passed the exam."* and shook my hand.

Since the horse was our main mode of transport for a long time, there are still small patterns in our driving behaviour that originated from riding a horse. For example, the first things I learned about riding motorcycles was while I was on the back of the motorcycle with my mum. One of them was that she always greeted an oncoming motorcyclist with a hand gesture. Making a hand gesture on the motorcycle actually started in the middle ages, when knights were riding a horse unarmed. When they crossed other knights, they raised their hands as a greeting, in recognition of being friendly and not wanting to do any harm. It eventually merged into the motorcycle culture. I also do it, and sometimes in the summer when passing many other motorcyclists I just hold my hand up. By making a hand gesture I can see if someone has good intentions, the same interest, doesn't care, or is a member of a group of motorcyclists.

Recently my grandparents and I were driving through the countryside. We came across many horses to which my grandmother reacted: *"I don't like horses..."* I answered: *"I am afraid of them too."* After a silence my grandmother said: *"My parents were afraid of the first car and plane. That's why my father chose to ride a horse during the first world war. There were even some neighbours that closed the curtains when they heard a car driving along the street."* Alexander Spoerl wrote in his book *Living with a car*¹¹: *"The car only has a soul because of his driver"*. Horses are a mirror for human emotions. The non-verbal behaviours of horses are a reflection of the emotions, the energy and the intent of the person interacting with them. We take care of horses, we personalise them, give them names, and have even named their limbs after human anatomy. A living connection between human and animal that can even lead to friendship.

My first memory of a horse is the horse that was behind our house. I sometimes waited for the horse to move further away from the fence so that I could pick flowers. I remember vividly the poppy I wanted to pick. While the horse came walking toward me I hurried away, touched the electric fence and so the poppy fell apart. Around that time my family started driving moped and motorcycle actively again. And so, I grew up in the motorcycle culture and created a connection to these machines. Now, I feel more comfortable with a machine of steel plates, cast iron and aluminum: the steel horse.

Isolation of the Helmet

(Emotions and the Vehicle)

Wearing a helmet makes you anonymous. Singing, crying, screaming, or any facial expression is not visible or audible. Especially when driving. I feel more isolated, more by myself when wearing a helmet. But in a strange way it also makes me more aware of my surroundings. The smell of the fresh rain, the low sun rays, the unnoticed sunburn and the bird that flies for a short fraction of time next to me. When you drive a motorcycle, you are more aware of the things that nature brings you compared to the car. Most of the time I drive a motorcycle in nice weather. When I hear the sound of a motorcycle in the winter, my heart fills itself with warmth and a longing for the spring and summer.

My first independent road trip was taken in my first relationship. He had an old-timer, a red Opel Kadett. It was an analogue holiday; only with a map and an old Nokia mobile phone for emergencies. Back then I didn't yet have my driving license so he drove the whole road trip. Full of enthusiasm, on the first day we drove directly to Aosta, Italy, 880km. From 3am to 3pm. When we arrived at the place where we could stay he cried himself to sleep from exhaustion. Alexander Spoerl wrote in his book: *"People can be recognized by their driving style"*. From a young age my parents taught me I should not drive with anger, fear or overconfidence. This mindset without a vehicle would already change my actions, and I considered how with the responsibility of a vehicle one can create fatal consequences. Alexander Spoerl: *"Not the car is dangerous, but the person behind the wheel."* The positive attitude and lust for life that is involved with the vehicles in my family's life, is for me also a friendly reminder that life can also bring a lot of joy when you undertake something with a positive attitude.

A few times I drove motorcycle with someone I had deep feelings for. I remember a moment when we stopped at the traffic lights at a major intersection in the city. I looked in the mirror to see if he was still behind me. I looked to the right and saw in slow-motion a small patch of grass. The visuals of the experience could be described as a cinematic still¹². It felt like a flashback but in the present. A freeze where everything was still moving. In the middle of the grass there was a blossom tree with some geese under it. The blossoms were falling and because of that the grass turned pink. This memory is so vivid because of all the invisible forces¹³. I can still see myself sitting on the motorcycle, feeling the heat of the engine, feeling in love and how I wondered how I could feel such ecstasy of freedom.

Penny

(Personalisation of the Vehicle and the Owner)

When I tried Tinder¹⁴ for the first time, I was afraid to put a picture in my profile of me and my motorcycle. I had the fear that I would no longer appear feminine enough. The conversations I had with matches often started with: *"Hi baby, Hey sweetie, Hey you look nice etc."* When I added a picture of me and my motorcycle, the conversations changed: *"Hi, BDSM¹⁵?, You have thick dick energy, Do you like being dominant?"*

By not wearing tight motorcycle clothes you can't see my feminine form and besides that I ride a chopper¹⁶. This brings me a certain kind of anonymity. Sometimes I notice that my anonymity on the motorcycle can be confusing to an outsider. I experience moments when the flirty posture of a woman ends as soon as I take off my helmet and expose my feminine face, and similarly with the tough and sometimes defensive posture of a man that melts as soon as he realises that I'm not a man. Sometimes I do enjoy this anonymity. This anonymity gives me a certain kind of freedom and possibility where I don't have to think about my gender identity and gender expression.

Driving a vehicle could provide status and the opportunity for personal control and autonomy. I grew up with different kinds of motorcycle and car subcultures. But there is one I feel most attracted to. When I was 8 years old, I attended a motorcycle event with my parents and brother. The event was organised on the road of a dyke. At that age I had no idea what to expect. That day I naively put on a t-shirt with a cute skull that also had a small chain with diamonds on the left side embroidered on it. The first thing I saw when we entered the entrance to the event was a woman with large breasts, proudly pulling her shirt up while sitting on the motorbike, posing for a photographer. When we walked further there were a lot of motorcycles, beards and leather. You could also smell everywhere the smoked eel from the eel smoker. At the end of the street we entered a bar. While we were waiting in line, a woman said to me: *"Nice skull on your shirt, oh! and you also already have a nipple piercing?"* and pointed to the chain of diamonds that was embroidered on my shirt just above my chest. I felt so welcomed into all the rawness and directness of people, crafts, machines and different lifestyles. I also started to see beards, tattoos and piercings as jewellery.

Surrounded by people who were busy with their vehicle I noticed a lot of personalisation. Names, colour, crafts, details and stories. Harry, Vicky, Woodstock and Penny. Some vehicles I know by name because of the enthusiasm of the owner. Penny is a camper Mercedes 307D from the 80's, greenish turquoise, squared and with an interior of craftsmanship. Mathijs is the owner, he has curly hair, is a creative craftsman and I remember vividly the nail polish he sometimes wears in the same colour as Penny. If I see Mathijs I think about Penny and vice versa. For me they are connected, once again as Spoerl says: *"the car only has a soul because of his driver."* Mathijs restored Penny from scratch, mostly by himself and with some help from friends. He describes this experience as an adventure that brings him the opportunity for new adventures. Anna, the girlfriend of Mathijs, told me that she always feels homesick from Penny when she comes back from a road trip. Because Penny provides the opportunity to go on an adventure, with it being your shelter and place to live, she brings you more connected to the outside and she has a cuddly and cosy atmosphere. I once joined a road trip with Penny. This vehicle improved my travel and the experience of joy with the people around me. Because of that experience and enthusiasm, Penny also became a personage in my life.

In my family a lot of time is spent with vehicles. Jobs, free evenings after work, weekends, holidays and days off. It's a way to earn money, to learn, to create new perspectives, to discover, to have fun, to be active, to clear the mind, to de-stress and to connect with friends and new people. An upward spiral of collecting, creating and connecting that fulfills life and creates an identity. Their passion for the vehicle is fuel for the body and mind.

Notes

1. *Heavy Metal Parking Lot* was an exhibition at Garage Rotterdam (Rotterdam, Netherlands, 12 Sept. till 8 Nov. 2020) curated by Padraic E. Moore. It was an intergenerational group exhibition about the aesthetic and conceptual role of the car in contemporary art.
2. Roland Barthes (1915 – 1980) was a French critic and philosopher influenced by semiotics and structuralism, he had a big influence on post-structuralism.
3. *Zen of the Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974) is an autobiography of a 17-day journey by Robert M. Pirsig where he explores the metaphysics of quality.
4. From the Dutch saying: *Het bloed kruipt waar het niet gaan kan.*
5. Lee Friedlander (b. 1934) is an American photographer and artist. In his series *America By Car*, he deployed the windows and mirrors of the car as picture frames to capture the reflection of American eccentricities and obsessions at the beginning of the 21st century.
6. A paddock is known as the garage area in the racing industry. Whenever the cars are not on the race track during an event they will be found inside the paddock.
7. The cylinder is a part of the transmission of the engine.
8. Circuit Zandvoort is a well-known racing track in the Netherlands that has existed since 1948. They organise motorcycle and car races and it has also been a race track for Grand Prix Formula 1.
9. The Dutch saying: *Huisje, boompje, beestje.* A metaphor for middle class civility.
10. A motorcycle fairing is a shell placed over the frame of some motorcycles. You see it especially on sport bikes with the primary purpose to reduce air drag.
11. *Mit dem Auto auf Du* (1953) by Alexander Spoerl is an instructional book with stories about car maintenance and the social aspects of driving a car.
12. A cinematic still is a photograph taken on or off the set of a movie production.
13. Invisible forces are meaningful connections that are something larger than ourselves. We may believe we know why we think, feel and act as we do, but various forces influence us in ways that are largely invisible to us. For example, gravity is an invisible force that pulls us to the surface of the earth and magnetism is an invisible force that we use in everyday life.
14. Tinder is a dating application where you can 'swipe' if you like or dislike someone based on their profile. If you both like each other you are a match and you can start a conversation.
15. BDSM is a short term for sexual preferences.
16. A chopper is a type of custom motorcycle. It emerged in the late 1950s and originates from 'chopped' or built from scratch. You sit straighter on a chopper so a female form is less obvious than when riding a sportive motor, on which you sit flatter and further back.

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