

Can't Afford the Freeway

2007-2010

By Elana Mann

In my art practice I probe the theatrics of exchange. Through performative strategies I investigate psycho-social and emotional undercurrents of both open communication and silence. In many of my projects I initiate dialogs and collaborations with friends, acquaintances and strangers as a means to identify the contexts from which interpersonal, social and political actions originate

After moving to Los Angeles I was interested in finding connections between my daily experience as a Southern Californian driver with the site of modern physical warfare: the road. In 2007 I began seeking out individuals with whom I could explore the topic of war and the road including a soldier in Iraq, two Iraqi artists and various commuters in Los Angeles. Through my search I also met Captain Dylan Alexander Mack (Alex), an Iraq war veteran, who was able to articulate his own experience of driving as a soldier and a veteran in a remarkable way. The recorded discussions I had with Alex allowed me to encounter a political and emotional space that was foreign to me and still remains unimaginable.

I worked with the initial recordings I made with Alex for a number of years, listening and re-listening to them, and in the fall of 2009 I returned to interview him a few more times. Eventually I decided to structure a video around the desire to understand my conversations with Alex and how the objects and locations of my everyday life are acutely implicated in what he talks about. In *Can't Afford the Freeway*, I fold and unfold my conversation with Alex into other conversations I am having with my Subaru Legacy Outback, my video camera and the cities of Los Angeles, Valencia and Irwindale. Throughout the video I am constantly shifting physical and psychological positions, locations and the camera lens. These movements mirror my attempts to deeply listen, absorb and relate my conversations with Alex to myself and my surroundings.

When I first approached Alex to make recordings with me about war and the road he was interested in the project as a way to work out his own thoughts about the subject for a novel based on his war experience. While serving as an infantry officer in Mosul, Iraq, Alex started writing emails to a small list of family and friends about what he was undergoing. The emails profoundly connected with people and were eventually mass distributed around the country. After he returned home Alex decided to transform his email diary into a fictional novel. Having never formally studied writing Alex enrolled as a Master of Fine Arts candidate in the Critical Studies program at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts). He was a student at CalArts when we first met.

Thus began our symbiotic relationship. Through our interactions Alex and I were both able to grow in our own individual directions and use our conversations to spurn different yet intertwined creative output.