



CAMINO

kim demuth

CAMINO

In the opening of Wim Wender's classic film *Paris, Texas* (1984), we are introduced to a stoic character who is ceaselessly walking. The character, Travis, stops walking only when he collapses. Travis soon recovers and continues, striding unflinchingly across a vast landscape of desolate plains. Possibly, he has been walking for years. Travis is eventually found by his bewildered brother Walt, who attempts to coerce Travis to the airport in order to fly home. Walt has no interest in the walking journey; his is a world of speed, where the annihilation of distance is made possible through the telephone or the commercial airliner. Eventually the brothers compromise on a car journey.

In *Paris, Texas*, the characters' respective positions in society are defined by their modes of mobility. Walt's desire to abolish distance through technological speed aligns him with the mainstream; this is the normal operating principle of capitalism. In contrast, Travis' persistent and apparently aimless walking puts him at odds with the society around him: he is out of place and out of time. The speed of travel and communication is one of the defining traits of the contemporary era, and as David Harvey writes: "a strong case can be made that the history of capitalism has been characterized by speed-up in the pace of life, while so overcoming spatial barriers that the world sometimes appears to collapse inwards upon us."¹ The slowness of a long-distance walk, by choice and without clear purpose, is a space of detachment, a step outside of this world. It is in this context that 'El Camino de Santiago' is uniquely positioned. This pilgrimage across northern Spain dates from the ninth century, but continues today as the region's main tourist product.² Today the pilgrimage is at the intersection of two worlds: as a 40 day walk it is a unique journey of slowness that extends space, yet its popularity and accessibility is made possible via the global communications reach of the internet, and the continued rise of jet travel, both exemplary of the compression of space through speed.



Kim Demuth's *Camino* series of photographic objects derive both their title and source material from the pilgrim's trail. In 2008, Demuth and his partner embarked on this 900 kilometre walking journey to the Cathedral at Santiago de Compostela. Authenticity is often invoked in travel discourse, creating a dichotomy between the tourist and the traveller, between fiction and reality, the inauthentic and the authentic.³ The Camino's emphasis on the journey, rather than the destination, gives this dichotomy a particular spin. While there are increasing numbers of visitors in Holy Years, the Camino today is predominately a secular journey.⁴ As such, religious piety is no longer the marker of the true pilgrim, but instead the traveller's method of mobility takes this role. To walk the pilgrimage is to obtain the status of a pilgrim, to travel the route by car, no matter how pious one may be, is to be regarded a tourist. Indeed, it is the mode of transport that the Church itself uses as the criteria for determining if one is a pilgrim of the Camino de Santiago: one needs to provide evidence of having walked at least 150km to receive a Compostela.⁵ The Camino demands slowness.

Journeys have often formed the basis for photography, from Stephen Shore's and Joel Sternfeld's roadtrips to Robert Adam's slow and deliberate walks around his beloved Colorado prairies, and Richard Misrach's desert wanderings.⁶ Landscape photography in particular has commonly defined itself by the unique effects of a walking journey into nature. As Rosa Olivares writes in her introduction to a volume on figureless landscape photographs, "on the road, along the trail, we think in slowness and silence, detached from a noisy fast superficial world that we have created in pursuit of protection and wealth."⁷ However, the objects of Demuth's *Camino*, are not quite photographs, nor are they accurate documents of the journey. Photographs taken during the walk are only the starting point in the production of the work. Through careful post-production Demuth combines, alters and transforms these photographic fragments, turning them into three-dimensional mixed-media objects. Just as the works that comprise *Camino* complicate their genesis as landscape photography, so too is the Camino pilgrimage far from being just a trail, completely detached from the 'noisy' world. The complications that each introduces to the apparently straightforward idea of 'photographs along a path' deserves investigation, as each illuminates the other.





Across its long history, 'El Camino de Santiago' has been entangled in all manner of discourses, as it has been symbolically activated to suit broader political and economic contexts. The pilgrimage has its roots in the belief that the remains of James, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus, had been laid to rest near the Galician coast in northern Spain. Around the eighth century a cathedral was built to house the recently discovered tomb and so began the pilgrimage, with people from across Europe making the long trip on foot through a network of pilgrimage roads.⁸ Initially the Camino was used by the Catholic Church as an example of the transnational power of Catholicism, particularly in its medieval heyday. The symbolic activation of Saint James would allow for modifications of this meaning. Through his designation as 'Saint James the Moorslayer' the Camino would be tied, not just to transnational Christianity, but more specifically to the Iberian Peninsula which James was believed to have defended. This nationalist or territorial connotation would come to dominate proceeding understandings of Saint James, and by extension the Camino. In the fifteenth century Spanish Kings began to make offerings to James, accentuating his role as a Saint of Spanish Catholicism, rather than just Christianity-in-general. In the twentieth century, the Franco regime would continue to tie the pilgrimage to Spanish nationalism. For Franco, this was an exclusionary tactic, used in speeches and other discourse to help define the righteousness of his vision of the Spanish nation: a 'chosen' Spain.⁹

The demise of Franco and Spain's subsequent immersion in cultural and economic globalisation has seen this territorial aspect of the Camino now reach outward rather than inward. In 2000 Santiago was declared the European Capital of Culture, and this exemplifies the transformation of the resting place of Saint James from a symbol of Spanish nationalism to a symbol of European integration.¹⁰ In many ways this is a return to earlier trans-national constructions of the Camino, with trails from across the continent leading to the cathedral. Except instead of symbolising the transnationalism of Catholicism, this now invokes the integration of the European Union as a cultural and economic entity. Parts of the pilgrim's trail have been given World Heritage Status by UNESCO, expanding its significance to a global audience.¹¹ Certainly, today the Camino is seen as a global marketing opportunity.¹²





This is not to say that Spanish identity has been lost from the Camino, but rather that this national identity is increasingly defined as inclusive and cosmopolitan.¹³ This is particularly evident in contemporary Spanish cinema, with its focus on the urban landscape: the city as symbol of international modernity.¹⁴ As a rural location, the Camino may seem an aberration in this discourse, but as a globally-recognised destination, this predominately rural trail has become a cosmopolitan space.

The Camino is a fascinating site for glimpsing some of the paradoxes of globalisation in the contemporary world. Marc Augé writes of the increasing homogenisation of places in the global era. Non-places, as Augé names them, dominate the contemporary landscape. Non-places are places of transit, they are measured in time but are without history, they are spaces that are everywhere, and could be anywhere: airports, freeways, planes, hotels, are all typical non-places.¹⁵ One of the paradoxes of this is that as multinational connections grow via the emphasis on movement through non-places, so there is simultaneously a clinging to the particulars of specific places.¹⁶ As David Harvey argues, the diminishment of barriers between spaces that is typical of globalisation, results in a parallel emphasis on the unique qualities of individual places. The particularities of the local become prized precisely because of their entanglement in global networks where speed has diminished distance, as such qualities are now accessible to a global market.¹⁷ The Camino is exemplary here, its global appeal paralleling the assertion of the autonomy of the Galician region of Spain in which Santiago is situated. This region, with its own language and culture, has used the Camino to gain recognition of its specificity.¹⁸ This interplay, between the homogenous and the unique, between the global and the local, that we find in the Camino is a crucial element of Demuth's *Camino* series. The source images for the works originate from a specific time and place, and this is almost mechanically designated in the title of each image. Yet, without distinguishing features each image could also be anywhere; conjuring half-remembered places and films, and childhood paths and reveries. Similarly, Demuth's transformation of the digital snapshot as record of a journey (ubiquitous, disposable, and reproducible) into rare, carefully

constructed, and precious objects, extends this interplay of the homogenous and the unique into the material structure of the work.

Tourism in general is defined by a constant oscillation between generic spaces (the airport, the plane, the hotel, the Starbucks) and the unique sight/site of the destination, tied to a distinct physical location. Our experience of such sights is often already inflected by the cultural life of these places in the world of media: pictures, films, guidebooks and tales of travels helping to form our expectations and colour our experience. Corinne Vionnet's Photo Opportunities series of art works succinctly encapsulate this intermingling of our unique experience of spaces with our pre-defined media-inflected expectations. Vionnet scours photo-sharing websites to gather hundreds of images of monumental tourist destinations (the Eiffel Tower, the Golden Gate Bridge, and so on) and then layers these images to form a ghostly, but immediately recognisable, singular archetypal image of the site. Only apparently slight variations separate these hundreds of images, indicating the shared language of the tourist photograph and the mediation of our experience of places.¹⁹



Memories and expectations are inseparable from the places that we visit. Demuth's *Camino* series embraces and explores this interplay, and is as much a product of post-production as of the places it represents. Constructed after the journey, back home in the studio, the image-objects in this series are inspired by memory as much as by the moment; yet as such, they also point to the elusiveness of spontaneity in photography, and particularly travel photography. The photos are taken in a particular time and place, but re-constructed and reflected upon, these moments intersperse with other places and times. This is not to dismiss as inauthentic our experience mediated through reproductions, but rather to recognise such images as a constitutive part of the physical sites of our travels, each inseparable from the other.²⁰ Like the digitally-altered images of Michael Reisch,²¹ Demuth's work is in many ways an idealised or even fictionalised version of the landscape, hovering between simulation and reality, between memory and document. The ghostly three-dimensional optical effect created by the sculptural quality of the work only enhances the work's liminal character, between dream and reality, shifting in and out of focus. The work revels in the indistinguishability of the path from its imag(in)ing.

The writer Will Self is a dedicated walker and has recently recounted a walk he made from London to Manhattan. This involved Self walking from his house to Heathrow Airport, catching an airplane to New York, and then walking from JFK Airport to downtown Manhattan: a juxtaposition of speed and slowness not unlike the international traveller's journey to the Camino de Santiago.²² What is interesting about Self's account of this walk, is that it turns out that this is less an exploration of the physical places along his journey, than of his memories and imaginative wanderings; each place is overlaid with significance through associations that are both real and fictional. Similarly in Demuth's *Camino* series, these distinctions, between tourist and traveller, speed and slowness, fiction and reality, the authentic and the inauthentic, evaporate. Embracing the paradox of the Camino, the works create a world that is a part of this journey, but with a path of their own.

Kyle Weise 2010

Kyle Weise is currently completing a PhD at the University of Melbourne and is the Co-director of Beam Contemporary and Screen Space art galleries.



- 1 Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990. p.240. The relationship between 'time-space compression' and capitalism is discussed throughout Harvey's book. Another key theorist on the centrality of speed in contemporary society is Paul Virilio. See, for example: Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer. *Crepuscular Dawn*. Trans. Mike Taormina. *Foreign Agents Ser.* New York: Semiotext(e), 2002. p.19-91.
- 2 Rubén González and José Medina. "Cultural Tourism and Urban Management in Northwestern Spain: The Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela" *Tourism Geographies* 5.4 (2003): 446-60.
- 3 John Frow. *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997. p.69.
- 4 González and Medina, p.455. Michael Murray and Brian Graham. "Exploring the Dialectics of Route Based Tourism: The Camino de Santiago." *Tourism Management* 18. 8 (1997): 513-524. p.519.
- 5 A Compostela is a papal document qualifying one as a pilgrim. Murray and Graham, "Exploring," p.517-19, 522. Brian Graham and Michael Murray. "The Spiritual and the Profane: the Pilgrimage to Santiago De Compostela." *Cultural Geographies* 4 (1997): 389-409. p.402-03.
- 6 See, for example: Robert Adams. *Perfect Times Perfect Places*. New York: Aperture, 1988. Richard Misrach. *Desert Cantos*. Albuquerque, NM: U of New Mexico P, 1990. Stephen Shore. *A Road Trip Journal*. 1973. New York: Phaidon, 2008; Stephen Shore. *Uncommon Places*. 1982. New York: DAP, 2004; Joel Sternfeld. *American Prospects*. 1987. Third Edition. New York: DAP, 2006.
- 7 Rosa Olivares. "Paradise Was Here Nearby." Trans. Dena Ellen Cowan. *Exit* 38 (2010): 12-13.
- 8 Cathelijne de Busser. "From Exclusiveness to Inclusiveness: The Changing Politico-Territorial Situation of Spain and its Reflection on the National Offerings to the Apostle Saint James from the Second Half of the Twentieth Century." *Geopolitics* 11 (2006):300-316. p.304. Murray and Graham, "Spiritual" p.390.
- 9 de Busser, p.304-09. Murray and Graham, "Spiritual." p.390-91.
- 10 Murray and Graham, "Spiritual" p.399.
- 11 de Busser, p.312.
- 12 Murray and Graham, "Exploring" p.520.
- 13 de Busser, p.314.
- 14 Marvin D'Lugo. "Landscape in Spanish Cinema." *Cinema and Landscape*. Ed. Graeme Harper and Jonathan Rayner. Bristol: Intellect, 2010. 117-129. p.126-28.
- 15 Marc Augé. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Trans. John Howe. London: Verso, 1995. *Demuth's Time : Date : Space* (2008) series conjures such non-places.
- 16 Augé, p.34-35.
- 17 Harvey, p.294-96.
- 18 de Busser, p.311-12. González and Medina, p.448. Official Church offerings to Saint James are now given partly in the Galician language: the Saint and journey continue to be embroiled in all manner of discourses that turn this rural path into a symbolically loaded space.
- 19 Corinne Vionnet and Welmer Keesmaat. "Photo Opportunities." *Yvi Magazine* 2 (2008): 75-81. See also <http://www.corinnevionnet.com>.
- 20 On this relationship, see Frow p.66-74.
- 21 Michael Reisch. *Michael Reisch. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006.*
- 22 Will Self. *Psychogeography: Distentangling the Modern Conundrum of Psyche and Place*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2007.



Images from front to back:

Camino Dia 29

Campo 4.16pm 20.06.2008

Camino Dia 27

Chozas de Abajo 3.34pm 14.06.2008

Ribadeo 8.45pm 19.07.2008 (Diptych)

Torre de Hercules 10.22am 14.07.2008

Camino Dia 31

Burgos 6.36am 04.06.2008

O'Cebreiro 11.13pm 24.06.2008



The artist would especially like to thank Simone Hine and Kyle Weise for the successful outcome of this project. Thank you also to Arts Queensland and Artspace Mackay for their support and contribution.

ISBN 978-0-9870529-0-2



Mackay REGIONAL COUNCIL



Queensland
Government

beam contemporary level 1/30 guildford lane melbourne australia 3000
e: info@beamcontemporary.com.au w: www.beamcontemporary.com
ph: +61 3 9670 4443 post: p.o box 664 north melbourne victoria australia 3051