

Framing Memory Epilogue by Wolfgang Zurborn

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In *Journeying 66* Rosemarie Zens embarks on a very special journey. Her quest to revisit Route 66 after more than 40 years is not driven by nostalgia. Instead, she treats it as an experiment to see and find the traces of what she remembers from her first trip in 1966. In the intervening years Route 66 has become like a museum, a reservoir for myths standing for a collective attitude toward life back in the 1960s – the legendary highway having been turned into a symbol of the call for freedom. Although Americans managed to break free from many rigid social structures in those years, high-flying ideals were soon tempered by political realities. It would be easy to look back with an ironic and distanced gaze to judge rather than to record the utopian pipe dreams of the icons of that generation. But this is not the purpose for Rosemarie Zens. She is well aware that she herself was chasing an illusion when first setting out to capture the American dream. Leaving everyday duties and cares behind, she instead resolved to explore the existential state of being on the road itself – both back then and today.

Zens is a crossover-artist between photography and literature. Novels such as, *The Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck and, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee, among others, motivated her to delve into the American adventure. She was intrigued by Steinbeck's realistic account of the tales of farmers in Oklahoma during the world economic crisis, when their livelihood was shattered by a prolonged drought. And she was captivated by the image of thousands of families trekking westward along Route 66 to California, following a promise of a better future. These destinies must have resonated with her own experience of growing up in a refugee family from Pomerania. Her view of America was shaped by a three-month cross-country trip in 1966 and a one-year stint as a teacher in Berkeley; she found herself caught up between a fascination with the country and the hope that social conditions might indeed improve one day.

How would she, a flower child of the 1960s, be able to work such divergent experiences into her 2010 reconstruction of her previous adventures in America? Is photography a medium that might be able to resolve the conglomeration of private recollections, social ideologies and media myths into a meaningful picture? Zens did well to concentrate on the process of travel itself, simply taking the pictures that presented themselves to her. Her impatience at the beginning of the trip at having to come up with a completely new concept in order to stand out from all the other road photographs taken before has been replaced by an openness to those special moments when the world outside and the image in the mind's eye suddenly coincide. This is the attitude adopted by street photography, which displays skepticism toward anything planned or staged, seeking instead to convey the immediacy of everyday experiences. The images Zens created are detailed depictions of roadside scenes: landscapes, cattle ranches, motels, billboards, mailboxes and, repeatedly, the asphalt of Route 66 itself, leading off into infinity. The photographs were taken in documentary style, and yet they are anything but sober, objective appraisal.

This sounds like a contradiction, because particularly in German documentary photography we are accustomed to an entirely different approach. There, “neutral” lighting, perspective and serial arrangement eclipse any subjective interpretation. Dispassionate recording is the absolute maxim in this understanding of the documentary. The old master of American documentary photography, Walker Evans, took a completely different stance on the relationship between photography and reality. To him the photographic image was the most subjective expression possible of our dialog with the outside world. He had no firmly entrenched concept, no stringent ordering system to which he subjected all

that he depicted, which is why he was able to create documents of American life that, despite their analytical precision, also evoke a feeling of closeness to what is portrayed. He was commissioned by the Farm Security Administration to photograph the plight of farmers in the American Midwest during the Dust Bowl.

His photographs also influenced Zens' notion of a reality beyond all the mythic ideals. However, knowledge of all the photographic role models that have molded our perception of a human-centered landscape can also lead to a creative block, hindering new and original viewpoints. This is why, before her trip, Zens deliberately avoided immersing herself in the imagery of prominent photographers such as Stephen Shore, Robert Adams or Robert Frank, in order to prevent her own gaze from being distorted by any preconceived visions. Zens set off on her own and only stayed longer in a few places: in Santa Fe, at Grand Canyon National Park and in Santa Monica. Constantly being on the move and taking pictures, she developed her own dynamic, which helped open her eyes to getting closer to the essence of framing memories.

People rarely appear in her pictures, and then only as marginal figures. But these are nonetheless "human landscapes." Human civilization is reflected in subtle form, in the handling of agricultural land, in the often peculiar architectural structures, in the omnipresence of vehicles of every shape and kind and in the messages proclaimed on billboards. Zens is picking up on the tradition of landscape photography presented for the first time in the legendary "New Topographics" exhibition in 1975. The young photographers of the 1970s, among them Henry Wessel, Lewis Baltz and Nicholas Nixon, distanced themselves from a sublime view of untouched nature like the one artfully cultivated by Ansel Adams, and instead focused on the man-altered world all around them. A thread running through all their works is the tension between natural environment and human civilization. Just because they eschewed any notion of emotionalism in their scrutiny of the landscape does not mean that they regarded themselves as neutral observers. Most of them were well aware of their own subjective interpretation of social realities. Robert Adams thus objected to the exhibition organizers' slogan that the photographs presented an objective image of the world. "What about my own biography?" he wanted to know.

No photographic work can be detached from its subjective process of creation and the aesthetic and epistemological criteria that shaped it. A personal interest in certain situations, value attributions and perceptions are indispensable prerequisites for the development of a living photographic signature. Only from a standpoint that has evolved step by step can reality be deliberately captured in a telling image. The notion of photography to procure a realistic picture of the world, that conveys a single, clear-cut meaning, results in a dispassionate cataloging, rather than the exciting process that makes tangible the photographer's own personal relationship with what is portrayed.

What gives *Journeying 66* its special quality is that Rosemarie Zens has found a coherent form for bringing together her own personal images of what it was like to live in the 1960s – a spirit of optimism that would shape the path of her future life – with views of what America looks like today along Route 66. The sequence in which the photographs are arranged in the book is essential. Rhythmically alternating between wide-angle views of majestic landscapes and narrow glimpses of settings utterly transformed by human life, Zens weaves a compelling fabric of space and time. She deliberately avoided imposing a linear narrative on her pictures, because this would not have reflected how she experienced the trip. Her sensations were much too ambivalent to be smoothed out in the editing process. Recurrent views of Route 66 leading off over the horizon generate a feeling of speed and restlessness, while vernacular still lives by the roadside slow things down again.

A picture of motorcycle riders seen in the rearview mirror bundles these contradictory sensations of standstill and movement, vastness and proximity, fixation on a goal and disorientation. This is a complex image with several picture planes, summoning parallels with the photographs of Lee Friedlander. As a critical chronicler of the American way of life in the 1970s, he developed a pictorial language, one able to transform the chaotic happenings on the streets and the complex interplay of bodies, architecture, objects, symbols and spaces into a legible arrangement, a comprehensible composition. Like Zens, he seems to have been driven by the same yearning to discover a better world just over the horizon while knowing that getting there is impossible. A stylistic device that recurs throughout his photography is the incorporation of the car's interior into the picture. This art makes the outside world look like a picture within a picture. The ordinary world becomes a theater piece within real life. This intersection between real life and fiction is essential to Rosemarie Zens' *Journeying 66* as well. It enables the viewer to oscillate between the present-day reality and memories of what used to be.