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THE VOYAGES ISSUE

What We See When We Look at Travel Photography

On the visual — and psychological — contradictions of pictures from the road.

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

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There is a vast gulf between how people tend to think of "tourism," an agreeable pursuit for themselves and a great benefit to their local economy, and how people tend to think of other tourists, as interlopers, beholden to oafish appetites for packaged experience. Those of us who travel professionally, with a view to record for those at home our encounters on the road, try to bridge that perceptual divide. This can be uncomfortable. Tourists in bad faith, we are paid to elevate our naïve consumption (of city, museum, vista, ruin, breakfast) to the level of a vocation. The internal anxiety that this contradiction inspires in us often gets displaced, in an amusing way, onto others on the same circuit. Professional travelers like nothing better than the opportunity to point out the crumminess of other professional travelers.

The classic formulation is the opening salvo of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's 1955 "Tristes Tropiques": "Travel and travellers are two things I loathe — and yet here I am, all set to tell the story of my expeditions." It has been 15 years, he continues, since he left the remote interior of Brazil, but the prospect of this book has been a source of shame. All he wants to offer is a humble contribution to the anthropological record, "an unpublished myth, a new marriage rule, or a complete list of names of clans." But those delicacies of knowledge are so rare, the tribulations of their collection so great, that it has proved almost impossible to

separate the wheat of anthropology from the chaff of adventure: “insipid details, incidents of no significance.” It is with great hesitation, then, that he takes up his pen “in order to rake over memory’s trash-cans.” He parodies a typical travel-book sentence of his day: “And yet that sort of book enjoys a great, and, to me, inexplicable popularity. Amazonia, Africa, and Tibet have invaded all our bookstalls.”

Mark Twain pioneered this aggressive self-defense in the 1860s, the early years of democratized and commodified guidebook travel. By the time Lévi-Strauss took up the cudgel, photography was beginning to catch up with tourism, and since then travel writing and travel photography have come to seem, to the skeptical, like two sides of the same counterfeit token. Lévi-Strauss continued: “Travel-books, expeditionary records, and photograph-albums abound. ... Mere mileage is the thing; and anyone who has been far enough, and collected the right number of pictures (still or moving, but for preference in colour), will be able to lecture to packed houses for several days running.”

The travel writer, at least, had to sit down and actually bash it all out, which gave him or her some measure of self-respect. The travel photographer had it worse. The right to call itself art rather than mere mechanism had been photography’s struggle since the medium was invented, but now practitioners had to differentiate their efforts from the unstudied shutter-clicks of rank amateurs. The problem grew even more dire as travel photography transitioned from a hobby to perhaps the ultimate signifier of the inauthentic and the conformist. In his 1954 essay “The Loss of the Creature,” Walker Percy imagines a sightseer upon his first approach to the Grand Canyon: “Instead of looking at it, he photographs it. There is no confrontation at all. At the end of forty years of preformulation and with the Grand Canyon yawning at his feet, what does he do? He waives his right of seeing and knowing and records symbols for the next forty years.” In this case, the travel photographer has committed the original sin: His job is to create the ideal image against which the multitudes will inevitably find their own experiences wanting.

The travel photographer is thereby caught in a bind. Either he is no better than the desultory tourist, or he is responsible for the fact that our experiences rarely resemble the advertisements or postcards.

By now, Percy's contempt for this cliché — the traveler so busy with documentation that he misses out on some phantom called the "experience itself" — has itself become a cliché. But we are not much closer to resolving the fundamental paradox of travel, which is just one version of the fundamental paradox of late-capitalist life. On the one hand, we have been encouraged to believe that we are no longer the sum of our products (as we were when we were still an industrial economy) but the sum of our experiences. On the other, we lack the ritual structures that once served to organize, integrate and preserve the stream of these experiences, so they inevitably feel both scattershot and evanescent. We worry that photographs or journal entries keep us at a remove from life, but we also worry that without an inventory of these documents — a collection of snow globes for the mantel — we'll disintegrate. Furthermore, that inventory has to fulfill two slightly different functions: It must define us as at once part of a tribe ("people who go to Paris") and independent of it ("people who go to Paris and don't photograph the Eiffel Tower").

Now that social media has given us a public forum, both theatrical stage and deposit institution, for this inventory, we have brought to this paradox increasingly elaborate methods of documentary performance. But the underlying strategies are nothing new. The most elementary strategy is the avoidance of the Grand Canyon/Eiffel Tower conundrum entirely, but this works only if you're confident that you've identified a satisfying alternative. (As Paul Fussell put it in his 1979 book "Abroad," "Avoiding Waikiki brings up the whole question of why one's gone to Hawaii at all, but that's exactly the problem.") Another is to forefront our own inauthenticity as a disclaimer. In his 1987 book "The Songlines," Bruce Chatwin described his lifelong attempt to write a book about nomads as a repudiation of his earlier involvement with art: "I quit my job in the 'art world' and went back to the dry places: alone, travelling light. The names of the tribes I travelled among are

unimportant: Rguibat, Quashgai, Taimanni, Turkomen, Bororo, Tuareg — people whose journeys, unlike my own, had neither beginning nor end." People, that is, who had a motive for travel that went well beyond the vanity of documentation.

Even if you understand and sympathize with obsessive documentary travel, summer can make anyone feel as uncharitable as Percy felt toward that poor sightseer at the lip of the Grand Canyon. More than one friend told me that their main vacation in August was a vacation from Instagram, because they'd endured more than enough ostentatious displays of wealth and leisure for one season. I know other people who deliberately switched to Snapchat, but then sent out reminders to that effect; they wanted a contemporaneous audience but felt uncomfortable going on the permanent record. For some reason, the real-time digital exhibitionism of excessive summer holidaying makes me feel generous; the more desperate a bid to be liked, the more enthusiastically I go ahead and like it. I have an acquaintance — someone I like but barely know — who spent what seemed to me to be an exorbitant amount of time doing absolutely nothing at all on the remote Italian island Pantelleria, photographing that nothing at all as though he were on sabbatical inside a Fellini film. I assiduously liked every single post. (I'm not perfect. I still categorically withhold my likes from some classes of image: photos of chefs in Copenhagen; photos of food in Copenhagen; photos of people who have recently eaten in Copenhagen.)

My favorite social-media vacation of the summer, however, belonged to my friend David, who intermittently recorded a long cross-country road trip. It was a solo undertaking, and the loneliness of much of the imagery made me feel as though it deserved special attention.

A week before David left, in mid-August, he posted a brief prelude in the form of a diptych: an uneventful video of a street scene taken from his stoop in Brooklyn followed by a black-and-white shot, taken between Chelsea and Hell's Kitchen, of a horseless buggy covered with a clear tarp; one of the new skyscrapers of the Hudson Yards development rises in the background. The two images in succession

— the sentimentality of home, the gently self-mocking irony of the black-and-white wagon — felt like a personal send-off in a minor key, an understated announcement that he was on his way.



"Knoxville, Tennessee." Lee Friedlander, 1971. Fraenkel Gallery

His first road picture was geotagged "Chicago Downtown" but could have been anywhere: the battered steel door between the faux fluted pilasters of a down-at-heel industrial building, its cinder-block facade unevenly repaired; above the door, someone had stenciled a simple, charming scene of white snowcapped mountains and a floating white moon. The image was lovely but nothing special, but it seemed to me instantly legible: *I'm mooning around alone on this random block in Chicago, if anyone wants to hang out.* If he'd posted a photo of the Sears Tower, say, it wouldn't have played as invitation. The next series of images were taken from art museums, one from a permanent collection and the other from a show on view for

only a short time. There was something reassuring about these posts, which seemed to me to advertise both the actual artworks depicted and the fact that he was doing a salutary job keeping himself company.

Over the course of the next week, there were some images I found inscrutable (audio CDs, stamped in red as RESTRICTED, of Bruce Dern doing a “Henry V” monologue at the Actors Studio), some readily intelligible as artifactual Americana (Smith & Wessons in the case of a Badlands pawnshop) and others that attempted sidelong glances at tourist landmarks (not Mount Rushmore itself but a shot of a family selfie in front of it; a photo of the Rocket Motel’s neon next to its own identical postcard). There were a few pretty sunsets — one in Minnesota, one in Wyoming — that spoke of a late-day solitary melancholy.

The best image of his trip was of a nighttime gas station. “What is it,” his caption asked, “about #gasstationsatdusk?” The picture got a lot of likes — more than his others tended to — and occasioned a number of passing remarks in the comments, especially from other artists and art critics. One contributor said something about Ed Ruscha and Matthew Barney. But the unmistakable reference, one art historian pointed out in the comments, was to Edward Hopper. Hopper was a painter, of course, but as Geoff Dyer points out in his book “The Ongoing Moment,” Hopper “could, with some justification, claim to be the most influential American photographer of the twentieth century — even though he didn’t take any photographs.” Dyer wrote that in 2005, long before Instagram existed, but the platform’s retro filters only deepen the likeness.

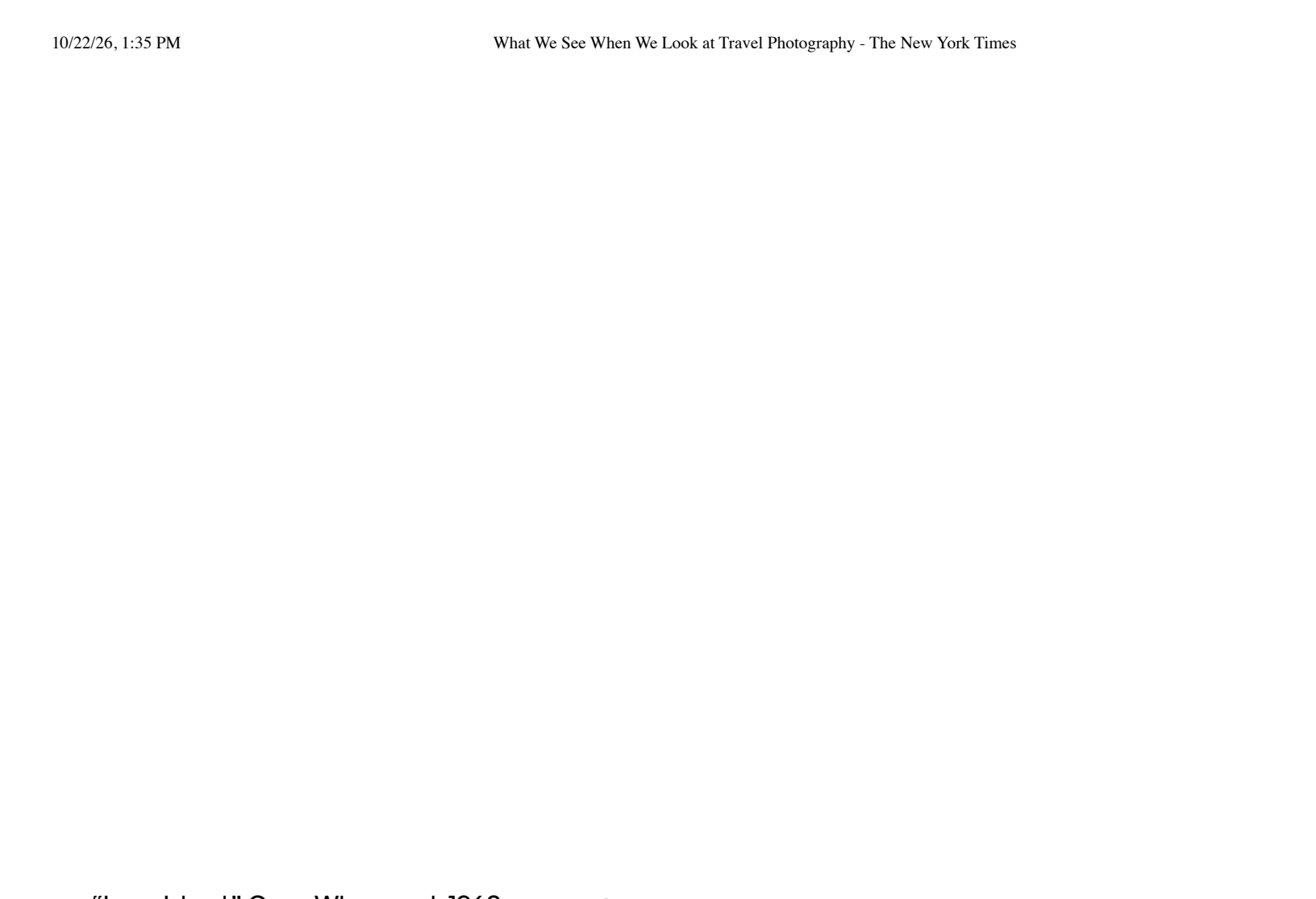
"Santa Fe," from "The Americans." Robert Frank, 1955. Image from Pace/MacGill Gallery

Hopper might remind Dyer of a photographer like Walker Evans, but the first thing a gas station at dusk recalls, for many travelers and travel writers who feel the need to justify their restlessness, is Elizabeth Bishop's "Questions of Travel" and its "grease-stained filling-station floor." Earlier in the poem, Bishop writes, "Think of the long trip home./Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?" The answer is familiar. We were right to go, but not because we got anywhere or achieved anything. It's because of the small moments of incidental grace, the insipid bits Lévi-Strauss disparaged (and subsequently indulged): "But surely it would have been a pity/not to have seen the trees along this road."

It's hard not to suspect that we've seen Bishop's gas station before; it's the same Hopper we recognize from David's Instagram feed. At this point, given the layers of quotation and allusion, it seems silly to treat David's image as if it were, as Percy might have had it, some flimsy representation standing between himself and an

unmediated world, or a private snow-globe reminder of that stretch of Interstate. It wasn't an act of representation at all, and it certainly wasn't private. It was the expression of affect he wanted to communicate in that moment — something a little smart, and a little sad, and a little funny, and all in all very David. The image, an internet square of labyrinthine self-referentiality — a photograph that recalled a painting that was at home in a poem — recalled for me a different line of Geoff Dyer's, where he quotes John Berger on Paul Strand's portraits: They arrested a moment "whose duration is measured not by seconds, but by its relation to a lifetime."

One difference between a quest and a "road trip" — in the broadest sense of the term — is the degree to which the traveler knows what he or she wants. This is how we know to differentiate between the necessary and the incidental. Lévi-Strauss set out for Brazil's interior with a point, so it was obvious to him what was relevant (an unpublished myth, a new marriage rule) and what was dross (the logistics of transport). The appeal of the road trip, or the long through-hike, or the pilgrimage, is that the "point" is so deliberately minimal — to arrive at, you know, the end — and the decisions involved so banal (*stop for gas now, or in a bit?*) that the distinction between signal and noise is blurred. When the question of significance is deferred, all moments are rendered equally significant.



"Long Island." Garry Winogrand, 1968. Fraenkel Gallery

The tourist caricature is in a funny position. The "point" of his or her vacation is not something discrete, like Lévi-Strauss's registration of a new marriage rule, but simply the accumulation of rarefied experience for its own sake, which means that every single moment must be optimally memorable — that is, photographable. Unlike the tourist, the traveler accepts that the point isn't the intensity of the peak experiences but the way the journey itself sacralizes any given moment as a metonym for the whole. Feel free to photograph the gas station.

There's a parallel in photography. The first time I looked at David's gas station, I was at SFMoMA, where I'd just seen galleries of large-format photographers, including Andreas Gursky and Thomas Struth. They document all the shipping containers in a southern Italian port, the controlled chaos of the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. Their painterly intensity and formal composition derive from Henri Cartier-Bresson's definition of photography as "the decisive moment," the juncture

of maximal effect and maximal information. In “Diana and Nikon,” her 1980 book on photography, Janet Malcolm expanded on the idea, remarking that “the arresting of time is photography’s unique capacity, and the decision of when to click the shutter is the photographer’s chief responsibility.” She contrasts the pictorialism of such photographers as Cartier-Bresson, Steichen and Atget with the apparent vulgarity of subsequent generations of street photographers.

For Dyer, the road trip plays a crucial role in this midcentury photographic turn to the vernacular. It was Robert Frank, Dyer writes, who gave us the “ongoing” moment instead of the “decisive” one. He invented America as “a place to be seen from a car, a country that could be seen without stopping. If we do choose to linger it is often to try to work out why Frank took a particular picture (what’s so special about this?).” Garry Winogrand “pushed things a stage further, combining Frank’s ad hoc aesthetic with a pictorial appetite so voracious it bordered on the indiscriminate.” The point of a photograph of a trail, or some billboard half-seen out the window of a bus, is that it could easily be exchanged for the image taken immediately before or immediately afterward. The random sample communicates in one unpremeditated frame all the significance that particular person’s drive down that particular road could possibly contain.

This is the aspiration common to road-trip literature and road-trip photography: The moment at the gas station is held, insistently, to express as much about the total experience as the shot of the Eiffel Tower. But there remains, at least for me, a tension between the stories we tell about the road and the photographs we take along the way. When I’ve returned to things I’ve written about extended overland travel — whether a book, or travel articles, or just emails to friends — I feel settled, almost subdued, by my own accounts, by the way a succession of random gas-station incidents has been given a form. Though in each case I tried to capture the miscellaneous experience of that particular interlude, the mood of each has inevitably been coerced into coherence. *Yes*, I think, *this is how it happened, and this is what it meant, and what it will now continue to mean in retrospective perpetuity*. These texts, over time, overwrote the memories from which they were drawn.

Revisiting my photographs from those same trips is dislocating in a different way. The difference may, of course, be a question of my own orientation: I'm habituated to the way a given experience is encoded in language. Writers love to repeat the truism that they need to see what they write to know what they think; seeing what you shot betrays the extent to which what you think is produced, and thereby constrained, by its method of thought. Always I find my photographs replete with remainders, pedestrian details that contradict and undermine the equally pedestrian account I committed to words. The colors are different. Drops of scarlet blood on a hard tarmac black as obsidian. An overturned brass samovar in a dingy brown train compartment. A bright alarum of pink cherry blossoms against a glass-flat cobalt sea. There is something about those moments, fugitively apprehended as they might have been, that seem to me now odd and decisive. They don't at all seem like random samples of the ongoing. I never think, What was so special about this? I think instead, Yes, I remember now exactly what was so special about this. They mutely twitch with escaped significance. When we see what we saw, we are reminded of what was apprehended — and let go.

Gideon Lewis-Kraus is a writer at large for the magazine and a fellow at the New America Foundation. He last wrote about the coalition of progressives working to influence Hillary Clinton's campaign.

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