“Autopia” – The Freeway as a Utopian Motif in Californian Art

László Laura
PhD, egyetemi adjunktus (MTSE)
laszlo.laura@tf.hu

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The study examines the Los Angeles freeway network from an aesthetic-ontological perspective, rather than a sociological one. Drawing on Marc Augé’s theory of non-places, Heidegger’s philosophy of space, and Béla Bacsó’s related reflections, it explores the problem of whether a transitional space such as the freeway can become a place – that is, whether contemporary art can humanize these impersonal transit zones. The questions are addressed through the analysis of California-focused visual art projects that employ various approaches, since California – on the one hand as the land of utopian dreams, and on the other as a world woven through with freeways and devoid of pedestrian streets – provides a fitting context for this inquiry. The broader stakes of the investigation concern how art, as a fundamentally ”place-making” entity, can confront the non-place, how it can bring it to light, and whether it can resolve this paradox.

Keywords: Freeway, Los Angeles, Non-Place, Utopia, Californian Art, Philosophy of Space, Heidegger, Augé, Dwelling, Transit Zone, Aesthetics

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„Autópia” – Az autópálya mint utópikus motívum a kaliforniai művészetben

A tanulmány a Los Angeles-i autópálya-hálózatot szociológiai megközelítés helyett esztétikai-ontológiai szempontból vizsgálja. Marc Augé nem-helyekről szóló elméletére, Heidegger térelméletére és Bacsó Béla vonatkozó gondolataira támaszkodva azt a problémát járja körül, hogy egy olyan átmeneti tér, mint az autópálya, képes lehet-e hellyé válni, azaz képes-e a kortárs művészet emberivé tenni a személytelen tranzitzónákat. A kérdésekre Kalifornia-fókuszú, de különböző megközelítésekkel élő képzőművészeti projektek elemzése révén kívánok választ adni, minthogy Kalifornia egyfelől az utópisztikus álmok földjeként, másfelől az autópályák által átszőtt, sétálóutcák nélküli világként megfelelő kontextust biztosíthat ehhez. A vizsgálódás általános tétje, hogy a művészet mint alapvetően „helyképző” entitás miként nézhet szembe a nem-hellyel, hogyan mutathatja fel, s feloldhatja-e egyáltalán ezt a paradoxont.

Kulcsszavak: autópálya, Los Angeles, nem-hely, utópia, kaliforniai művészet, térfilozófia, Heidegger, Augé, otthonosság, tranzitzóna, esztétika

"To dwell at home is merely to recollect ourselves, to return to ourselves – not as a final, closed stage of human existence, but as an ongoing practice we must repeat time and again."
(Béla Bacsó)[1]

Introduction

"All freeways lead to Los Angeles", "Nobody walks in L.A.", "Autopia" – these witty expressions mean more than we might think, and they also serve as a key motif in this paper.[2] They point to an essential feature of the city: its peculiar relationship to the automobile and the freeway, for which L.A. is so famous. As a simple and practical reason, one might say that the sheer extent of the urban settlement simply requires this dominant form of transportation. Needless to say, numerous studies have been written about the roots of car-dominance in the United States, and about how (and why) it became a status symbol and a way of life.[3] However, instead of pursuing the conventional urbanistic-sociological perspective, the present paper offers an aesthetic-ontological reading: it focuses, through the Los Angeles freeway, on the philosophical significance of the freeway as a space of non-dwelling. The discussion moves from Marc Augé's theory of non-places to Martin Heidegger's observations on space, complemented by some considerations of Béla Bacsó, before finally turning to some artistic approaches. This turn is motivated by the recognition that artistic reflections – particularly those emerging from California and Los Angeles-based visual art – offer a unique lens through which the freeway's problematic status as a transit zone can be examined. Cars and freeways are also cultural icons in their own right, and the artistic responses to the fact that Angelenos (inhabitants of Los

1 I dedicate this paper to the memory of Béla Bacsó. This is a revised version of a text I originally wrote during my stay at Humboldt University in Berlin, a stay made possible by his encouragement to learn German and to attend art history and art theory courses. The following pages bear the mark of what I learned there, as well as the intellectual atmosphere of the Department of Aesthetics at Eötvös Loránd University, where Professor Bacsó was my mentor for many years. He read the original version and left his corrections on it – characteristic notes, written on cardboard with a black fine-tipped felt pen. I now offer this revised paper to his memory, with gratitude for his unwavering professional and personal support. The original version of his cited motto: „Otthon lenni csak annyit jelent, magunkhoz térni, visszatalálni magunkhoz, ami az emberi létezésének nem végső és lezáruló pontja, ezt folyton-folyvást gyakorolnunk kell." (Bacsó 2004, 150.)

2 The term Autopia originates from Banham 1971. Banham calls the freeway system "a single comprehensible place, a coherent state of mind, a complete way of life, the fourth ecology of the Angeleno". (Banham 1971, 195.) The "fourth" implies the other three ecologies of Angeleno life: nature, the built environment, and social-cultural practice, with Autopia as the fourth, distinctively automotive ecology. This term Banham uses not negatively but as a neutral description of a working way of life (that means a- is not regarded as a negative prefix for utopia).

3 See Bottles 1987.

Angeles) spend so much of their lives on the freeway can be remarkably instructive.[4] In this paper, we focus on some of these responses, while keeping in mind that the freeway as a real place may be highly problematic: one cannot form an emotional bond with it, given the temporality of being on the road. California – which, by its very etymology, seems predestined to be the home of dreams and utopias – appears particularly well-suited for this analysis. The main questions are the following: how could the freeway become a "place" or a kind of "home" in the first place? How do artistic projects either "domesticate" it, or merely demonstrate the impossibility of such a personification? And how are all these questions framed by sociological and philosophical theories of space?

Being nowhere

"The freeway system supplies Los Angeles with one of its principal metaphors",[5] as David Brodsly observes in his study on L.A. freeways – and indeed, one can hardly imagine a postcard of the city without its asphalt.[6] This means that the road is not merely an efficient and unavoidable means of covering long distances, it is also treated as a tourist attraction, as a symbol visible from almost everywhere. Los Angeles is a place where the pedestrian appears as a kind of "Scotch mist" – someone immediately suspected of poverty or suspiciousness. Discovering the city on foot is almost impossible, not only because of the few pavements and the vast distances between attractions (there is no real downtown), but also because of the poorly organized public transport.[7] Instead, Los Angeles County boasts 508 miles of freeway, the city itself lies at the center of the Southern California Freeway System, comprising some thirty highways, which handle more than 99.4 million vehicle-miles of traffic per day. Anyone who opens a typical L.A. guidebook will surely find, among the very first pictures, a representation of the winding, interweaving motorway network – often illuminated at night.[8] In this automobile-centered civilization, nearly everyone owns a car, and it is not unusual for a single family to have two or three vehicles. It is no exaggeration to say that a significant part of life unfolds "at the wheel": the car serves not only as a space for relaxation (witness the drive-in restaurants, theaters, and cinemas), but also as a kind of mobile workplace – business can be conducted, appointments can be made. One might therefore feel that

4 Banham 1971, 214.
5 Brodsly 2002, 277.
6 Brodsly 2002, 277.
7 The 2016 film, titled *Nobody walks in L.A.* just presents this unthinkable project: the protagonists decide to walk around Los Angeles.
8 See Marael 2009.

life does not stop on the road. But can we fully accept this hypothesis? Or is it rather a simulacrum of reality, a "fake" life that unfolds there?

The French anthropologist Marc Augé defines the notion of "place" in his influential book *Non-Lieux – Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*.[9] According to his study, a genuine place requires identity, relations, and history – these are precisely the factors that connect a given space to human beings.[10] Everyone receives their identity from the place where they were born and we regard something as a place only if it stands at the center of human interactions: if "nothing" happens somewhere, it ceases to be a place. It is also essential that a place possess a kind of tradition, a "collective memory", capable of holding together a group of people who share a common origin. Consequently, a place always belongs to someone, and someone always belongs to a place – to a particular part of the world – since every perspective generates a unique, incomparable sense of place. Thus we arrive at a deeply anthropological and ontological point: the peculiar human capacity to "produce" space. A human being without their own space is, in a sense, a nobody – they do not truly exist.

Considering the deduction above, the so-called "non-place" appears almost "unimaginable" in relation to human experience. Marc Augé employs this radical counter-term to describe the *surmodern* (the "surreal" post-modern) world in which we live our present. This present is characterized by temporality: time and space have been greatly compressed – the globe has "become" smaller, and the speed of information now rivals the speed of thought in the era of social media, where anyone can share "what's on their mind" instantly, and, naturally, these contents can be altered or deleted at will. This implies that nothing is stable or fixed, thus the most essential skill today is flexibility. The prevailing tendency remains the replacement and disposal of outdated products rather than their repair or recycling, though these latter alternatives are becoming increasingly fashionable – albeit perhaps mostly among younger generations. Another aspect of this phenomenon is the ease with which one can leave a certain place (home?) behind, exchanging the familiar for the unfamiliar. In an era of open borders and low-cost airlines, by which every part of the world has become accessible to virtually everyone, it is no longer necessary to make a lifelong decision about where to live: home can be anywhere. This suggests that the possibility of being at home has become more essential than actually being at home. If we take this seriously, the notion of home itself becomes questionable, even virtual – which carries a grave consequence. As we know at least from Heidegger: "Dwelling,

9 For the English version see Augé 1995.

10 "These places have at least three characteristics in common. They want to be – people want them to be – places of identity, of relations and of history. The layout of the house, the rules of residence, the zoning of the village, placements of altars, configuration of public open spaces, land distribution, correspond for every individual to a system of possibilities, prescriptions and interdicts whose content is both spatial and social. To be born is to be born in a place, to be 'assigned to residence'." See Augé 1995, 52–53.

however, is the basic character of Being in keeping with which mortals exist."[11] Moreover, commuting between places means being always in transition, always on the road – or in other words, always in temporality. Perhaps it is now recognizable that we are not far from the paradox of "living" on the (L.A.) freeways.

The freeway, in Augé's view, is one of the most typical examples of the "non-place". The non-place – which resonates with the original meaning of *u-topia* – does not evoke any sense of belonging or the work of memory: it is a "passage" devoid of real identity, yet often governed by impersonal, computer-controlled instructions through which everything seems to be automated. On the freeways, such instructions appear in the form of speed-limit signs, signposts, or the voice of the GPS – every piece of information addressed to the driver along the road. According to Augé, non-places – freeways, airports, duty-free shops, supermarkets, elevators, and even digital interfaces and computer screens – dominate contemporary everyday experience. All the above examples evoke a peculiar sensation of being unable to clearly determine one's own position. In these transit zones, time is reserved for waiting: it is insufficient for forging new, deep relationships, because everyone is aware of the temporality of the situation, in this way, nothing seems to carry any significance. Yet at the same time, time appears more than abundant – and still, it feels empty between departure and destination. One might say that everything we do in these zones is an act of compensation, a way of concealing the vanity of being in-between: perhaps this is why these activities – and their participants – seem so "important" (reading messages, checking e-mails, scrolling through social media, making calls – and so on).[12] No wonder, then, that the irony of this situation has inspired numerous artworks, particularly in Los Angeles – which, in Reyner Banham's words, is the land of Autopia. Indeed, artists are especially well-equipped to respond to the challenges of this impersonal world, often by devising creative "surviving" strategies, ways of humanizing the non-place.

Although this is not his primary concern, Augé does not invoke Martin Heidegger or the philosophical tradition in this context. Instead, he draws on a lineage of French (and Swiss) thinkers, among them Michel de Certeau, Alphonse Dupront, François Furet, Paul Hazard, Marcel Mauss, and Jean Starobinski. Yet it is precisely at this point that the philosophical reflections on space – reflections that Heidegger develops with remarkable sensitivity – prove worth introducing into the discussion. In his study "Art and Space", he argues that "we would have to learn to recognize that things themselves are places, and do not merely belong to a place",[13] and we would also have to agree with the idea that the human being itself is a place. Although Heidegger's reflections

11 Heidegger 1971, 158.

12 This impersonal experience is precisely what Marc Augé vividly describes in the Prologue of his book, see Augé 1995, 1–5.

13 Heidegger 1973, 6.

here are primarily directed toward sculpture, this text nevertheless reveals his deep and complex relation to space and place. For Heidegger, sculpture is the embodiment of places – a work that opens up a region, preserves it, and gathers a free space around itself, thereby affording sojourn to things and dwelling to humans among them. Sculpture, in its place-establishing operation, is the formation of the truth of Being into corporeal form. This line of thought is naturally framed by the foundations of Heidegger's thinking on space in *Being and Time*. Heidegger does not start from physical or mathematical space, but from the existential spatiality of *Dasein* – the being that we ourselves are. "Being-in" does not mean the location of one bodily thing inside another, but rather dwelling, sojourning, being at home in the world. *Dasein* is not enclosed in an inner sphere from which it occasionally emerges, in its primary mode of being, it is already "outside", in the world, with things. This spatiality cannot be measured in the objective distances of ready-to-hand objects, it manifests itself in the circumspect nearness and remoteness of concerned, familiar involvement. The spatiality of *Dasein* is therefore not a position, but a directedness and de-distancing – not mere extension, but an original dimension of Being-in-the-world. The freeway, as a non-place, is precisely a space where this existential spatiality is suspended: the distances are objective, measurable, mathematical – but the nearness, the dwelling, the being-at-home, is nowhere to be found.

The question is how all this applies to our subject – what kind of spatiality is displayed by the freeway system? Interestingly enough, Heidegger himself, in another essay, makes explicit mention of the freeway:

> We attain to dwelling, so it seems, only by means of building. The latter, building, has the former, dwelling, as its goal. Still, not every building is a dwelling. Bridges and hangars, stadiums and power stations are buildings but not dwellings; railway stations and highways, dams and market halls are built, but they are not dwelling places. Even so, these buildings are in the domain of our dwelling. That domain extends over these buildings and yet is not limited to the dwelling place. The truck driver is at home on the highway, but he does not have his shelter there; the working woman is at home in the spinning mill, but does not have her dwelling place there; the chief engineer is at home in the power station, but he does not dwell there. These buildings house man. He inhabits them and yet does not dwell in them, when to dwell means merely that we take shelter in them.[14]

These lines already come from another essay by Heidegger titled "Building Dwelling Thinking". The author's observation is striking precisely because it acknowledges that the freeway is a building – indeed, a massive one – yet it is not a dwelling place. The truck driver is "at home" on the highway, yet he does not have his shelter there, he inhabits

14 Heidegger 1971, 144.

it, but he does not dwell in it. This distinction is crucial for our inquiry. The freeway is a built space, a structure, but it does not offer a place where identity, relations, or history could take root. It offers movement, not sojourn, transit, not abode. The truck driver's "being at home" is therefore not a genuine dwelling, but a kind of familiarity with the road – a functional, practiced ease that nevertheless remains detached from any true sense of place. The freeway, in Heidegger's terms, remains a building without dwelling, a space that shelters only in the sense of providing passage, not in the sense of offering a home. In this sense, it exemplifies precisely that which Heidegger identifies as the limit of building: a structure that houses man without allowing him to dwell. It is a space where one can be "at home" only in the most provisional, fleeting sense – a home on the move, a home that never arrives. From the perspective of Heidegger's "fourfold", the freeway cannot be regarded as a site of dwelling. For Heidegger, dwelling does not merely mean sheltering under a roof, it is the mode of being of mortals on the earth, under the sky, before the divinities, and in the company of others – in short, in the fourfold. The fundamental trait of dwelling is sparing and preserving: saving the earth, receiving the sky, awaiting the divinities, accompanying the mortals on their way. The bridge – Heidegger's famous example – gathers the fourfold in its own way: through it, the landscape is articulated, the banks are brought together, the traveler's path gains meaning. The freeway, by contrast, does not shelter the fourfold. It does not save the earth – it reduces it to asphalt; it does not receive the sky – it treats it merely as visual backdrop; it does not await the divinities – no sacred or transcendent dimension inheres in it; it does not accompany the mortals on their way – it merely enables functional passage. The freeway is therefore not a genuine building, in the sense that genuine building shapes the essence of dwelling and provides shelter for it. The freeway is a building, to be sure, but it does not shelter the fourfold – and precisely in this lies its character as a non-place. He contrasts the bridge that encompasses the fourfold with the freeway bridge, as he writes:

> The highway bridge is tied into the network of long-distance traffic, paced as calculated for maximum yield. Always and ever differently the bridge escorts the lingering and hastening ways of men to and from, so that they may get to other banks and in the end, as mortals, to the other side.[15]

In other words, due to its purpose-rational functionality, it is incapable of fulfilling the human need for "poetically dwelling". Béla Bacsó, in his study "The Place of Man" ("Az ember helye"), adds his reflections in the Heideggerian spirit. As he writes: "[S]pace is not something opposed to man; indeed, man is never outside space – man finds his

15 Heidegger 1971, 150.

place by being drawn into space. That is, man's contemporary existence cannot be separated from how he finds his place in the worlds he himself has built."[16] Then he adds that "to dwell at home is merely to recollect ourselves, to return to ourselves – not as a final, closed stage of human existence, but as an ongoing practice we must repeat time and again".[17] But how can this practice take place? Perhaps through art. And is art capable of filling the impersonal, transit spaces with humanity? Can art, then, create a sense of home in this context? The following analysis of several artistic projects seeks to offer possible responses to these questions.

Nobody walks in L.A.

As Reyner Banham points out, the "freeway system in its totality is now a single comprehensible place, a coherent state of mind, a complete way of life, the fourth ecology of the Angeleno".[18] Alex Scott, the photographer born in 1981, may wish to capture precisely this complex feature of Los Angeles: "hanging" around the roads can be regarded as a kind of lifestyle – not only for the artist, who is a native Angeleno – by which the freeways acquire an aesthetic dimension as well. In his photographic essay titled *Nobody Walks in L.A.*, he captured the freeways primarily at night, when the city's lights come to dominate the scene. The question immediately arises: why precisely at night? Solely for its anticipated aesthetic potential?

At this point, we can turn to the artist himself: "I climbed on freeways in the middle of the night for the last two years to capture these haunting photos that tell of an almost mythical version of L.A. that most certainly does not exist – one without cars."[19] Can we fully accept this statement? Would it be a "non-existing utopia" that no one could find anywhere? There are indeed no cars in these images, yet the freeways themselves – which "keep" L.A. alive – remain present, and the artist surely conveys some truth about the city by showing only the freeways, the very "symbols" of Los Angeles. It is as if he were asking: where are the people? Can we regard freeways as a trace of human presence? How "human" are these representations? Is "humanism" even required here? Most of the photographs suggest a profound emptiness, despite their often highly aestheticized forms: they are frequently beautiful, but people are

16 The original version of the text: „[A] tér nem valami az emberrel szemben levő, sőt az ember soha sincs a téren kívül, az ember a térbe vontan leli meg helyét. Azaz az ember jelenkori létezése nem választható el attól, hogy miként leli helyét az általa épített világokban." See Bacsó 2004, 148.

17 The original version of the text: „Otthon lenni csak annyit jelent, magunkhoz térni, visszatalálni magunkhoz, ami az emberi létezésének nem végső és lezáruló pontja, ezt folyton-folyvást gyakorolnunk kell." See Bacsó 2004, 150.

18 Banham 1971, 213.

19 See Scott 2015.

conspicuously absent. The real protagonists seem to be the motorways and tunnels, the columns, the graffiti, the poppies by the roadside, the neon commercial signs, advertisements and nameplates – captured especially from an "impossible" bird's-eye view, or from what appears to be a driver's perspective. Yet one attribute is common to all the images: they play with our altered approach to "landscape" – today, no one is surprised by the sight of a random hill crossed by asphalt roads. Perhaps, from an ordinary perspective, one cannot perceive the "inapposite" quality of the highway, one cannot "see" the peculiarity of the image, because our senses have grown accustomed to the modern world's landscape, so thoroughly characterized by cars. Alex Scott attempts to open our eyes to the fact that the freeway has "become an integral part" of nature, and that it can transform human perception imperceptibly – in other words, the freeway is indeed much more than what it appears to be at first glance.

As Andrew Cross emphasizes the phenomenon in question: "Delve into a contemporary account of the American landscape and you can be certain that driving along a road will be close to its heart."[20] In Scott's photograph titled "Head in the Clouds", we can observe this intriguing relation between nature and (auto-dominated) civilization: a tiny "golden" road runs through the left side of the dark hill (photographed, like many others, at night), with the lights of the "luxurious" skyscrapers visible in the background. Another striking image shows a tunnel cutting a mountain in half. Nature, as a leitmotif, also appears in the form of flowers ("Poppies"), or in the shape of palm trees on a narrow, grassy "island" between the roads (as in "Phoenix Rising"); or, in the case of "Two Worlds", where the freeways beneath the tunnel represent "Hades' Land", while the upper part is dedicated once again to palm trees as a kind of Paradise. The encounter between the artificial and the natural is always a compelling subject, and Scott's camera proves remarkably sensitive to its irony as well. Nobody walks in L.A.: the main title is literally accurate. Scott has likely focused on the impersonality of the transit zones of a metropolis, where the most tangible human trace is a neon subtitle: "Jesus Saves". The image titled "Truck Route" is a veritable drama of this emptiness, where all signs of life finally disappear: gray concrete structures are everywhere, without a single living organism. Do the Angelenos really live the greater part of their lives on these soulless, sterile non-places? Is the entire city a transit zone, a place of passage? In L.A., the freeway "has become an emotional word. […] Freeways may be associated with all the ills of a modern, and particularly automotive, metropolis: air and noise pollution, congestion, the destruction of neighborhoods, the specter of a concrete blanket over the landscape."[21] Perhaps we can read Scott's series as a "story" of how the artificial gradually gains ground, or how nature has given way to modern civilization. Yet during

20 Cross 2002, 249.
21 Brodsly 2002, 277.

this process, we arguably lose humanity along with nature: the positive "A-utopia" here becomes dystopia – a space where no life remains due to the freeway system. Perhaps this will be the cardinal question of the following art projects as well: how to transform this dystopia back into utopia? How to bring nature back to the road?

Bonnie Ora Sherk's performance titled *Crossroads Community (The Farm)* is, in her own words,

> a social art work. I think of it as a life-scale environmental performance sculpture with a layering of meanings, metaphors, and actual situations. I see it as art […] the naming of The Farm as art is perhaps the most perplexing and problematic idea for the establishment to accept, because the involved elements are diffused and for the conventional eyes and mind they are difficult to grasp.[22]

Sherk, an American landscape architect, created several "farms" under freeway overpasses and intersections in California, particularly in San Francisco. These were vegetable and flower gardens and also served as "homes" for various animals. Their functions extended beyond farming to include human activity – not only cultivation, but also performances and open-air leisure activities. The aim of "The Farm" was to function as a new kind of city culture-ecology park – a space capable of bringing together people from diverse cultures in a natural environment, right in the middle of traffic.

Perhaps the first thing to mention is the temporality of this project, and the plurality of the farms. Clearly, it was not intended to last for eternity. Indeed, it may point to the temporality of all living creatures. Yet this very feature makes it almost unimaginable and non-reconstructible – as is often the case with art ephemera – after those ages, it became a kind of "never-land". Another interesting point is the location: "landscapes" often lose their "face" in the face of freeways, for instance, which means that it becomes difficult to recognize an actual "place" within the uniform network of roads (which is precisely why signposts are necessary along the way: they indicate direction, not "natural" landmarks). On the one hand, Sherk's oasis stands out remarkably and has the potential to become a place by which one can orient oneself, precisely because it differs from its surroundings. On the other hand, the plurality of the gardens raises thought-provoking questions: where exactly are they? Are they "reproducible"? Are they as uniform as the freeways themselves?

The plurality of the gardens probably responds to the "plurality" of the freeways – the latter quasi "requires" this kind of approach. Therefore, "The Farm" is everywhere and nowhere at the same time: it is an alternative and imaginative world for drivers, a place for planting vegetables, playing with dogs, and engaging in various social activities. Yet

22 Sherk 1974–1980.

is it a "real" place? Why is it regarded as "art"? These two questions are connected, and "utopia" plays an important role in both. One might say that the significance of this Farm is rather symbolic than real, in this sense, the freeway system functions as a kind of art gallery. It is more a performance than a truck garden – a manifestation, a ritual, or a project of an ideal world, where the "audience" is the passing traffic itself. Just as no one would eat Andy Warhol's tomato soups in a contemporary museum, presumably no one would consume the carrots from this freeway "farm". It is an agricultural simulacrum: "not unreal but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumreference".[23] This is precisely why the actual location and duration are irrelevant in this case – despite the hypothesis that it is a possible and impossible world at once. It is deeply human, and it undeniably gives face to the freeway, reminding us of the "lost humanity".

A project quite similar in spirit is Senga Nengudi's *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*. Nengudi, an African-American visual artist, began her career with this public installation and performance, created in collaboration with Studio Z. Little documentation survives, which is another common point with the previous work. "What happened during the ceremony, why was it staged under the highway, and what exactly were the 'fets'?"[24] – asks Nick Stillman, for we have only a few photographs of the performance. It also exists in oral tradition, like a legend – as another possible world. Beneath a Los Angeles freeway overpass (Pico Boulevard), Nengudi sought to personalize the freeway columns: she created a female and a male part of the "stage", decorating the columns with talismanic and Afro-American fetish objects of "undefined expressive power" – pantyhose fabric and "densely clumped, multicolored forms, all quite diverse in shape and color" – in order to make the project evoke "African fetishes",[25] and perhaps to suggest the basis of harmony. According to the available records, members of Studio Z, including Nengudi, performed rituals and dance, accompanied by what may have been authentic music. There was no grass, participants lay down on the sand (or construction waste?) beneath the crowded overpass, as if on a beach, perhaps simulating nature and an ideal lifestyle amid the smell of petrol. "Had the sense of Africa" among the dirt, the artist recalls – but what else can we read from her art? It seems that being human is only possible through simulation: we simulate life, we simulate farms, we simulate public parks, we simulate fresh, unpolluted air, joy and happiness – and we, the "inheritors" of this project, nearly four decades later, are only able to imagine that "happiness" through the sounds of Africa. Who knows what exactly happened there? It happened somewhere, once – no one can be certain of its reality. But perhaps it is enough to believe in it – utopia works precisely in this way. Simulation "starts from the utopia of [the] principle of equivalence, from

23 Baudrillard 1983, 11.
24 Stillman 2012.
25 Stillman 2012.

the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as reversion and death sentence of every reference".[26] This ritual also represents a kind of rebellion, an alternative to the modern world, a possibility of surviving the dominance of "non-places" – through another performative and ephemeral "non-place".

Finally, it is worth noting that the idea of turning the road into a "stage" also occurred to other Los Angeles artists, perhaps most notably to Joel Kyack in the 2010s. His performance, or more precisely, puppet show, titled *Superclogger*,[27] is literally staged on the road – specifically, from a moving car on the freeways. In a white Mazda pickup, Kyack performed mini-plays for drivers on L.A. highways via a radio station, broadcasts that are only "enjoyable" in heavy traffic. This is another attempt to give a "face" to the impersonal "in-between" situation, to offer some experience in "neverland", to fill the emptiness of being in a transit zone. As we have seen, projects of this kind are only possible through other non-places, in this case, the moving car represents "anywhere": a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the road – to adapt Michel Foucault's words from his essay "Of Other Places".28 Perhaps a possible form of "Autopia" is presented here, one in which only human creativity makes the sounds of the GPS and the automatic instructions of the road bearable. In this framework, where the main criterion is somehow "making a home" in this "homelessness", even the smallest gesture of creativity counts – though perhaps without any artistic quality. Yet the "quality" of the puppet shows is absolutely irrelevant, because it is all simulacrum: Superclogger seems to be a "show", but it is, of course, another utopia, one that places performance across the audience. It is merely an action that rescues us from the captivity of the freeways, though only by offering the illusion of a real existence.

What, then, can we say in conclusion about the question that has occupied us throughout this study – namely, whether contemporary art is capable of filling the impersonal transit spaces of the freeway with humanity? Heidegger's thought of the fourfold may lead us to recognise that a merely functional space of passage is incapable of gathering earth, sky, divinities, and mortals, and thus of creating a place in the sense of dwelling. It is presumably this very condition that motivated the artistic projects analysed above. But are they capable of altering this? And should they attempt to do so? Scott's photographs, Sherk's urban farm, Nengudi's freeway ritual, Kyack's car-borne puppet show are attempts to practice that "finding of place" within spaces that deny it, but they do not change the fact that the freeway remains an impersonal transit space. Yet without art, we would pass by this fact indifferently. Art turns us toward this problem, toward this truth, it makes it visible. Heidegger in *The Origin of the Work of*

26 Baudrillard 1983, 11.
27 See Kyack 2010.
28 Foucault 1986.

Art makes this vivid through his well-known reference to Van Gogh's peasant shoes: in everyday use, the shoes are inconspicuous ("ready-to-hand") tools, but in the painting – torn from their context – they speak: the fatigue of labor, the dampness of the earth, the anxiety for bread are concentrated in them.[29] The artwork does not merely depict, it opens up a world, it tears the thing out of its everyday inconspicuousness so that its truth may appear. Similarly, the projects examined here do not transform the freeway into a dwelling place, but they do tear it out of its functional invisibility: they show that the non-place is not merely a passage, but a space marked by absence and human need. They direct our attention to what we would otherwise overlook, and in doing so, they reveal the truth of the non-place. The philosophical dimension of "Autopia", then, lies not in an achieved utopia, but in the permanent, unresolved tension between transit and belonging, a tension that art makes visible, but never resolves. For this reason, we may say that the work of art, and the interpretation of artworks, constitute a mode of dwelling in the world. As Béla Bacsó argues, they help us find our way back to ourselves – yet this is not a final or conclusive point, but something we must practice again and again.

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29 Heidegger 1977, 158–165.

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