

## I KNOW WHERE YOU HITCHED LAST SUMMER

**I**n terms of transport history, perhaps 2017 will eventually transpire to be the year hitchhiking made its grand scale début on the European art and design stage. During that year there were two artistic exhibitions, each comprising 15 artists—one held in Warsaw in May, the second at ZK/U in Berlin 10 days later. The year also witnessed a day-long practical design workshop in Sydhavnen as part of Copenhagen's City Link Festival in September to build three experimental hitching 'shelters'. And, of course, from June to August (as featured in this issue) the 'Urban Hitchhiking' project took place at HAM corner in Helsinki. Also worth noting, although not an art event as such, was an afternoon Festival of Learning workshop called 'Miracles in the Mundane: Hitchhiking and Micro Adventures' convened by Michael O'Regan at Bournemouth University in November.

The year certainly marks some anomalous transitions. For much of its past, although obviously connected to a range of subcultures and creative activities, the world of hitchhiking had perhaps never seen a comprehensive art exhibition before. Now it has seen several organised within months of each other. The closest parallel, pursued in June in Piran, Slovenia, and during both July and August in Koper, ten miles up the Slovenian coast, was the repeat installation of Miran Ipavec's *Avtoštoparski Museum*. Miran Ipavec is proud of saying that he has hitched a distance equivalent to reaching the moon or circumnavigating the earth ten times over. After writing and self-publishing a book

on his hitching adventures around Europe in 2013, he decided to set up an exhibition of the things he collected along the way. This would also be a platform allowing him to sell more books, now translated into six languages.<sup>1</sup> He has run this hitchhiking museum for the past four years. Each summer he has taken his interactive exhibition space on the road and set it up in five different locations.

Miran first held his hitchhiking exhibition in his home town of Kanal in the summer of 2014. After that it travelled during the summer to Ljubljana in 2015. In June 2016, I finally got the opportunity to visit the exhibition, despite having read his book two years previously, when he went to the tourist town of Bled, located by a large alpine lake and nature reserve. In 2017 he undertook a double feature, displaying the museum in both the neighbouring seaside towns of Piran for a month in July and in Koper during August/September. He plans to retire the museum after the summer of 2018, where, in its final destination in Trieste (some 10 to 15 miles from Koper/Piran), it will, for the first time, be featured outside Slovenia.

The museum exhibition comprises a diversity of interactive games and objects/images such as a collection of ice-cream spoons, table-tennis balls picked up at various tournaments, football scarves, and newspaper and magazine articles about his achievements. There are participative games to identify the population, flags, celebrities, and beers of several European countries, and to trace the route across the borders from one end of the continent to the other.

Miran used to be the mayor of his home town, Kanal, and has organised countless events to promote the Soči River valley region of Western Slovenia. He is a lively story teller with lots of energy. Rarely does he close the museum before 10 pm and, on many occasions, he has slept in the exhibition space for four or five nights in a week, only to open again at 10 or 11am. When not doing this, he has had to drive over 90 minutes to get back to Kanal, where he still lives in the family home with his brother, mother, and their dog Bonnie. Perhaps what is most unique about this charismatic person in his mid-50s, who still likes to hitchhike long distances, is the desire to set various new records. He has crossed through 31 countries in 11 days and, before retiring from the practice, is attempting in October 2017 to hitch to all the European capitals starting with the letter B within four days. He calls this his 7Bs project and it involves quite a journey, taking him from Bucharest to Bern via Belgrade, Budapest, Bratislava, Berlin, and Brussels.

Now some might find it odd to make a connection between art and the practice of hitchhiking, beyond the fairly banal statement about its being an artistic or at least creative form of mobility. We generally accept that auto-stop is connected to both film and literature, but leave it at that. Yet despite, or maybe because of this gap, May 2017 saw two group exhibitions of European artists and designers. I participated in both: the first, a week-long event in Warsaw; the other a day-show in Berlin a week later. Each brought together 15 artists plus a few peripheral contributors, such as a speaker addressing long distance hitching. In total some 35 to 40 people have therefore been directly involved, not counting those that attended the two exhibitions or witnessed them through social media.

'The Art of Hitchhiking: a Collection of Works Inspired by the Roads' took place in

Warsaw's Warszawski Creative Community Centre from May 17th until the 21st. It was curated by the French photographer, Antonin Borgnon, who had never undertaken to organise such an event before. After accompanying hitchhikers himself in 2016, he took a series of black and white photographs of the makeshift signs that they used on their journeys. He then decided to hold an open call on the internet for other such related works. He told me that he received over 35 submissions and had chosen the best 15. The event, with a budget of 3,000 Euro, was financed by a crowd-funding campaign. There were other photographic works, two audio-visual pieces, a collection of found objects retrieved from the roadside, a commissioned set of painted posters advertising hitch-gatherings, and a drawing to illustrate the semiotic hand-gestures that drivers make for the passengers they do not collect ('turning off soon', 'are you nuts', 'not you mate', and so on).

A work that stood out for me was a prototype for a hitcher's travel kit, including a canvas roll on which to inscribe with chalk one's intended destination. Another was a collection of magnolia linen clothing entitled, 'Are you comfortable with nudity'. Within each of these garments, a short narrative was inscribed to reveal a set of exceptionally intimate stories that the artist/traveller had been told.

The second exhibition, simply called 'Auto-Stop', was curated by the Slovakian art historian, Dr Lýdia Pribišová. It was held on May 26th at the Z/KU artist residency complex in a former railway depot near the Westhafen industrial area of north-west of Berlin. Pribišová managed to include a documentary about hitchBOT created in 2015 (see Zeller & Harris Smith this issue) as well as a screening of the fictional travelogue film, *Avé*, directed by Konstantin Bojanov, who introduced the work in relation to his other films. Another work included the

miniature prototype for a 'Memorial to Drivers'. Somewhat reminiscent of an unknown soldier's tomb, this work reminded the audience of the anonymity of hitchhiking as well as highlighting the act of generosity that remains at the core of the practice. A fully functional small green car also featured. It was covered in various technological gizmos to advertise how it was itself hitching for a driver to take it somewhere. In an era when there is much discussion on the future of driverless vehicles, this dog's breakfast of an artwork surely makes some kind of social statement.

The year's auto-stopping-related events illustrate that, as a mode of getting to the other, even within the context of 'at home' ethnography, hitchhiking allows for the expression of the other within the self. That is, hitching introduces strangeness into the familiar, by the act itself

as well as the characters involved. In so doing, however, it does not marginalise or completely isolate the eccentric. Rather, it acts as a 'pocket of resistance' in John Berger's terms, which demonstrates that strangeness can co-exist with 'everyday' social norms. It allows for types of behaviour and forms of expression to differ from how they are regularly—yet it does so alongside the conventional, at both the level of the individual and the social.

## NOTES

- 1 One can get a copy in Slovenia, Serbian, English, German, Dutch and Italian.

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