

The Museum of Modern Art

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY HENRY WESSEL, JR.
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Wall Label

"Getting there is half the fun." The Cunard Line

These are travel photographs closer in spirit to the Instamatic Kodacolor glossies made by tourists than to the great topographical documents of the nineteenth century--the Geological Surveys of O'Sullivan, Bell and Jackson of the 1870's. Those photographs were intended to inform eastern America what the West looked like, just as the pictures the Astronauts make tell us what the moon looks like. Henry Wessel's photographs do, in some measure, show us what today's West looks like. Primarily, however, they are subjective reports of what it felt like to travel through a certain region. They function as souvenirs, as aide-mémoire, which evoke the experience of confronting the peculiar juxtaposition of vast nothingness and clutter that is now the American West. Like the tourist snapshot, they testify to having been there once.

But the "there" of the tourist is the Grand Canyon or Tahiti. Wessel's "there" is a state of spiritual equilibrium induced, paradoxically, through almost ceaseless movement. Henry Wessel is a compulsive traveler whose address is a post office box in Boalsburg, Pennsylvania. In the past five years he has driven twenty times across the United States, and on one of those trips, in April, 1970, he wrote this to a friend:

"Somewhere around Mobile, Ala., at the moment--en route to Seattle via South and Southwest. Experiencing a very cathartic spiritual thaw--picking up momentum from the road." He continued, "Drove the jeep to Yucatan last summer, spent the fall in Southwest, passed a cold winter in Rochester. Every time I get a darkroom built, I tear it down and move. A very quiet psychosis."

(more)

It is difficult to believe that physical movement through space can induce a timeless state of spiritual equilibrium. Yet these forty photographs, the smoke that evidences the fire, suggest that for Henry Wessel it does. His work is casual, loose, almost randomly free-wheeling. But the eye that made these "casual" pictures is rigorously formal. Individually, the mounds, hills, bushes, groves and markings on the earth in these photographs are puzzling and often amusing. Collectively, their circular forms merge to suggest a Platonic idea: the Ideal Circle known only to the contemplative mind. Wessel's plants, through the alchemy of their formal placement, seem mysteriously sacred or evil or both. Even the humblest is endowed with a vital dignity, an elemental quiet. The harsh, edgy light that fills these photographs seems the awesome effect of a new-born sun.

Henry Wessel, Jr., was born thirty years ago in Teaneck, New Jersey. He was graduated from Pennsylvania State University, where he later taught photography for two years, 1967-1969. Recently, he completed a Master of Fine Arts degree at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester and the State University of New York at Buffalo. The Guggenheim Foundation awarded him a fellowship in 1971, to make a "photographic documentation of U. S. highways and the adjacent landscape."

Most of the photographs in this exhibition were made during the Guggenheim year, 1971-1972, in California and New Mexico. Since they are records of states of feeling rather than documents of places, they are untitled and undated.

Dennis Longwell