

Hans Schabus

The Long Road from Tall  
Trees to Tall Houses

20 February – 24 April 2016

Textbook

**SALZBURGER  
KUNSTVEREIN**

## A text by Séamus Kealy

*Every life is in many days, day after day. We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love. But always meeting ourselves.*

– James Joyce. *Ulysses*.

*... myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form.... We shall therefore take language, discourse, speech, etc., to mean any significant unit or synthesis, whether verbal or visual: a photograph will be a kind of speech for us in the same way as a newspaper article; even objects will become speech, if they mean something.*

– Roland Barthes. *Mythologies*.

*It's called the American Dream. You have to be asleep to believe it.*

– George Carlin. *Life is Worth Losing*.

There was a critical moment in Stephen Hawking's career when he made a miscalculation. A central equation on the future of the universe he had mastered was sent back to him. He was convinced his original calculations were correct. He had his team repeatedly re-formulate the figures for months. Again and again they returned—the figures didn't add up. Again and again, he sent them back, something was not done correctly, he told them. They returned a final time. The news was the same and he had to concede his error: Time will not reverse itself when the universe begins to contract. There will be no way to return to our youth.

This situation has two parallels to this text about the exhibition *The Long Road from Tall Trees to Tall Houses* by Hans Schabus. Firstly, Hans Schabus' project is by its very nature also an enquiry into being and time. Secondly, the analytic approach that Hawking applies to his work is something that I wish to be mindful of, with the full knowledge that I am no scientist. That is, since the formulations in this text—also reviewed and revised—do come up with some sort of equation that does not replicate

nor ultimately explain Hans Schabus' exhibition, these formulations and the resulting equation actually propose, as a scientist does, a hypothesis.

I leave it to others to prove or disprove it, if any will to do so may arise. This text is also mindful of Roland Barthes texts on mythology and semiology; how one hangs upon the other.<sup>ii</sup> From the examination of the collected signs in Hans Schabus' peripatetic project and resulting exhibition emerge postulations that endow onto the entire *oeuvre* a string of signified meanings. Each therein produces a sign that altogether lead to a construction of a language around the exhibition. Instead of continuing with the signs in order to build a signifier for a new signified, which results in a further, compiled sign (myth), we take another direction: The string of signs balances first from conjecture as a testing ground, then to narrative and secondary analysis, and finally to resulting conclusions. Therefore throughout the text, especially as we examine the post-cards, the use of the term *sign* will be applied to elements of the images that are highlighted and sometimes magnified in meaning.

What I have found pertinent is to write this text in the chronological fashion that complements Hans Schabus' exhibition in its daily journal-like structure, as we will see. While his overall project has been assembled by the passage of time—there is a beginning, a middle and an end—it is also assembled with the hindsight of the journey. Thus this text also follows a wisdom of hindsight (or perhaps a folly of such) and thus is assembled into a three part structure. The beginning we have already encountered: Stephen Hawking's mistake and the quandary of physics to explain the universe. The middle is an analytical response to the postcards that Hans had found, written upon and even collaged daily, with the odd photograph included from the series also explored in writing. The final section is an attempt to marry some of the findings in this analysis, but in a very modest step towards this kind of marriage—merely as a proposed means to approach this exhibition and the forms of meaning that it espouses, whether intentionally or not.

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For nearly two decades of practice, Austrian sculptor Hans Schabus has been making artworks and installations that self-reflectively and curiously

play with his experiences of the cosmos. His own surroundings are often the key reference with which he builds ideas into physical manifestation. He has dug massive holes in his studio, burrowed under museums, sailed through sewage systems, and in 2005, transformed the Austrian pavilion at the Venice Biennale into a mammoth, labyrinthine mountain.

This exhibition itself emerges from the artist's own reflective and poetic excursion through space and time. From June 19<sup>th</sup> to July 30<sup>th</sup> 2015, Hans Schabus journeyed 5,352 km across the United States on his bicycle. Each day, at high noon, he stopped to document his whereabouts. Each evening he wrote a postcard, often attaching fragments or writing notes from his daily experiences. In a quasi-journalistic manner, he tracked his progress from one end of the country to the other. This daily ritual and the journey itself inform the installation, which also involves an intervention in the architecture itself—a large hole cut in the wall.

The exhibition consists of 42 framed works that, as the artist indicates, form a “sort of horizon within the space,” combined with bicycle parts hanging from the ceiling, and the negative and positive of the wall intervention. The fragmented bicycle, the artist says, references the “vertical axis as the high-noon photographs do.” Each of the framed works are more like panels, presenting archived material in a kind of presentation, rather than, the artist says, the sense of a window, as in traditional pictures. The framing is also important, where the vertical frame-parts are made out of a “classical aluminum profile in order to be less visible in the overall context.” The horizontal parts are “made out of a wooden distance bar to visualize a common bond.” He continues, “the yellow colour is mixed in reference to the ‘corn yellow’ of the painted road middle strip” that he faced day in and day out.

Each panel represents a day of his 42 day journey. Within the panels are four images, positioned identically in each frame. On the top right of each panel firstly, is the photograph that the artist took each day at noon with his iPhone. In the next two frames on the left, slightly below are the front and back sides of each postcard he found or created, and sent back to his studio through the post. Finally in the bottom right-hand corner is a photograph from his hotel room that evening.

On each postcard's face there is the name of the city that he encountered that day. If there wasn't a postcard available or just one without a name, then the artist took the name from a newspaper or sticker or similar things and taped it on. On the backside of each, he taped the business card of the motel and wrote the daily distance. The immensity of the voyage—from one coast of the US to the other, in 42 days, on a bicycle—harkens us to consider an immense, near immeasurable landscape compressed within these 42 frames. This is, naturally, an infinitely-small space within the scope of our galaxy, and inconceivably microscopic in comparison to the universe, but this project is exactly a sketch of a corner of the universe. It is, for me, a measurement, in a controlled system, of space in time, in reference to the greater *everything* surrounding it.

### Forty-Two Days

By the end of this analysis, it became apparent, that one should not over-analyse. Rather, a more spontaneous and open response to the workings of the artist's journey is important. As I continued from image to image, I would sometimes stop and research the history of the cities or the representations found in these images. I found, however, this was important to do in order to imagine the journey and the thought-process of the artist as the journey unfolded rather than to try and seal some sort of conscious narrative that is constructed piece by piece with the continual accumulation of images and their embedded histories. These could themselves be withheld or more readily apparent. This is not a question of writing off the meaning of these histories and associations, but rather to not permit them to over-write the crux of Hans Schabus' project, which we return to later.

(1) The journey starts in California, with the first image at high noon by Schabus taken in the breath-taking Avenue of the Giants, just outside of Myers Flat. Here Hans Schabus is embedded within the tall trees, from which the journey springs, as does the title of the blog he created along his journey and therefore, this exhibition. The first postcard, written upon that same, first evening, depicts an aerial view of the idyllic town of

Garberville. This is an outdated photo probably dating from the 1960s but still presumably used today since it conveys a romantic notion of this far-west town of post-war dreams within grand nature. The look of the image, combined with the curious sketches on the reverse of the postcards, might suggest an initial estrangement that the artist feels, as he has just arrived within this nation of apparent open-ness, hospitality, dreams and patriotism. Immediately one might associate Robert Frank's photo series "The Americans" from the late 1950s with the task that Hans Schabus has set out for himself: A journey through manufactured memories and billboard-identity that itself is a rite of passage and self-discovery in one sense, and a juxtaposition of American and European notions of civil society in the present tense, with a sense that the post-war boom and romantic notions of the American west (whether historical or not) must inform this juxtaposition.

But we will see later that this is not necessarily so.

(2) The second post-card is the first active collage by Schabus. On it we see a montage of readily-available images he has found, presumably that very day. The orange "greetings from California" card with the row of scantily-clad, 1950s pin-up girls is partially covered by a monstrous, black, pick-up truck. Regressive femininity and aggressive masculinity, both of high-paced marketing from two different eras, meet oddly here. Should we make something of this? Is this some ironic engagement and slight wonder about this context he is suddenly in by Schabus? On the reverse are "USA Forever" stamps, which continually re-appear in later post-cards.

(3 – 6) Here is an image of Clear Lake itself and some collaged packaging from a comb Schabus clearly bought for his journey. The card has Johnny Cash stamps on its reverse, the first of many. Will we need to read this as a continual clash of competitive narratives with meaningful icons? This might be so, as the fourth post-card continues this apparent gesture with an image of bounty compressed in a county fair. This is again an older image from a recent, photographic past, where the ordinary is "great." This narrative of American splendour, that which is the soapbox of contemporary American politics for example, is a daily experience. We also see stamps on the reverse side instructing us to "celebrate," in the lead-up to Independence Day, just over a week away. More instructions in

pink (“Try Me! Plug me into your phone.”) are collaged onto the next image of Nevada City—here a cycling race, in pause, in the town centre. And on its reverse appears the first of many Batman sticker-stamps. One might wonder, is the artist thinking of some sort of meaning-making but is simultaneously willing to let it unfold by chance? Is what appears day by day in this format he presents indicative of the treasure-chest of advertising, product-availability, self and civic representation, nationhood and patriotism, as well as the manufacturing-dream-factory and myth-making of post-war USA? The signs are almost always antiquated, but are still found in the gift shops and tourist offices of the American west, held as representative, in some manner, of the American now. Sometimes the images and self-representation is so bland and cliché, as in the next post-card of a steam-train of the old west, that we might wonder where can this journey of image-collection really take us? Here the train clearly harkens back to the conquering of the west and the subsequent industrial revolution, which we can assume are ever-embedded in the consciousness-production of this region.

At this moment, one might stop and consider, is it fair to try to make some sort of cultural analysis based on the collection of post-cards and their inscriptions by a Viennese contemporary artist deliberately cycling across the United States? One can stop these chains of thought for a moment. If one was to read “Vienna” by its post-cards, naturally a most similar type of deduction may emerge, and it could be naïve and off-base. But within it would be some small but ripe kernels of truth, as contemporary psychoanalysis in the form of Slavoj Žižek, for example, would tell us. The order of these images until now, since they are collected in a chronological order within a closed-system that Hans has produced for himself to journey through, presents this conundrum in a few ways: We might indeed do some sort of cultural analysis and try to read the meaning-making that the artist appears to be engaged in, but then we might also step away from reading the *oeuvre* in a linear fashion, while also not entirely relinquishing the linear approach simultaneously—for that is simply how it happened.

(7 - 8) So then, “The People-The Railroad-The Water-The Homesteads” appears next, covered partly by the packaging and text of “100% Petroleum Jelly,” which the artist clearly needed for a scrape along the

route. On the reverse is one of many business cards that Schabus collects. We begin to imagine the people (as living, breathing entities with thoughts and forms distinct from his own) that he did or indeed did not meet along the way (or merely passed by, sometimes catching a glimpse of them). We might call this, for now, a heightened encounter. Which makes one consider the possibility of the loneliness of this journey, an idea somehow anticipated in the next post-card: "The Real On Lonely-Welcome to Middlegate: The Middle of Nowhere ... Population 17." Here the cliché of the old western sign with such an inscription meets reality—or is this simply a quasi-parody? Partly true, partly kitsch? On the reverse is another Batman stamp. This one again states "Batman / Forever / USA." Would we make a reading of this? In one sense, I think not. There is an expression, quite North American that goes "it is what it is." This can be read in a literal, empty fashion or perhaps as a more Zen attitude, but either way, the meaning of the subject is cancelled. It is not approached. It is avoided. It is denied. Which urges me to instead turn back to the subject, here being Batman, and to suggest a reading: This comic book figure, both hero and anti-hero depending on the epoch he emerges from is, for me, emblematic of celebrated but twisted American ideals. The Batman from the original comics (1939) or later television series (1960s) is simply a costumed policeman compared to the later post-1990s comic-book dark knight with an orphaned childhood, but still generated out of almost infinite privilege and wealth. This later, darker figure is also the Batman of the most recent Christopher Nolan films, starring Christian Bale (and unfortunately, Ben Affleck next). Batman's alter-ego Bruce Wayne is a multi-billionaire who is (mostly) closely tied with the city politics. This man of extraordinary wealth is not self-made (he has inherited his fortune), but is always alone and therefore appears to be in the guise of an entrepreneur. The early trauma of losing his parents violently fuels his ongoing, primal motivation to fight crime. So his fortune is funneled into his bullet-proof, skin-tight costumes, gimmicky paraphernalia, high-octane vehicles, acrobatic equipment, his faithful man-servant, and underground batcave, all used to fight petty crime and a series of madmen. Whether the Joker, Clayface, Two-face, Hugo Strange, The Penguin, or the Mad Hatter, all his rivals are insane and direct unfortunate souls turned criminals with their own troubled (but, markedly, underprivileged) childhoods. The metaphor could not be clearer: Set in a near but unimaginable future and alter-world, the world's 1% fights off, diminishes and



is defined by the poorer part of the population who do not abide by the ruling gothic capitalism, but instead believe some other mad narrative as an ethical imperative. Dressed like a sadomasochistic perpetuator, Batman beats the criminals to a pulp with a clean conscience and clear will aided by his own childhood anguish. His subjectivity slides between two cyphers; a menacing, often sadistic “punisher” sometimes scorned by society, and an idealized billionaire, admired by society.

A more American narrative one could not conjure. In the place of a political figure, folk legend, artist, founding father or revolutionary on American stamps, instead we continually come across this almost infantile and completely fantastical representation.

Also on this post-card, we see stamps of “Forget Me Not,” for helping to find missing children, a dark narrative we can imagine happening in a Batman story, for example, and here the grim under-current of reality beneath the fuzzy dream-work of America. But “Forget Me Not” also seems like an omen for the traveling artist, for we will later continue to see more reminders of not losing oneself.

(9 - 10) Even the “Loneliest Road in America” conjures this, in the next post-card. We begin to imagine the forlorn-ness of Hans Schabus on his journey, again a self-imposed one as he has done repeatedly in his peripatetic practice. Did he choose the card or did the card choose him? Either way, we feel that Schabus might have anticipated these notions. On the reverse of the next card comes “Forget Me Not” again, together with the stamp “From Me To You,” both of which signify a kind of disappearance of self along this journey, within the solitude of the assignment he has self-imposed. With such a process, at this stage, the artist may be beginning to vanish into the landscape and into his ritualized gestures. The vastness of the universe moves from the background of this journey starkly into the foreground. Then he comes upon “Eureka” (Eureka, NV). This is the tenth day and this is the tenth post-card and every small mark—each stain, each letter, a torn ea—mark, a missing number, the composition of colours - all become equally relevant and irrelevant. All become equally nothing and everything. The controlled system begins to release findings.

The hum of the cosmos and the crackling of the tires on the highway are more discernible.

(11) This kind of trance is split by the arrival of a yellow train, a yoghurt label affixed over it. Here the self-representation of this place, East Ely, is marked by Hans and played with. That which is distant, unreal, unimaginable, unknown, untouched, unseen was momentarily experienced. No matter how empty or banal or kitsch or ridiculous or meaningful this place may be, it is profound to consider that the artist was there. This is so even if he stayed in the blandly-named Main Hotel. It is even moreso the case.

(12) The “Healthy Clean” label glued onto the typical mid-west flat landscape with its box-formed motel on the side of the highway added to the “Border Inn” provokes a sense of being at the limits of something. In one sense, the artist is outside the “civilization” that he is accustomed to. In another sense, he might be out of his mind from the exhaustion, solitude and confines of his project. A Batman logo appears here again, its battle-axe-like shape somehow does not make ridiculous a continued sense of wonder that these post-cards both address and contain. The “From Me to You” stamp reminds us that this card is from Hans Schabus to Hans Schabus. It is from himself of that time on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June in 2015 to himself back in Vienna, over a month later. The artist then and the artist later are two, separate entities, physics might tell us, with the mark of time and the passage of self-hood, we might also consider what a psychoanalyst might tell us about a fragmentation of self throughout this journey and its remnants before us in the exhibition.

Then one considers, there were thirty days to go.

(13 - 14) Two Batman stamps are on the reverse of the “Annual Snow Goose Festival,” in Utah. A card with the Missionary Training Centre follows with a to-go menu atop. We might sense that the artist is intervening less with the materials and trying less and less to oversee juxtapositions and clashes of meaning. They will unfold on their own in this over-loaded universe that he encounters daily.

In one sense, this is in fact an effective counter-strategy to the common appropriation of pop culture or movies, as done by many artists today, as it had been by American artists we may here consider, such as Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg or most especially James Rosenquist. Here in these panels by Schabus on these small post-cards are these collaged images, with the accidental and incidental ruling the decision-making. Arbitrariness appears to be at the heart of the production of meaning. It appears that the less searching for a selection that there is, the more that is unveiled.

(15) The most perfectly suitable signifier in a chain of associations arrives next; the museum. This is the perfect repository of history and therefore the perfect constructor of meaning. Whether this image is a choice by Schabus or not is not really important. On the reverse side, another icon, the dead master Johnny Cash, looking at us, reminding us of the absurdity of life and singing, perhaps, about a boy named Sue.

(16) With day sixteen, it appears that the collaging here becomes more obsessive, uncertain, grasping; frantic. Or the artist simply needs to relinquish himself of an excessive amount of stickers in a set of circumstances that prescribe that he must carry next to nothing with himself. But in fact he has made six white stripes with these stickers to emulate the 13 stripes of the US flag, a nod to Independence Day, that very day. And thus the collage over a depiction of Dushesne River, a place we most probably cannot know, is born.

(17) Incidental meaning-making continues and becomes bizarre with the artist's arrival in Dinosaur, Colorado. The meanings, associations and references that we are already familiar with when considering the vastness of an American landscape and its stream of dinosaur movies (with the film series Jurassic Park, Steven Spielberg even reincarnates the dinosaur age into the present or near future, to form a blending of eons into a single moment) now also collide with the inexplicable, unbelievable history that preceded us on this planet. With a hot summer over one's head, the dizzying notion that these great beasts were as present and real as we are, despite our seeming familiarity through cinematic representations of them, oversteps meaning. We consider that these creatures venerated in fantasy movies were perished by the whims of the

universe. The Terrace Motel, which is the “The Gateway to Dinosaur National Monuments” (with “Clean, Reasonable Rooms”), itself embodies the factness of this world of images and meaning-making that the artist encounters daily. For America is highly tolerant of consuming even the most profoundly inconceivable of histories (even those well before human time itself) and easily converting them into the wheels of consumerism or even into the infantile beliefs of creationism.

Meanwhile the artist’s legs keep pumping along the long, grey stretches and broken yellow lines of American freeways.

(18) Cowboy culture and the mythology of the western is another one of these American-led fantasies. It is no coincidence, incidentally, that another journey and film that Schabus made (sailing in the same Viennese sewers first glimpsed internationally in the 1949 film, and one of the greats, *The Third Man*) over ten years before was entitled *Western*. This post-card has “Maybell” in red pasted onto an image of two cowboys on horseback leading cows towards a full, red moon in an open plain. This icon is almost universally interchangeable with American identity both within its nation and world-wide. But affixed within this journey through signs, one can redouble one’s view of it, reconsider it not only as an iconic image that we can deconstruct politically or culturally or historically, but moreso visually as if we had never encountered this type of appearance before. Did the artist feel like an alien plopped onto a planet solo, at this stage? On the reverse side, Schabus draws the logo of the Victory Hotel, affixes another Johnny Cash sticker, and we might think that he is taking a pleasure (guilty or not) in this endless collision of signs, even if the ultimate meaning to the population is a wall of wondrous, marveled and desired signs that collectively holds reality together. The artist can move beyond this wall, indeed, through this wall of desire, as the voyeur, the journeyer who collects but does not keep. He takes evidence to send onto a lab back in Vienna (his studio) for a later, objective analysis, where specimens will be placed under glass for examination. He can unfold different meanings and build another universe of signs that is from this source but not necessarily parallel or needful of it. And to top all of this, it does not matter that this existing universe of signs that has its function of keeping American society rationally functionable (while, I will add, being made up of a series of different madnnesses, as practically any society is)

is ultimately determinable by an overall, agreed delusion in the United States. It does not matter, for ultimately, it is still minable.

(19) A post-card from the town of Steamboat Spring is next. It is a place of idyllic tranquility, presumably, as the image conveys to us. Might the artist rest from his project here? Can there be an absorption of nature and beauty along the way? We might venture that there can also be a real sublime existing alongside the whirlwind of man-made associations and dreams. It may indeed fold into it.

Perhaps until now, this text has focused too much upon the signs that we first identified arising throughout the text; those the artist collects in the forty-two days and the forty-two panels in the exhibition. However the vast majority of Schabus's journey has been within the near-empty space of highways.

(20 - 21) With the image of Walden, Colorado, a multi-coloured balloon flies over a green landscape and town. Would the artist not heavily identify with the weightlessness of this balloon floating in the sky, at this stage—day 20, nearly the middle-point—of his exhausting journey? This feeling of ungroundedness, floatation, and drifting into space is a state that the artist continually finds himself within, or even brings to those who experience his work. In 2002, for example, he built a one to one scale model of his studio in the Vienna Secession galleries, using cardboard as the main material for the floors one walked upon or the walls one touched. Entitled "Astronaut: Komme gleich" (Astronaut: Be Right Back), there was a clear disembodiment to the entire exhibition. Weightlessness and forlornness were there merged together, as here.

*USA Forever* stamps appear and re-appear. Here is another, alongside the business card from the uninspiring Days Inn. On this trip, some days are better than others, but an equality of images, signs, and collaged meaning is suggested by virtue of this serial presentation, but moreso the structure and path of the journey itself. That is, we do not necessarily need to reintroduce a discussion of US mythologies when we re-encounter these stamps.

(22 - 24) Sterling Colorado appears to us like a flag or a corporate logo, like an outdated, almost forgotten referent. And within this, the question remains if the artist is forgetting himself, as indeed, the “Forget Me Not” stamp on the reverse echoes. The twenty-fourth card asserts this possibility in a different way with the strange, nearly unreadable town name of Arapahoe, which has a fragment of a newspaper photo of two cowgirls with ten-gallon hats on horseback, presumably in a beauty pageant. The photo is reminiscent of one of Robert Frank’s yearning photographs from The American series. Here so many different signifiers are crumbled together like an all-dressed pizza, and equally like an archaeological finding; conveying the excesses of an empire vanquished within its own splendour.

(25) In Hastings, we encounter an image of the lowly frontier carriage, driven by oxen by a forefather hidden in the shadows of the covering itself. Accompanying him is a cowboy with a shotgun slung over his shoulder. With this near-iconic image, a history of colonialism is simultaneously visible and wiped clean by the innocence of the design. Staying in the Rainbow Motel that evening, we might imagine the artist that evening mulling over the magic of how history, despite its trauma and tragedy, can be shrouded with pleasantries, romanticism and heroic mythologies.

Or perhaps he slept with dreams of wide open plains.

(26 - 28) There is humour along the way. The artist collages “Flat Tire Amber Ale” onto the next post-card, in Lincoln, and finds a Wiener Dog sticker, itself a small whimsical piece of personal mini-nostalgia for his home city and possibly a small representation of himself, all leaned out on his dogged bicycle trip. Perhaps he seeks rest in the Chautauqua Park Pavilion, itself like a UFO dropped into the next town, Red Oak, Iowa.

And it is at this point that it appears that the narrative of meaning and associative building through this journey may have been a mistake.

I had not sent calculations to my team in time.

About ten images ago, I was convinced that I would have said to Hans Schabus that I have found a narrative of accidents and incidents being

weaved together. This hypothesis now falls apart, although the structural meaning with a grounded process and pattern and sense of ongoing task all remain. Thus the oddness of a totem pole with an aboriginal man's head reminds me that an attempt to make a linear reading is fool-hearty to begin with. The complexity of how North America deals with its history of and relationship to aboriginal culture itself renders this entire process of inducing a narrative from Hans Schabus' work indiscernible, then even perhaps overly Occidental. Made by the Native-American wood carver J. Kuhs, whose current Facebook page shows his wares of wooden kitsch and aboriginal-idealized memorabilia, this statue seems more a parody of the historical format of totem poles. Totem poles rarely if ever depicted particular human characters, but moreso legends, animal familiars or spirits, and thus makes the character of Osceola and his namesake city into a problematic kind of mythical figure, especially in relationship to the homogeneity of contemporary American culture today, which engulfs, contains and ultimately devours these narratives into its own greater one. Should we concern ourselves with this? Or is this merely something that the artist passes by and accumulates into the heap of images, another souvenir systematically processed into his journey?

(29 - 30) Upon reaching Oskaloosa, did the artist perhaps consider the notion of having to move to and live in one of these small, American towns? This township of 11,400 people, named also after an aboriginal name (as many towns and cities are across North America)<sup>iii</sup> might first be entirely alienating upon first encounter, but then one would presumably become assimilated into it. Would that then be the time to leave? And how would one make one's earnings there? Would the artist need to join the abattoir? The photograph that the artist takes that day near the town, at high noon, allows for this association. That is, the regularity and repetition of Schabus' daily noon ritual enables to appear that which could be forgotten, what might be overlooked, what might be left out from our own encounters with reality. For me what is revealed in this photograph are the small pieces of living flesh that poke through the metal meshing. We can deduct this is a truckload of pigs on their way to the slaughterhouse. In a process where every encounter is heightened in meaning, where each small addition or discovery in the resulting image comes alive with sensation, I turn to the misery of the short lives of these pigs. They were alive when this photo was taken, if we can call that existence some sort of

life, knowing what we do of the conditions of pig farms, slaughterhouses and everything in between. They are now nothing. It comes to me that this exploration and gathering that Hans has set out to do also reveals many items that might rest beyond his own reckoning or intentions. Beyond his noon photographs and the collages he assembled each night with his findings from place to place arrive universes of possibility. Does this render one's pity for these pigs irrelevant or over-determined? Or does it awaken a distinct care and attentiveness for anything and everything that can possibly be? Beyond sticking Batman stickers all over the postcards, and self-consciously placing "from me to you" stickers on cards that he is sending onto himself, like some quaint, existential joke, the universe makes these appearances. Beyond all these intentions, unseen elements of the invisible day-to-day arise, and they may haunt us.

One might begin to determine that meaning can be generated from the most banal of encounters to produce a flurry of endless associations, which one must handle with care and choose as one chooses a flower from a rose garden. Like Meursault in his prison cell in the final page of Camus' *The Outsider*, who himself can endlessly remember finite details from his life, from his apartment, and recount them in his head; a moment's memory can inform a lifetime of thought. This is a gift of the present, always awaiting us whether or not it is within the journey of an artist or within the frame of a picture. One can engage in a nostalgic and melancholic reflection of the present, and rest one's conscience upon it but Hans Schabus goes beyond these questions (without relinquishing them), and makes a system that enables their appearance and repeated consideration.

Returning to the journey, the artist leaves the Budget Inn in Oskaloosa, crosses more of the apparent innocence of these fertile lands, under which brews eruptive, inconsolable and inconceivable histories and pre-histories, and arrives in the technicolour, living nostalgia of Muscatine, Iowa. This state, Iowa, is so long and large, we realize. And the image of the post-card, again our guide to reviewing Hans Schabus' experience on July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015, emits a 1950s-style, old-fashioned association of a time of fore-fathers that still produces the consideration of identity today.



(31) Next come map fragments in place of a post-card, depicting the city of departure and the city of arrival for that day: From Muscatine to Princeton. We trace here with our eyes his route and the passage of the kilometers he gains as he pedals.

(32 - 34) *Batman Returns*. I hesitate to look it up (that is, *google* it): Was there a film of this title? We cannot call this re-appearance of the comic book hero a form of haunting within the appearance and re-appearance of images and meaning, because at this point, this is certainly a deliberate choice by the artist. As with many other cards that the artist sent home, it is a self-made one with the Batman image collaged over a hotel pamphlet. Immediately following is the photograph of a yellow lorry (called a semi-trailer, big rig or eighteen-wheeler in the USA) which makes us consider the negotiation of motorway traffic that the artist must have done, day in, day out. The previous week's date is collaged (a newspaper scrap clearly found in Warsaw, Indiana) over the truck's trailer, along with the temperatures that he also had to negotiate in the American summer. And the time which he minds and marks with an even schedule on his journey, now appears finally in print with the public clock in Defiance, Ohio. Did he find his body defying him at this stage, with now over a month on the road under his belt? The numbers don't reveal that. He cycled 137 KM that day of the 22<sup>nd</sup> July, 2015. A month earlier he had cycled 106 KM in one day. Each evening, he lay in a strange bed of a cheap hotel in a strange town in a strange country. There he pondered, assembled collages, and licked his wounds.

(35) Again the living nostalgia as civic identity rears its head: "Norwalk Then & Now, est. 1817." The notion that the "then" is as alive and present and is itself the "now" as an eternal present has some kinship with the "Wien bleibt Wien" civic campaign (named after the old ballad) from the early 2000s, and the continual, near universal tendency of many modern cities to evoke a romantic past to repress both problematic histories and troubled presents. A *kitschified* past is a ground for identity, as if time not only slowed down like molasses in the winter time, it has perhaps even stopped and will also not continue. But time has not stopped, and the artist has not slowed down: He cycled 162 KM on this day.

(36) The journey is nearing its end and monotony is the joke at this stage, making its debut with the “Ho Hum Motel.” There could be here a temptation to make readings of the war of Petersburg from 1864-1865, which appears on the stamp on this pamphlet-card. The journey to date however has taught us that there is no need to.

(37 – 38) The consistency of the project’s parameters are confounding. It is not simply repetition, it is an experimental application of some tactics in different, distinct and indicated places along a trajectory of consistency. With this system, sometimes we get a sense of homogeneity, sometimes there are hints at profundity, sometimes the culturally repressed appears momentarily, or sometimes, like here in Coudersport, with the standard-stock photo of a gas station, sometimes there is next to nothing, excepting of course, the oddness of the “Potato City County Inn.”

(39 – 40) More beer to quench the cyclist’s thirst, with the label laid over Towanda’s city hall. As always, a business card is affixed to the rear side. One might wonder who Bob Patel, the hotel manager, really was. Would he look like his name suggests - dark, tightly-curved hair with silver streaks, thick eyebrows, of medium height and build, a square-ish jaw, slightly tanned and friendly enough with his large, melon-shaped mouth and hunched shoulders? Or are we thinking of Bob Sakosky, hotel manager in the Pioneer Plaza Hotel in Carbondale? Does speculation suffer from the similar trappings of memory? The red sticker-frames stuck onto this side of the postcard hint at gestures of boredom or frustration, or the long-term effects of feeling forlorn. Still, 111 KM cycled that day. Not bad. And while the USA is still “forever,” the journey is nearing its end.

(41 – 42) In the final throes of the journey, an old cowboy finally makes his long-awaited appearance, finally. Sussex may be the last area outside of the destination of New York, where these iconic mythologies still circulate so freely. Ninety-five kilometers later, the artist arrives in the Big Apple. A small twig carried along the entire route from the Redwood trees is attached to the city’s aerial view. As the last gasps of the journey emerge, nothing so terribly new arises.

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It is a human tendency, if often an over-used and sometimes pathetic one, to attempt to find meaning within the activity, succession or encounter of numbers. Overwrought analyses are naturally commonly linked to madness. Over a decade ago, a dear friend fell into the oblivion of his addiction to crystal meth. Several of the final conversations I had with him involved his obsession with numerical figures denoting meaning. He spoke out a deflated poetry that he perceived as profound messages delivered to him from the universe in numerals as they collided with his reality. A succession of digits would set him off on a passionate rant. A repeated number was a signal that his luck was changing. Every numerical coincidence was like a horoscope reading.

What is more American, however, than mind-altering drugs along the freeway? American literature and even moreso American cinema are rife with this hallucinogenic spell. From Jack Kerouac (aka Sal Paradise) and Neal Cassady (aka Dean Moriarty), to Hunter S. Thompson, or William S. Burroughs and Gus Van Sant collaborating on *Drugstore Cowboy*, to Keanu Reeves and the late River Phoenix in *My Own Private Idaho*, or even to Kate Hudson in *Almost Famous*, this American narrative never ceases.

A key difference, of course, is that these mad, dizzy journeys convey only one aspect of what Hans Schabus has demonstrated. While they are noisy and like a sharp cry against the staleness and repression in civil society itself, Schabus is silent about any meaning. Neither does he meddle in thoughts on figures or coincidences. For the most part, he only presents them as they make up the passage of time and the markings of his route.

From my initial experiences of Hans Schabus' work, and with this most recent project in mind especially, I have always felt that a thorough combination of physics and poetry might find some parallel to the meanderings and production of this artist's explorations and resulting artworks.

My first inclination was to introduce a poem to Hans by Seamus Heaney. We met for dinner in Vienna and I played a video of the poet reading aloud

*Digging.* It had, for me, many parallels not only to Hans Schabus' methodology of sculptural practice but also to what I assume to be his praxis:

*Digging*<sup>iv</sup>

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound  
When the space sinks into gravelly ground:  
My father, digging. I look down.

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds  
Bends low, comes up twenty years away  
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills  
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft  
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.  
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep  
To scatter new potatoes that we picked  
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.  
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day  
Than any other man on Toner's bog.  
Once I carried him milk in a bottle  
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up  
To drink it, then fell to right away  
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods  
Over his shoulder, going down and down  
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge

Through living roots awaken in my head.  
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it.

The content is not exactly parallel to Schabus's exhibition, so to speak, but the intonation, the pace and most importantly, the sense of humble awe before something simple and great are important for us to consider. There is then also the sense of time that has passed. And that it has been carefully discerned and documented.

Turning away from a Northern Irish landscape in the Heaney poem and back towards the vast American landscape, the following poem was sent to me, by coincidence, by another artist, presently teaching in California. The poem is by the American, Walt Whitman, *On the Beach at Night, Alone*,<sup>v</sup> and is perhaps more akin to the spadework of Schabus' artistic practice:

On the beach at night alone,  
As the old mother sways her to and fro, singing her husky song,  
As I watch the bright stars shining—I think a thought of the clef of the  
universes, and of the future.

A vast similitude interlocks all,  
All spheres, grown, ungrown, small, large, suns, moons, planets,  
comets, asteroids,  
All the substances of the same, and all that is spiritual upon the  
same,  
All distances of place, however wide,  
All distances of time—all inanimate forms,  
All Souls—all living bodies, though they be ever so different, or in  
different worlds,  
All gaseous, watery, vegetable, mineral processes—the fishes, the  
brutes,  
All men and women—me also;

All nations, colors, barbarisms, civilizations, languages;  
All identities that have existed, or may exist, on this globe, or any  
globe;  
All lives and deaths—all of the past, present, future;  
This vast similitude spans them, and always has spann'd, and shall  
forever span them, and compactly hold them, and enclose them.

The poem asserts that one might approach the universe as a great universal truth onto itself. I find this helpful when mulling over this exhibition by Hans Schabus. Approaching his project, I rely upon the relics of his journey—and this exhibition that he has arranged for us that spells out, in part, his time between June and July 2015. These panels, the arranged bicycle parts, the massive hole he has had carved into the wall and the crumbled wall fragments are all pieces of evidence presented in the gallery. The intervention through the wall enables the passage between the matter and meaning of different spaces (inside and outside the gallery) to be apparent and literal. Space has matter that we cannot experience readily with our limited senses. This matter now moves between the inside and the outside of the gallery walls.

Each panel in Schabus' exhibition is a collection of a few very deliberate marks of time. Time has passed and the moments in these photographs and even the moments imprinted by the artist's handwriting on the postcards are delicately preserved. They are before us because the moments cannot be recovered, and this is the point. Acknowledging a sacred passage through space and time (whether one wishes to be mournful about this or not), each panel contains these gestures that ring of the factness of time passed like a fleeting person who has come into one's life briefly and then perpetually tells us "good-bye." This project is a calculated and laborious cosmic burrowing through space and time, presented intelligibly, precisely and with devotion.

These gestures and constructions all circumnavigate his experiences and enable us to enter into them. For me, this has kinship with how Seamus Heaney's poem brings the reader into his own experiences of a now lost past. This resonates with Walt Whitman's poem, which bestows cosmological truths of the universe onto the reader. This exhibition also has parallel to Stephen Hawking's quest to painstakingly define elemental

truths and create a universal theory; making a few mistakes or bursting one's tires along the way.

### Works in the exhibition:

1

**Hans Schabus**, *The Long Road from Tall Trees to Tall Houses*, 2015, pigment print on paper, postcards, grey board, museum board, glass, aluminum, wood, paint, various mounting material, 42 plates each 86,2 × 65,8 × 2,6 cm

2

**Hans Schabus**, *High Noon*, 2016, bicycle, 527 × 65 × 68 cm

3

**Hans Schabus**, *Konglomerat*, 2016, 105 × 160 × 179 cm (Hole: 35 cm ø, 78 cm deep)

All works courtesy of the artist and Kerstin Engholm Gallery, Simon Preston Gallery, Galerie Jocelyn Wolff, and Zero...

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i "I had made a mistake. I had used too simple a model for the universe. Time will not reverse direction when the universe begins to contract." See *A Brief History of Time*, a film by Errol Morris, 1991.

ii Roland Barthes. *Mythologies*. Paris: Verso, 1957.

iii Indeed, the name Canada comes from the Iroquoias word kanata that means "village." We can imagine the encounter that the French explorer Jacques Cartier had, when first hearing (and appropriating) this word.

iv Seamus Heaney. Digging. From *New Selected Poems (1966-1987)*. London: Faber & Faber, 1990. P 1-2.

v *The Complete Poetry of Walt Whitman: Leaves of Grass (1855 & 1892) + Old Age Echoes + Uncollected and Rejected Poems*. Publisher: e-artnow (November 10, 2013).