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The passenger view

Abstract:

In my novel-in-progress I am investigating the legacy of the automobile – the twentieth century’s chief commodity – as we zoom into a new era characterised by the transition from fossil fuels to hybrid and electric alternatives, as well as growing technological complexity around data and surveillance. In this creative work, I present a series of digital images produced as part of my research for this novel, alongside a creative–critical reflection about the creative process. Taken while on a research trip in Paris and Shanghai last year, the images ask us to consider the intimate roles we assume within the vehicle – the driver versus the passenger – and the ways in which the automobile is mediated by the technologies of the day, such as the smart phone. The animating concept for my novel figures the car as an animal that is going extinct, and this line of inquiry raises additional questions explored in my reflection: as we move away from the animal as a formative referent, what real and imagined losses might we be incurring?

Biographical note:

Emily Stewart is a writer, editor and researcher living on Wangal Country. Her second book of poetry, *Running time*, was published by Vagabond Press in 2022 and received the Helen Anne Bell Poetry award. Emily’s improvisatory creative practice is grounded in walking and sometimes incorporates photographs, collages and found objects. She is currently developing an experimental book about cars and extinction. In 2024 Emily was a Climate Change Research Fellow at the University of Graz, Austria. Emily is a 2023–2025 Marten Bequest Scholar in Poetry and holds a DCA from Western Sydney University’s Writing & Society Research Centre.

Keywords:

Creative practice, practice-led research, automobiles, animal studies, photography



Figure 1. Paris series (Stewart, 2024).

The passenger sitting behind the driver has a covert view out the side window. Cars in the next lane pull up parallel for a few moments then pass or fall behind again. Chrome safety barriers stretch in long dashes. It's impossible to focus on the tranches of concrete or the trees and shrubs that line the motorway. Whatever is there becomes visual pulp. But a slight movement of the eyes shifts time. Certain objects, those further away, stick around for longer. If there is a mountain it inches past. It has ridgelines, trails, remnants of snow. Elements that can be considered in detail. Sometimes factories and industrial plants also join this slow procession: there's ample time to read the company names and wonder about the stacked shipping containers set out in rows.

A child stares back at the passenger from another car passing. Then something else. Two goats stuck on an overgrown verge. Now the driver watches the passenger through the rearview mirror, glimpsing their friend in their private reverie, before turning back to their own highway view.

Another passenger is seated next to the driver. This one is responsible for the ambience of the car: music, aircon levels and conversation. They want to stay awake to keep the driver company. The front seat passenger offered to drive but the person behind the wheel feels carsick these days if they're not in control. They sometimes turn to look at the driver but mostly keep their gaze straight ahead. They see and notice the same things. The numberplate

CLOUDY. A pelican sitting on top of a road sign. Occasionally the front seat passenger catches a pale and dusty version of themselves in the side mirror. After a petrol stop they crane back to whoever is behind them with an open bag of chips.

If there is more than one passenger in the back seat, human or animal, those passengers become co-conspirators. They have their games, which they choose to believe are not being witnessed.



Figure 2. Paris series (Stewart, 2024).

The origins of the book I'm writing began at Varuna in 2018. I'd reached the end of my weeklong stay, and as I stood outside, bags packed, the stray thought occurred to me that the cars parked there looked like marsupials in the scrub. I am rarely this fanciful. But here were two wombats huddled next to each other, top to tail, and a third off somewhere else doing its own thing. Let's blame that mountain air. I unfolded this idea and thought about how we are in the pouches of these creatures. From the moment we are brought home from the hospital. I unfolded the idea again and considered how cars, after all, run on fossil fuel, which is like blood ... and comes from animal bones in the first place. I unfolded the idea again and thought: well, the car as we know it is going extinct.

(It feels treacherous to use animals in this way, as a way of figuring an abstract impulse that may or may not have a subject (cars?) and form (book?) and which may or may not be about the climate and *this moment in history* and the paradox of why we [humans] sometimes love things that are so bad for us. Leave the animals alone, I keep thinking. Perhaps all I can do is pledge to explore this treacherous feeling.)

On the train from Katoomba back to the city I unfolded the idea yet one more time and resolved to start on the long and uncomfortable process of finally learning to drive. This speculative image of the car-as-marsupial sparked a curiosity about how I wanted to live, long before it became something I wanted to make art about.



Figure 3. Paris series (Stewart, 2024).

Let's skip forward some years. The photos I've included here are process images made at the tail end of a research trip to Paris in 2024. I spent a few weeks walking around the Boulevard Périphérique, a ring road built between 1956 and 1973 that marks the border of the city of Paris. The Periph is also Europe's busiest motorway. I had become interested in places where walking and car culture intersect. This, rather neatly, was the intersection of my research background (in 2023 I had completed a doctorate in poetry that examined feminist walking practices) and my experience (I was driving now, and I had a strong case of beginner's mind about everything to do with it.)

The year before I had spent time hanging out at Tokyo's Shibuya Crossing for the same reason. Because it moves me to think about the different temporalities that happen around and through us as part of everyday experience. A driver, unlike a walker, can look backwards and forwards almost simultaneously by virtue of some well-placed mirrors. As drivers we get to perform a feat that brings us closer to the experience of most other animals, like cows and sheep and dogs, which have more expansive fields of vision. I have in mind a quote by the Canadian poet Lisa Robertson, 'all our transports are spiritual', although there is a chance I have grossly misquoted her or else made it up. In Paris I wanted to walk and think in physical proximity to my material.

I trusted that this would allow certain thoughts to appear that wouldn't be possible otherwise.
The thoughts that would become the book.



Figure 4. Paris series (Stewart, 2024).

These photographs, with one or two exceptions, don't come from the ring road. Many don't even come from Paris. I started making them on the way to Charles de Gaulle airport, at the conclusion of my trip, and I continued making them some hours later from the back of a cab in Shanghai. A few days after that, energised by the great feeling of something having 'clicked', I stayed up all night and edited them on my phone while the plane carried me back to Sydney. (The plane – a special kind of megafauna?) Some months later, I found myself in Paris for a second time, and pulled out my phone camera again.



Figure 5. Paris series (Stewart, 2024).

The click. The sounds cars make – the boot closing, the transmission starting up, the wipers, the car windows, the doors opening and closing – these sounds are all engineered. Our bodies come to know and rely on them (for what? A sense of safety. And for world-building. For building the world that is the time and gravity and enclosure of the car.)

The click. Conventional car photography fetishes the object from without, its speed, its curves, the sinuous interplay of light and colour. The emergence of the car as the reigning commodity of the twentieth century – replaced in the twenty-first by the smart phone – was contiguous with the rise of mass media advertising. The way the car has been imaged has manifested this world that we know, our streets and neighbourhoods, but also our sense of family and community and our relationship to time. How else to say it – the car has always been a propaganda machine.

The click. The moment when some part of the creative process resolves itself. A decision about structure. A character arc. When a poem is saying just enough. The click didn't happen to me during my walks on the ring road. I filled many pages of my notebook, took hundreds of other photographs, discovered nightclubs and graveyards and plant nurseries, witnessed the gentrification of the city in full flight, ahead of the Olympics. But the click didn't come until I followed a spontaneous impulse to pull out my iPhone in the cab, switched the setting to panorama, and began making these images.



Figure 6. Paris series (Stewart, 2024).

The trouble with the click is that it can make you feel as if all your work is done. My weeks in Paris had been distilled into something concrete. But what was I supposed to do next? I had a pile of images, but my book was no closer to having been written.

A creative process has its byways and detours. A process without them isn't a process at all – it's a production line, each step already worked out, the end product predetermined. For a long time I've been making images *and* I've been writing. I've never quite worked out how to bring the forms together successfully.

This sifting process – experience into words, words into images, images into words – might be all it needs to be. From the back and forth emerges an idea that couldn't come into being any other way.



Figure 7. Paris series (Stewart, 2024).

Here is my emergent idea:

In his essay ‘Seen from the Window’, Henri Lefebvre likens cars to animals, too. This is an essay where he is beginning to document some of the concepts that form his influential *rhythmanalysis*. The window he is looking out of faces onto the street towards the Centre Pompidou. He writes of the traffic lights changing and ‘the bellowing rush of the large and small beasts’. He writes: ‘One does not converse while crossing a dangerous intersection, threatened by wild animals and elephants about to leap, taxis, buses, trucks and various cars’.

I’ve pointed to Lefebvre but I could point almost anywhere. Up until recently, we have been used to this sort of description. Cars bear the imprint, if not the DNA, of the animal. Before cars, horses and camels were what moved us. We have our idioms: ‘the purr of the engine’, ‘the roar of the engine’. We know about Jaguar.

But now our cars are starting to be named things like Cybertruck and their almost-silent engines have been engineered to whirr. Our kin the animals are increasingly in the rearview. Recognising this subtle shift – barely perceptible in the wash and spectacle and violence of the present moment – has opened up for me the longer view and presents new thoughts to animate.

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