Automobility

Matthew Chung

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AUTOMOBILITY

By
Matthew Chung

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
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Abstract

AUTOMOBILITY

By
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B.F.A., Photography, College for Creative Studies, 2009
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Cars are machines with which we have complicated and ambivalent relations. Automobility considers the car as vehicle in multiple senses: as a vehicle of mobility and constraint, of representation and rituals, of communication and cultural meaning, of production and power, of desire and destruction. The artwork and research are rooted in an examination of my own relationship to the car, of relations I have observed in other people, and an exploration of the spaces, places, and practices designed for cars.
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INTRODUCTION

I think that cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals: I mean the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object.

– Roland Barthes

I have had a long relationship with the automobile. Growing up in and around Detroit I was exposed to the automobile industry from a young age. My father and I make a yearly pilgrimage to the Detroit North American International Auto Show. As a kid I saw the theatricality of all the lights and shiny cars, the hustle and bustle of people, and the glossy magazines that each manufacturer produced. Now I see the extreme branding, oversized vehicles, and the overall spectacle of consumer culture. I still love the spectacle of it all, although my relationship to the festival and cars in general has of course become more complicated and ambivalent.

Cars are technological machines with which we have complicated relations. My discussion of the automobile and my thesis exhibition, Automobility, considers the car as vehicle in multiple senses of the term: vehicle of mobility, representation, communication, culture, production, and destruction.

Cars were invented more than a century ago and as they have evolved, so has their position in our lives. The automobile has affected the designs of our cities and suburbs, our forms of movement and socialization, and our understandings of our own agency, freedom, motion, and appearances.

Automobility explores aesthetic and social ideas and experience of the automobile in contemporary American culture, and my interpretation of certain themes, curiosities, and rituals to which it gives rise. The work and research is rooted in an examination of my own

relationship to the car, relations I have observed in other people, and the spaces, places, and practices designed for cars. My analysis draws from 1) the experience of growing up in a suburb of Detroit; 2) theoretical analyses of space and place in relation to the car; 3) my education in the photographic arts which serves as the foundation for parallels I draw between the technological innovations (and complications) of the automobile and the photographic medium itself.

My artistic explorations of the automobile can be considered in relation to a range of other themes that are explicit or implicit in my individual pieces or across the installation as a whole. These themes include:

• Imaging technologies
• Machines and human agency
• The public/private divide and explorations of boundaries
• Environmental implications
• Mass production and the production of mass culture

Given the diversity, breadth, and spatiality of the automobile and car culture and consequences, I utilize various media: still photographs, video, installation, sculpture. This multi-dimensionality contributes to capturing, appropriating, critiquing, and embracing the automobile as well as the space, culture, and lives that surround it.

_Automobility_ is not representational in a traditional photographic way; but it is referential. While traditional photographs signify or represent objects, by choosing to work in a multi-media installation, I hope that the work and its implications are abstract, mobile, and meditative. In the works, cars are not represented explicitly; instead their presence and consequences are referenced suggestively, aesthetically, but with ambivalence.

This thesis is organized into three sections. The first is background: my own history,
context, and influences on the work. The second section will include analyses of each of the pieces in the installation. The third section will discuss the overall installation in the gallery—how pieces work together and what is accomplished by working in installation. Installation shots, as well as my observations on the overall successes and possible limitations of the installation (theoretically and visually) will be considered in this section.

My intention for *Automobility* is that it engages people in different ways—evoking a spatial and aesthetic experience initially, followed by diverse reactions and contemplation, ranging from joy to confusion and beyond. The work engages questions of how the automobile shapes who we are and how we live, and how our lives are both enhanced and complicated by our cars.
CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND

You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.

– Buckminster Fuller

1.1 Personal & Educational History

Growing up I always loved art. I was raised in the suburbs of Detroit, Michigan. My Dad co-owned and managed a Chinese restaurant in Detroit until I was thirteen. My dad was very supportive of my interest in the arts. While I was growing up, we often visited the Detroit Institute of Arts. This was one of my first major exposures to art.

As a child I was always creating, whether it was painting, drawing, making ceramics, or building forts. I loved making things. I first printed in a darkroom at age twelve, at a friend’s house. I remember the experience in vivid detail. From then on I was hooked. The next day I went to the library and checked out every technical photography book I could find. I found a darkroom kit online and ordered it. I started to plan and research, and I constructed a darkroom in my basement by the time I was thirteen. My parents gave me their Canon AE-1, which was my first camera. I spent the summer making terrible gray prints, but I loved the process of learning and exploring, and the freedom to set up my own workspace. The next year I entered high school and took photography every semester until my graduation.

I don’t know how I would have gotten through high school without photography class. Our teacher, Ms. Davis, created a great atmosphere to explore and learn about photography. It was my favorite place to be. I could print in the darkroom, listen to music, and browse photo books. I learned how to mat, dry-mount, and process film; I even learned

a few historical photo processes. I also used the class to explore ideas I had no way to verbalize. I made self-portraits every semester and for my senior project. Looking back at this work, my self-portraits throughout high school were dark and fragmented. I struggled with my identity, balancing academics, sports, a religious upbringing, and my suppressed homosexuality. The darkroom was a refuge and a way to address what was on my mind.

My education included traditional and historic processes as well as digital manipulation and printing. As an undergraduate I attended the College for Creative Studies (CCS) in Detroit, Michigan, where I earned a BFA in Photography. The CCS program balances fine arts with design studies. Towards the end of my degree I began to make large, detailed prints of urban surfaces such as sidewalks, walls, and concrete. I created this minimal work by using a flatbed scanner to capture these textures and output them as highly detailed large-format prints. This work was the beginning of a shift from using traditional photography to using digital imaging more broadly. In the future I hope to continue to explore new forms of technology such as rapid prototyping, in which a digital 3D model is “printed” in a fairly fast and affordable method.

In 2003 my parents helped me purchase a used 1998 black Jeep Cherokee; instantly the automobile became my main form of transportation. This car took me out of the suburbs and into Detroit, returning to the place my parents lived before they—and many others—left the city for the suburbs in the late 1960's. Living in an urban environment was important to my development as an artist. Detroit was more exciting, complicated, and diverse than where I had previously lived. My Jeep eventually took me out to Rochester for graduate school. Much like my home in Michigan, RIT is situated in the suburbs. While public transportation does exist, it is not the most convenient way to move about (or outside
of) the city. At the beginning of 2010, the Jeep stopped working. Without a car I became deeply aware of my dependence on it.

1.2 Artistic Context & Influences

As previously mentioned, one of my first exposures to art was to the collection at the Detroit Institute of Arts. I always enjoyed the contemporary wing, and found myself enthralled with the mysterious compositions and materials within the galleries. Looking at a Franz Kline on display, the audio tour dictated that, “he not only paints the black, but also the white.” This stands out as significant to me because painting with white paint defied my expectations of what painting (or the creative process) is; additionally I realized that art can be indirect, and sometimes unexpected. This Kline painting was one of the first times I felt engaged by abstract art. I think such Expressionist mark-making has influenced my way of creating certain pieces, such as Labyrinth (video) and Through (carwash).

Figure 1 Franz Kline, Siskind, 1958
Another piece in the collection is a sculpture by Richard Long, entitled Stone Line, installed in the gallery. The arrangement of stones stretches 34 feet long by about 5 feet wide. It uses Texas cork-stone rocks in an arrangement across the gallery floor. There are other minimalist works in the collection that resonate with me, including those by Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt. The design aspects of these works, including their simple and clean compositions, have influenced my design taste. Many of these minimalist works distill the viewer’s focus to what is present in front of them. Though different from each other, my installations, Containment and Labyrinth, both were influenced by Minimalism, especially in their aesthetic simplicity.

In 1927, artist Charles Sheeler was commissioned by the Ford Motor Company to photograph their River Rouge industrial complex. His works are a precise exploration of the aesthetic of the machine. The photograph Criss-Crossed Conveyors—Ford Plant (1927) by Sheeler shows the complexity of the industrial site. While it is beautifully composed and organized, it also shows the scale and chaos of the campus. At this location everything for the automobile could be produced, from the creation of steel to the final assembly. There are no workers present in the photograph, only the massive structures of the industrial landscape. Karen Lucic writes in her book Charles Sheeler and the Cult of the Machine, “This photograph also recreates the myth of industry as the new religion of the machine age by focusing on the monumental grandeur of the factory buildings.” Later, she writes, “Sheeler’s vision of American industry in this photograph transforms the factory complex into an icon of omnipotence,” and that his “stunning image is seductively persuasive—a visual confirmation of the cultish sanctification of industry during this period.”

4 Ibid., 97.
Also at the Detroit Institute of Arts is a large mural titled *Detroit Industry*, painted by Diego Rivera, also commissioned by Ford, shortly after Sheeler was commissioned. This work differs greatly from Sheeler’s photographs, not only in medium but also by the presence of humans. Rivera’s fresco murals are a complex installation encompassing all four walls and stretching across seven panels of an enclosed court at the museum. The north wall of the fresco depicts an assembly line in the Ford factory; the mural depicts workers making the engine and transmission of the 1932 Ford V-8. In this piece, the human worker and the assembly line appear to be merging into one machine. The layout appears as organized chaos with machinery twisting its way across the compositions and workers spread across the frame: the humans and the assembly line become one machine. Above the main panel of this wall there are also smaller murals: one showing a baby being vaccinated and another showing the manufacture of toxic gases, examples illustrating some of the positive and negative aspects of industry. While working on my thesis, I came to realize what an impact Rivera’s mural has had on me. Its scale is overwhelming and engages the viewer’s physical body, while considering that humans and machines—in this case industrial manufacturing—are inextricably linked, and can be simultaneously productive and destructive. Both Sheeler and Rivera show the industry of automobile manufacturing in different ways. But both, by either including or excluding the worker from their images, speak to the dominance of industry over the human. While my work takes a different form than these representational artists, their consideration of humans and industrialization, as well as the complexity and beauty with which they work, has greatly influenced my ideas and practice.
Since then, the automobile has continued to inspire and intrigue artists. In 1953, Robert Rauschenberg collaborated with John Cage to create *Automobile Tire Print*. The work consisted of a black line created by rolling an inked tire across a scroll of paper that unrolls to twenty-two feet in length. The work is beginning to rebel against many ideals of the Abstract Expressionist movement popular in the 1940’s and 1950’s. Instead of creating marks expressively by the hand of the artist Rauschenberg and Cage used an inked tire to create a mark with the machine. Rauschenberg describes the process they used: He made a long scroll of paper by gluing together sheets of typing paper. Then he called up Cage who came over with his Ford Model A, they unrolled the paper down the street and Rauschenberg inked up one of the car’s tires. Then Cage drove the car across the scroll.

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creating the mark. Rosalind Krauss describes this piece: “the indexical imprint is developed as a weapon against the expressive mark.”

In a piece entitled *A Line Made by Walking*, Richard Long walked back and forth in grass until a line was left from his movement. This simple piece combines marking, place, time, and distance, using both the human and environment. Both *Tire Print* and *A Line Made by Walking* influenced *Labyrinth* (video), in which I used the marks created for other purposes (for parking) to direct my navigation and the aesthetics of the piece.

Allan Kaprow also used the tire in one of his installations. In 1961 he created an “Environment” titled *Yard* in the backyard of the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York. With this pivotal installation he filled the space with used car tires. Instead of the movement of the tire across the paper in Rauschenberg and Cage’s print, Kaprow’s work became about the movement of the viewer through the space of the tires. The viewer climbs on and fumbles around through the large environment, which is constantly changing as the tires are moved. This work was hugely innovative at the time, not only because of its unique use of space and site specific qualities but because it deployed and thereby considered the world’s refuse, and because it was interactive. Kaprow’s installation influenced my work *Labyrinth* (installation), which is made with shredded rubber from tires, and also encourages the viewer’s directed movement through and interaction with the piece. By contrast, however, Kaprow’s piece was somewhat chaotic, and did not specify a direct route for the viewer to move through it, whereas *Labyrinth* has a specific path.

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Julie Mehretu’s paintings are massive, and seeing them in person really draws a viewer in by encompassing the entirety of the visual field. I respond to their mesmerizing detail and complex compositions. Mehretu uses the elements of line, maps, and architectural forms, which are important in my own work as well. They blend history and abstraction to create new narratives for the viewer. They refer to specific structures and symbols while they are at the same time ambiguous: clean but chaotic. This leaves me between these
dichotomies, in a place to contemplate and think. Her work is extremely precise but abstract at the same time; for example, in some works certain parts contain meticulously detailed architectural elements while embedded in the larger work which appears abstract. Mehretu influences my own goals toward precision in my work. Even my abstract pieces are intended to be streamlined, deliberate, and precise. For example, *Through* and *Containment* both contain elements of chance and unpredictability, yet the way the space is organized and presented nevertheless is underscored by aesthetic control and intention.

These and many other artists have served as influences on my own work, in both the themes they explore and the processes by which they explore these themes. Their work ranges from historical to contemporary, from abstract to referential, and spans various media.
CHAPTER 2: THE WORKS & THEMES

A variety of works.

1. A memorial, old technology, a starting point, the death of my first automobile.

2. Walking and moving through the installation. Ways to think about industrialized practices that organize and mediate our experiences of space, sight, and motion.


4. Follow the lines in a different direction.

5. Cars direct the design of our roads, buildings, cities, and spaces. They shape our understanding and encounters with the environment.

6. A ritual of cleansing, rebirth, protection, and pleasure. A cycle that is visually and environmentally curious.

7. Visibility, observation, motion—forces to consider.

8. There are dangers, there are spills, collisions. Beyond surfaces, things are not contained.

9. And yet there is an ordered space in which to move and reflect.

2.1 Engine Print with Key

The first piece the viewer encounters when entering the gallery is a framed black and white photograph of a car engine hanging on the wall. This is the only still photograph in the installation. It is juxtaposed with a car key, which hangs beside it on a hook on the wall. The engine print, which appears old and traditional (with the warmer tones of the print), is complicated by the key hanging beside it. The technology of internal combustion dates back
to before the nineteenth century. It is represented with another historical and important technology: photographic technology.

![Figure 4 Engine With Key, 2012](image)

The photograph of the engine (the inner-workings of the car) introduces the viewer to certain themes that are explored in *Automobility*: parallels and relationships between the automobile and photography, the relation (and occasional confusion) between the real and the image, and relationships between inside and outside, in this case literally looking at the inside of a car.\(^7\)

The key beside the photograph suggests several things: first, “the photographic image” does not have uncontested authority. The commonplace and unassuming key hanging beside it suggests to the viewer that the show will explore boundaries of images.

\(^7\) Other pieces in the exhibition, as I discuss below, consider the relationship of inside/outside in other realms relating to the photographic, automobile and culture.
Three-dimensional space begins to interact with two-dimensional space, and certain absurdities can be read through this juxtaposition. For example, the banality of the car key carries a different meaning than it normally would, since it is hanging on a gallery wall, beside a representation of the machine it operates (an engine). Also, the key on the wall beside the image could be read as a memorial to the car, suggesting that this particular (internal combustion) engine is not running. Maybe it is time to move on to other forms of transportation?

The photograph happens to picture the engine of my first car. My relationship to my first automobile, especially when it “died,” was part of the inspiration for this work. Thus, as described by many, including Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes, the photograph memorializes. These notions of shrines, mementos, ritual, and the religiosity of automobile culture and the photographic are themes that emerge in various pieces in the installation.

2.2 Henry Fords

Machinery is accomplishing in the world what man has failed to do by preaching, propaganda, or the written word… Thus may we vision a United States of the World. Ultimately, it will surely come!

– Henry Ford

On the right-hand wall when the viewer enters the gallery is a long row of miniature Henry Ford wax models. They are installed on a shelf with the aesthetic of an assembly line. They are machine-made from wax, which alludes to the inexpensive mass production that his company is known to have utilized. These little souvenir figures of Henry Ford are

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9 Cf. Through (carwash), Containment, Henry Fords, Labyrinth (video), and Labyrinth (installation) pieces.

affordable and quick to produce (like Ford automobiles); they embody both mass production and consumer culture.

I acquired the Henry Ford models at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. Dearborn was Ford’s hometown and is also the location of the Ford Motor Company headquarters. The museum contains an amazing collection of automobile history and innovation. As part of my research for this project I have made several visits to the Ford Museum, through which I have learned not only about Ford and other inventors, but also about how such people and objects are memorialized, represented, celebrated, and remembered. These visits to the Ford Museum have helped shape my understanding of our devotion to the automobile and the culture to which it has given rise in America.

![Figure 5 Henry Fords, 2011](image)

The Henry Ford molds in this piece are made from a machine called the Mold-A-Rama, which before your eyes makes a wax mold of the sample on display. The machines are a fascinating mechanical process to watch, as the whole process is on display and visible through a plastic bubble. Inside the bubble, two molds press together and hot wax is injected
inside; after a few minutes the molds pull apart and a small, shiny Henry Ford emerges from the machine. The mass-production of these figurines relates to the mass-production of the automobile. Ford is famous for saying, “Any customer can have a car painted any color that he wants so long as it is black.” 11 I have disrupted this consistency by “custom” painting some of the Henry Ford models with red. The red paint is automotive paint now used by Ford. My hand in altering/painting some of these pieces alludes to the trend of customizing or individualizing the automobile.

The piece is playful but not without an undertone of critique. The wax figurines are kitschy; they look cheap. Yet they are installed in an appealing and aestheticized way. They look at once attractive and yet they are disposable commodities. The long line of figurines refers to the way cars might roll off the assembly line. The shelf on which they are elegantly presented might remind the viewer of browsing a store, and of the multitude of commodities that we constantly encounter.

2.3 Labyrinth (video)

Today, we experience an ease of motion unknown to any prior urban civilization… we take unrestricted motion of the individual to be an absolute right. The private motorcar is the logical instrument for exercising that right, and the effect on public space, especially the space of the urban street, is that the space becomes meaningless or even maddening unless it can be subordinated to free movement.

– Richard Sennett 12

At the beginning of graduate school, I was creating highly detailed composite images, combining hundreds of photographs of parking lot surfaces. I used Photoshop to combine


them together into patterns that resembled aerial views of our expanding suburban environment. The network of roads in the world could be read as a massive labyrinth structure.

![Figure 6 Untitled, 2009](image)

I wanted to further explore this idea and introduce movement. *Labyrinth* is a video piece I made by walking the lines of a parking lot in a meditative, labyrinth-like way while hand-holding a video camera. The shaky video feed of a yellow line on black asphalt is projected onto the floor of the gallery space.

There are similarities between this piece and a labyrinth.13 “As opposed to a maze, the labyrinth’s path is not intersected by other paths. There are no choices to be made, and the path inevitably leads to, and ends at the center… Once there, the walker must turn around and retrace the same path to return to the outside,” Herman Kern, *Through the Labyrinth* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2000), 23.
dizzying if watched closely, but it also brings a physicality to the piece. I want the viewer to feel present with me walking through this space. The piece was not intended to be ironic, but that could be one interpretation, since a labyrinth is traditionally sacred, calm, and usually in a natural space, while this piece was made in a parking lot. As Marc Augé writes in his essay “Roundabouts and Yellow Lines,” “The yellow line guides us and orients us, but leaves a certain number of decisions to our judgment. In this way it is sometimes formidably ambivalent.”14 Similarly in Labyrinth, the lines do not take us on a clear path; it is ambivalent.

I was raised Catholic and experienced, although with ambivalence, the rituals, myths, and many forms of knowledge in the church. The architecture of many churches is spectacular; some often include labyrinths in them or in nearby gardens. In my experience with labyrinths, I have felt at peace with my movement as I could walk around the calming

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curves and patterns alone with my thoughts and away from the ideology and symbols of the church. The labyrinth has been used by the church as a metaphor for journey or redemption, though most people’s experiences of labyrinths, even in church courtyards, may not be tied to these religious underpinnings. *Labyrinth* (video) becomes a meditation on the surface of asphalt—something we continuously put down to maintain and expand our travel with the automobile. The video loops continuously, just like our movement and expansion of this system.

![Figure 8 Rolled Road, 2011](image)

### 2.4 Rolled Road

The rolled up road started as a model to convey my idea for a larger installation. Ideally it would be created as a huge roll, approximately six feet wide by five feet tall. It is meant to be playful but is also meant to raise concern. At the small scale in which it exists in the installation, it is easy to look past, similar to the way we look past the roads on which we normally drive. We are often unaware of the vastness of the roads and their infrastructures.
Likewise, we are not often attentive to the destruction of landscapes and communities as roads are “unrolled” around us. The small scale of this piece (that it is a “model”) references the idea of its construction. The shape of the roll also references a steamroller again giving it a somewhat ominous power. At this size, the viewer can step back and visually consume the piece’s totality.

![Image of a roll and a TV screen]

Figure 9 Containment, video from inside the room is transmitted to the TV screen, 2012

2.5 Containment

In its earliest days, the automobile was primarily a toy, and perhaps it will be again, as the media theorist Marshall McLuhan predicated already in 1960s. He and other prophets of technological progress have long argued that in the electronic age, the physical mobility offered by cars already matters far less than it did before. So far, however, people are moving about more rather than less.

– Brian Ladd

Containment is an installation, performance, media piece, and sculpture. In the gallery space there is an eight-foot by eight-foot room, constructed from wood. The viewer is free to walk around it, although there seems to be no way to see into the space. Across the gallery a monitor shows a video feed of a vehicle moving around in a gray, seemingly void space. The screen shows the vehicle constantly bumping into walls, turning around and continuing.

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to move. It is unclear where this mobile view is taking us. In the center of the wooden room is a large black steel oil drum. This black shape appears on screen as the robotic camera continues to move, almost as if it is searching for something. It continues to drive and bump into the walls and the steel drum in the center of the room. Being unable to escape or find what it needs, eventually the vehicle and feed stop moving, depleted for the day. The search will start again tomorrow. Oil is imported into our country and reported in volume of barrels, while the technology has changed and oil is often transported via larger barges, tanker trucks, or pipelines, the “barrel” is still used to quantify the volume of oil we consume, spill, and trade.

![Image of BP Deepwater Horizon spill](image)

Figure 10 BP Deepwater Horizon spill, video still, 2010

The piece references surveillance and also the distancing power of media. I remember watching (on a television screen) the BP Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Watching this continuous feed of black liquid flowing out, I was both disturbed and perplexed. There was no way to understand this constant flow on the screen. I could tell that the movement and leak were continuing, but I could not determine the size of the leak, the scale, or the volume being spilled. The screen I placed in the gallery functions both as a way to let the viewer into this space to see the abstracted movement and also as a way to play with the distancing power of the medium. We are visually informed yet held at bay,
captivated, and restrained. We are watching it. Surveillance technology is used in the piece: a wireless video camera transmits visual information from inside the room to the viewer outside via a screen. We watch this feed, and we become the ones who surveil. We are outside of the space, which additionally references the way architecture can be used to discipline experience.

The constructed room becomes an anti-panopticon. The visibility is restricted and only allowed through a mediated device of the screen. The power here is shifted and is given to the device. We can see only what the robotic camera will show us. Since it is not directly mediated by a person, the agency is handed over to a robotic device which we have given the task to search and show. It is limited, distanced, and abstracted.

The piece relates to several other works in the show including Through, Containment, and Labyrinth(s). The room contains the roaming video camera; similarly, cars contain bodies, roads contain cars, and our mobility and choices contain certain risks and potential consequences. In Containment, the room, steel barrel, and video feed all function as containers. It relates to the Labyrinth video through the play of movement.

2.6 Through (carwash)

Bodies, machines and landscapes become interrelated and confused, observations that have resonances with everyday freeway experiences, where the spaces of driving and the driver are bound up with spaces and materials extending far beyond the limits of one’s own body, body work and traffic lane.

– Peter Merriman¹⁶

Through (carwash) is a looping video projection approximately three minutes in length.

The projection fades in from white; the camera’s perspective is through the windshield of a

car, but only the windshield is in focus. The surface of glass becomes the screen. Textures of liquids, foams, brushes, and light cover the surface as the car travels through the car wash. At the end, the familiar motion of traffic is blurred but ahead. The car moves toward the street, the frame fades to white, and the video repeats.

I was inspired to make this piece one day as my car and I were encompassed in the womb-like experience of an automatic carwash. I was amazed by what an aesthetic experience it is; the colors and light, the smells and sounds all struck me. I used to be terrified as a kid to ride through the carwash, but as I got older I became enchanted by the process. The process of washing a car is very much about cleaning, renewal, and maintenance of the vehicle. The experience of being in a car while it is being washed is an unusual one. Our bodies are docile and relaxed by the water patterns. It becomes a show for our senses, a theatrical experience and the windshield becomes a screen. The focus, composition, and how the work is projected onto the gallery wall enhance what we see while driving through a carwash. The viewpoint is fixed, and the focus is shallow.

Through can be read as a rebirth as it plays through a constant loop. The video fades in from and out of white; it is a cycle. The vehicle comes out of the carwash anew; shiny, fresh, clean: a new beginning.
Figure 11 *Through*, video stills, 2011
2.7 Surface Tension

*Surface Tension* is composed of a looping video projection of tranquil waves and a one-liter jar of dark liquid placed in the foreground of the looping video. The close proximity of the two images highlights the sense of tension between the contained liquids: one contained in a clear but fragile jar, the other a projection of water looping on the white screen. My intention was to create a relationship between the two substances, each contained in different ways, but with a perceived sense that one could at any moment break out of its confines and contaminate the other.

![Surface Tension, 2011](image)

I titled the piece *Surface Tension* because it is all too often that these substances do not remain contained. My installation has placed the dark black liquid in a fragile glass container on the floor. There is the potential that viewer could break the glass container and create a spill. *Surface Tension* was made before *Through (carwash)*. Aesthetically, like most of my work, it is minimal but, I hope, engaging. Conceptually they both incorporate liquids in the work.
Liquids are an important part of the automobile and our bodies, and required for both to work and function properly. Thus, in this piece and in *Through*, the liquid can serve as a metaphor connecting the human body (and thus the viewer’s body) to the body of the automobile. The fragility of the glass jar in which the black liquid is contained represents a certain foreboding of the non-sustainability of our use of automobiles and our oil dependence.

![Figure 13 Labyrinth, 2012](image)

### 2.8 Labyrinth (installation)

I am interested in materials which are ambiguous, which can simultaneously be symbol and raw substance, achieving a status as paradigmatic objects. Materials which can carry this ambiguity range from matches to Coca-Cola bottles, from coins and banknotes to a broom…. They are in the everyday world, close to their origin, yet impregnated with meaning.

> – Cildo Meireles\(^{17}\)

My newest work is a labyrinth installed on the gallery floor. It is created out of crumb rubber made from shredded car tires. The rubber is then positioned on the gallery floor.

floor in small mounds to create a circular labyrinth pattern the viewer can walk through. The installation is temporal and will shift and be altered or destroyed if the viewer steps off the path. *Labyrinth* is fragile, site specific, and temporal.

Tires are our connection to pavement. The piece is site-specific and scaled to the gallery in SPAS. It is intended to be interactive: the viewer can walk through it. The circular path leads the viewer into the center and then back to the start. Unlike the other *Labyrinth* (video) piece, here the viewer embodies the motion as he or she moves through the space. My goal is to create a meditative experience for the viewer as the viewer travels through the piece, contemplating the path/road and the rubber material and other uses for it, as well as other possibilities for motion. I hope that by directing the viewers’ motion, I can place them in a space to think and feel. There is a requirement of focus as one walks, one has to be mindful of the edges of the path. This is part of the piece—the viewer must negotiate his/her movement through the work.

![Figure 14 Labyrinth, 2012](image)
*Labyrinth* creates a different kind of movement. This becomes about slow movement of the body through space, instead of the fast speed of tires over pavement. Additionally, the viewer walks through the piece, suggesting walking as an alternative mode of transportation. The controlled environment of the gallery emphasizes the relationship between the viewer and the work, without the influence of other environmental forces.
CHAPTER 3: THEMES & INSTALLATION

The outstanding feature of modern technology lies in the fact that it is not at all any longer merely “means” and no longer merely stands in “service” for others, but instead [in the fact] that it itself unfolds a specific character of domination.

– Martin Heidegger

3.1 Themes in Automobility

The themes that are most important in Automobility are the themes of embodiment, mobility, visibility, and containment. The car dictates how we travel; what speed, direction and pace; where we go; how much time it will take; and what systems we use. The systems of the automobile in contemporary American culture exert a power over us. They regulate the design of our cities, suburbs and rural spaces, as well as how we move from one location to

Figure 15 *Automobility*, Entrance hall, SPAS Gallery, 2012

another. There are architectures in place—such as the culture and economy of sprawl—that discipline us into participation while enabling our freedom of movement.

The car is about mobility and freedom. However, if we are to participate in this mobility and enjoy such freedoms we are constantly regulated by rules and regulations. The car allows us to navigate through these systems in ways that give us pleasure. Cars are regulated by police, used by the military and by medical and safety services. The infrastructure of roads, oil industry, car manufacturers, and city architectures link many institutions of power together. The automobile is how we move through our country, outside of a few dense cities where public transportation, walking, and bicycles provide sufficient transportation.

Safety is one body of knowledge that controls our movement on roads, from speed limits to the system of licensing to limits of alcohol consumption while operating vehicles. These regulations determine who has authority to operate vehicles and whether they have the proper forms of training to drive. These documents also work to track and control drivers’ behavior, by rewarding safe/docile drivers and punishing drivers for behavior that is deemed reckless or dangerous. Photography—and visibility—is also integral to this culture of documentation. This is another thematic link that is suggested by Containment, Through, Rolled-Road, and Labyrinth (installation). Safety keeps roads productive.\(^\text{19}\)

Roads and lines keep us highly disciplined; we know, for example, that crossing certain lines will lead us into oncoming traffic. Lines show us where to park. The individual in a car does have autonomy but at the same time is highly disciplined by training and systems of knowledge. The suburbs become an interesting place, as they require an automobile to navigate them. Subdivisions with winding roads and cul-de-sacs limit visibility

\(^{19}\) By “productive” here I mean in the Foucauldian sense of the word; safety keeps roads productive of identity, mobility, control, consumption, … etc.
and who can access the area. Such design is referenced in the *Labyrinth* installation in which gallery viewers/participants are limited to walking a specific path. The “traffic” in the gallery, and in this installation in particular, will further draw the parallel between bodies navigating space and cars navigating roads and cities.

In my work I often use titles to refer to our supposed “knowledge.” For example, the title and piece *Containment* play on the idea of how things appear to be separated. This separation is between the oil and other pollutants and the large body of water depicted in the video feed. We think of oil as being contained and safely separated from our water sources, but oil companies’ practices are not made clear (or at least explicit). Thus our own knowledge of such practices is “contained” by the information we are given, which is usually limited to a certain image that the company wants to project.

Barthes’ essay, “The New Citroën,” in *Mythologies*, as cited in the opening quotation of this paper, makes astute comparisons between the automobile and the church. I use some of the symbols of mediation and contemplation of the church in relation to the automobile. My work also references the way that we worship and use the automobile. Barthes uses examples from popular culture (words, objects, rituals) to show how they become signs to signify and connote different things. Often we don’t stop to question or contemplate the automobile and its implications and effects but yet we depend on it for our own everyday mobilities.

These concepts are more implicit than explicit in my work. In many of the works, I abstract an idea from the automobile or its surrounding practices, and combine this idea with my own aesthetic interpretation. The viewer’s interpretation of the work depends on his or

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20 “I think that cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals: I mean the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object.” Barthes, “The New Citroën,” 88.
her own knowledge and experience. I hope to leave space for the viewer to move, think, and play with the work. While my readings of Barthes and Michel Foucault, for example, have influenced how I have made these pieces, it should not be necessary for a viewer to have read these texts in order to successfully and meaningfully engage my work.

3.2 Automobility as Installation

As Automobility developed, and as I began to consider how I wanted the viewer to experience—and move through—the work, it seemed clear that an installation made the most sense. I would not, however, classify most of the work as installation art, but the installation itself is a very important aspect of the show. For instance, the relationship between the viewer and the works is very important. Are they looking up at a wall or down onto the floor; or what is the relationship between two pieces, and how does that change, depending on how they move or where they are standing?

I don’t see the pieces as limited to this layout. I think they can be adapted and displayed in different locations and contexts. Also I think they can be shown without each
other. I do think there are some strong possibilities for site-specific installations, such as with *Labyrinth*. How would this change if I created it in a parking lot, or in the Diego Rivera Court at the Detroit Institute of Arts, or in a junkyard? I think all of these could complicate and expand the piece in interesting ways.

I do not see the project as completely finished. These themes and ideas will continue to develop in my work. Several of the pieces are made to be interactive. In *Labyrinth* (installation), the piece is about the experience of moving through it. In *Containment*, the piece is activated by the presence of the viewer in relation to the container of liquid, because the knowledge that the viewer could break the glass vessel charges the piece with potential energy and fragility.

### 3.3 Opening and defense

**Opening Reception**

The opening was wonderful. I enjoyed watching my carefully constructed space fill with people. It was exciting to see people interacting with my work: moving through, looking at, curiously approaching and even peeking into some of the pieces. The opening was very well attended, probably upwards of 100 people, and the visitors in the space brought the works to life. The mood shifted from quiet and meditative (and almost stoic) to celebratory and energetic.

Overall I was extremely happy with the opening and how the show came together. It was interesting for me to see so many people engaging with the works, and the diverse ways in which they did so. The *Labyrinth* video projection onto the floor worked out perfectly as some people watched it while others walked through/on it.
The most interactive of the pieces was the life-sized labyrinth installed in the center of the gallery with shredded rubber. Some people walked slowly and carefully to avoid running into the edges; others were careless, bumping into and disbursing some of the shredded rubber from the edges. Yet some people insisted that the piece remain tidy. A few people even took it upon themselves to clean up the edges of the lines after others had walked through. Each person had to navigate the space and got to negotiate his or her movements in their own ways.

When the gallery was filled with people it was hard to hear the robotic sounds and collisions inside of the Containment piece. These sounds help link the large wooden room to the television screen across the gallery. Some people at the opening did not see the connection between these components of Containment. However, through discussions, or if they were curious enough to open the latch and peer into the room, they were able to connect and engage with the piece further. In the future I might use a microphone and speakers to amplify the sound of the collision of the robot with the interior walls of the container.

The pieces in my show filled the SPAS Gallery space well. I worked to create a flow from one piece to the next in a logic that helped the viewer explore the space. I placed the video Through in the back end of the gallery, and painted all the surrounding walls dark grey. This space provided a slightly secluded area to watch the piece. I also used dark grey paint behind Surface Tension in order to create another dark area for video projection.
Thesis Defense

Many thoughtful comments and questions arose at my defense. One of the most central questions related to my balance of my subject matter with my own personal aesthetic. My work is clean, concise, and minimal. However the automobile and its surrounding culture, which is the subject from which my work is inspired, is not clean and concise; it is dirty and chaotic. My hope is that my aestheticization of the works entices and draws the viewer into engaging with and contemplating them.

Some other useful questions and comments from the defense included: 1) how my work does (or rather, does not) deal with the “refuse” side of automobile production and culture (i.e., the dark underbelly is relatively absent in my show); 2) the use of text/titles to name but not label the pieces in the exhibition; and 3) the position of the viewer as the “driver” in many of the works. These are insightful points that merit further exploration.

In reference to the refuse side of automobile production, I do think my show would benefit from a more explicit reference to the dark side. There are references to oil in both Containment and Surface Tension, but each piece is very clean and minimal. In the future I may change the presentation of Containment so that the visual exterior of the container more closely references the oil barrel inside. I also might consider making Surface Tension a time-based piece in which the black liquid seeped out, either onto the gallery floor or into the video projection.

In relation to the text, I felt that traditional gallery wall labels would interrupt the visual and aesthetic flow of the show. Instead I allowed my artist statement to act as an abstract guide through the show. The points listed in my artist statement referenced specific
works.\textsuperscript{21} I could additionally see myself making a list of all the works that included their titles and materials, so that a viewer could know the titles of the works, which during this exhibition were absent.

I appreciated the question about the viewer as “driver” in some of the works: in Through (carwash), in both labyrinth pieces, and in the video feed from Containment, the viewer has the perspective of the driver. This is a reference to our own embodied agency—and responsibility—as drivers and art viewers. In my upcoming works I plan to investigate the bicycle as a mode of transportation and I will continue to explore this notion of making the viewer the driver with more sustainable (and more embodied) modes of transportation.

\textsuperscript{21} See “A variety of works” at the beginning of Chapter 2, on page 13.
CONCLUSION

*Automobility* explores some contemporary relationships to the automobile in the U.S. The work plays on and abstracts certain rituals, materials, and ideas that we engage with in the system of the automobile. The work is accessible to the viewer, but upon deeper consideration opens up space for thought, question, and critique. It takes the form of installation encompassing sculpture, video, and images.

This project grew out of my relationship to cars and the death of my first automobile. As I continued to work on it and research my ideas, the project grew and expanded. In this project I explore, through the production of objects, images, video, and sculpture interacting in a gallery space, ideas of motion, containment, visibility, production, and worship. I try to push what images can become, and what forms they can take.

In making this show, I have learned about my relationship to the automobile as well as to the larger systems of power, knowledge, and art with which I engage. I have learned to trust my instinct to let my ideas dictate what media to follow and explore, and to let my exploration of these media generate ideas I might then consider further. I hope that viewers are moved by the work; perhaps their beliefs will be shifted. I hope at a minimum that their understandings (like their bodies) will at least start to move and be more conscious of their mobility.

If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no but that traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse.

— Michel Foucault \(^{22}\)

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