

fig. 1 "Positioning" route on Mt. Whitney's Northeast face: 4th cl, with moderately steep snow

I would like to make an update to the Essay-Caption published in vol. 9 number 2. In that piece I proposed, "If you want to advance art, there is a much more advantageous alternative to making art more like everything else, and that is to make everything else more like art". The idea is to extend art's possibilities by making influencing gestures upon the operating procedures of other disciplines. I've made some attempts at putting this into practice and would like to offer a kind of progress report that may serve to expose the fragility but also the possibilities of such art making. The fields of endeavor that I have engaged with so far include mountaineering, off-road racing, and surfing. The sample suffers from its not being diverse- these are all basically sports- but my specific activities have dealt with equipment manufacture, sponsorship, and nomenclature and documentation.

MOUNTAINEERING

Alpinism, 'the practice of mountains', seems a willing host seeing as it already shares some basic characteristics with art. There is an underlying kind of un-usefulness about the activity and also a claim to a kind of transcendence that touches on the spiritual. The culture, history and literature of mountaineering seems like it

might be sympathetic to some modifications.

I climbed this route (*fig. 1*) on Mount Whitney's north east face last Spring. It is not an ordinary mountaineering route because its path was determined by motivations that fall outside the established traditions of alpinism. Rather than finding an expedient route, or one that would present interesting climbing challenges, I simply overlaid the letter "P" on this image and attempted to follow its course.

I submitted this route to the American Alpine Club for publication in its annual journal of record, *The American Alpine Journal*. I'll include here a transcript of my original correspondence:

This route, which is really an extended variation of John Muir's route of 1873, and does not top out is being submitted because of its unusual approach and its potential to suggest alternative climbing tactics that could lead to greater climbing opportunities.

Over time the reasons (or justifications?) for climbing have evolved. Although the original motivations may have been no humbler than someone's desire to 'conquer' a mountain, the earliest stated goals for climbing were often related to exploration; the accumulation of first hand knowledge of the geography and natural history of the planet we inhabit. Later, a greater emphasis on climbing for the joy and sport of it shifted the focus from attaining summits to the routes by which they are climbed and the techniques employed. Here in the well trodden and temperate Sierra, conditions have been particularly favorable to the development of the gear and techniques to allow evermore improbable routes which has led to the emergence of a dialogue concerning the ethics and style, the aesthetics of climbing.

Routes have traditionally been determined by 1. the easiest way, 2. a direct way, and 3. by a feature that would allow interesting or dramatic passage. The 'Positioning' route on Mount Whitney proposes that routes can be determined by outside or tertiary fac-



Viewed from the North North East, the "P" route on Mt. Whitney loses its distinctive, unnatural shape

tors. In this case the shape of the route was predetermined with no consultation of the existing characteristics or features of the objective. We essentially overlaid the shape, a letter “P”, on the mountain’s east face and followed the path regardless of its efficiency or pleasure.

What are the advantages of this approach?

1. new ground that would otherwise not be encountered.
2. different and unusual mixes of climbing technique
3. a de-emphasis of summiting or even difficult climbing for its own sake
4. a different relationship with the mountain
5. inexhaustible possibilities
6. expand the reasons for climbing

In the case of this climb, I was forced to traverse extensively, making awkward moves around the prominent arête right of the Muir Route. The route required me to touch down on the snow gully beyond only to then remount the ridge, but not on its crest, and ascend awkward terrain while at times only meters from relatively easy snow slopes. The peculiarities of the method of overlaying a two dimensional shape on a three dimensional surface became obvious when I turned to traverse back to the notch at the top of the main chute. While my partner scoped and directed progress from below, I was instructed to move in completely counterintuitive ways. This was surely the most engaging part of the climb as the intricacies of the mountain combined with the perspective of its projected immensity made for a physically enervating lesson in form. What might this letter “P” look like from other angles? From the notch, the decent was made on skis.

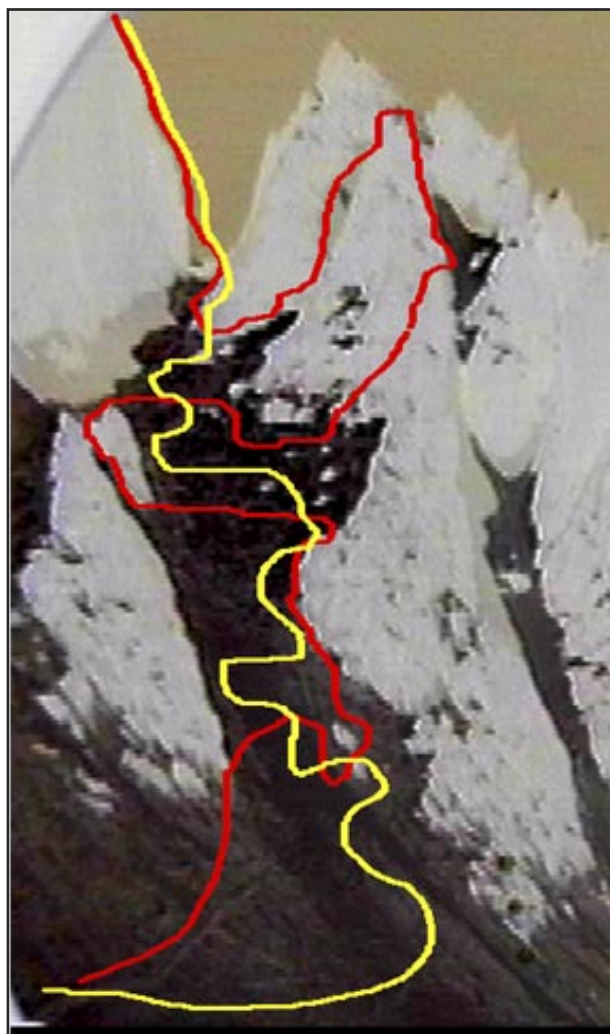


fig. 2 An alternative route

1. The response from the Journal follows:

From John Harlin :

Hi Chris,

Well, that certainly is an unusual submission! I hadn't seen it before, but I'm hereby forwarding it to Kelly Cordes, who edits the North America submissions. I'll be interested in learning what he thinks of this. Cheers, John

John Harlin III
Editor, American Alpine Journal

From Kelly Cordes (AAJ):

Howdy Chris,

Thanks for this. Unusual, indeed, and an interesting read. You touch on some good points, but in terms of our bottom-line qualification of big new routes (with the occasional exception

thrown in), we won't be able to use this in the Journal. Sorry. But thank you for sending it. Keep up the good adventures, and take care. Cheers, Kelly
Kelly Cordes
Senior Editor, American Alpine Journal

Arbitrariness has a long and understood history in Alpinism. Mallory's famous explanation "because its there" attests to the mysteries of an alpinist's intentions and suggests motivations other than athleticism and research. Developing routes that embrace rather than dodge these uncertainties may reveal a possible alternative future for climbing. One in which the act comes to embody something other than a deferred explanation, but physicalizes a personal aesthetic.

The success of the route was negated by the eventual refusal of the AAC Journal to publish it on the grounds that it did not meet the length criteria (The policy is that it must be Grade IV or higher)¹. So my following proposal might be this (*fig. 2*). This would surely meet the length criteria and my own 'arbitrary' criteria, but I'm afraid it would not really feel like an act of art making, as much as it would be an act that appears to be a challenge but is in fact an acquiescence. And on top of that, the "P" shape was only arbitrary in relation to mountaineering objectives- it was arrived at in accordance with objectives particular to art practice- which in fact is the point. This (*fig. 2*) shape simply *is* arbitrary. With certainty it's publication would be rejected on some other pretext. However its possibility has only come about by this sequence of events, and describes in the cambers of its path a conversation between something requested, an intention, and something offered, a representation.

OFF-ROAD RACING

Another secular venture into the not-concerned-with-art world was launched last summer which involved entering a modified Vespa motorbike in the legendary off-road endurance race, the Baja 1000. Artists and the art world have no more business being in the Baja 1000 than a Vespa, particularly due to the fact that in its self-styled madness and celebration of the hand-crafted it seems to make a fairly good argument for art's irrelevancy. In other words, this is exactly the kind of backdrop that art ought to be able to define itself against. This enterprise required assembling a team of



Convalescing

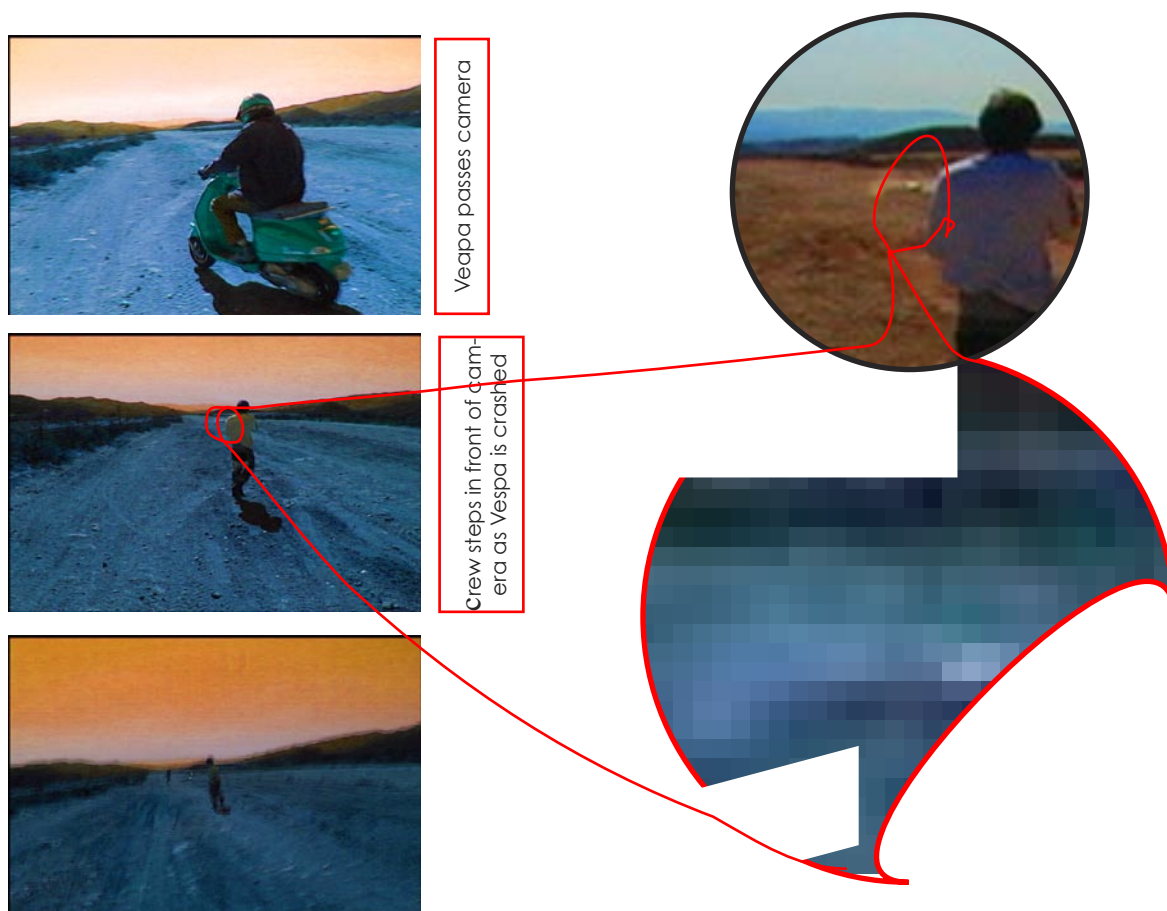


fig. 3 Instinctual drift: a close-up of the sponsorship of a possible accident

riders and mechanics and the raising of funds. It was not difficult to interest riders in the project, and we quickly put together a surprisingly good team. I do no insult to say that they were not artists, they were in fact serious off-road motorbike rider/mechanics fully capable of turning in a competitive finish. Plans were being drawn up for the modification of a particular model Vespa which we had purchased from a lady in Beverly Hills. Funds were committed as I began to solicit sponsors whose logos would adorn our racing outfits. I was specifically seeking insider money from various arts organizations, galleries and institutions whose insignias would nonplus the competition and dislocate the art world but the soundness of our endeavor was met with skepticism. Conceding to the courtship of the likes of Red Bull, we defined down our sponsorship aspirations to an unlikely mix of sources that would include at least some art world funding. We took the bike out to Rowher Flat, north of town, to make some off-road trials in October. Several obstacles became apparent. First, even our best times recorded over 5 mile intervals was not enough to finish within

the maximum allowable time frame when extrapolated out to the full length of the race (1200 miles). Second, because of the unusual variable Vespa gearing system, it could not manage extended steep ascents. Lastly, I shattered my left wrist while attempting to avoid hitting a shallow trough in the dirt road (*fig.*

3). This accident-making testifies to a kind of instinctual drift -the tendency for learned behaviors to become instinctual- which can have project ending results outside of an art production contained to metaphor making. Riding with a cast promised to be extremely problematic, and the project was put on hold as there was not enough time to overcome these obstacles before the start of the race.

SURFING

Recently I have turned my attentions to the manufacture of sporting goods, in particular surfboard construction. My initial gesture was to reenact the shaping of a surfboard using a surfboard itself for material. I wanted to make a 1979 Al Merrick tri-plane Hull, and located one which had not been ridden for years. I

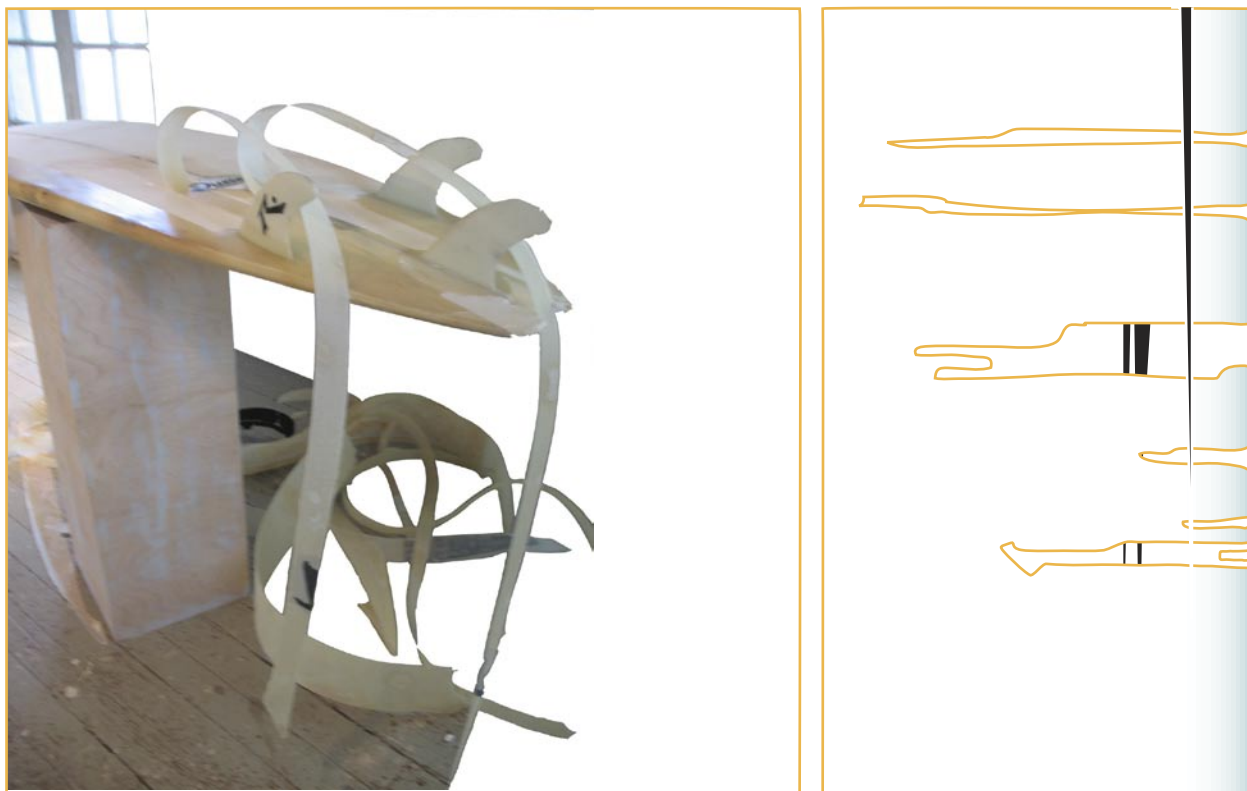


fig. 4 Stripping a widow (elevation and plan)

tore off the widowed surfboard's skin (*fig. 4*) and re-shaped the pitted surface of the polyurethane core back to the original's contours, but just down a bit. In this, subtlety is everything, and I could not hope to recapture Merrick's venerated touch. I refinished the board with fiberglass, now unbranded and with its history of deeper scars and stained foam sealed beneath a glossy casing. I took it to the water to feel it out. My destination was the jetties off the coast directly adjacent to LAX. This is a series of potential, if mediocre, surf spots which are, as far as I know, unsurfed and unnamed. Protocol is that the first person to ride a wave at a particular location has the naming rights. I think more than just riding and naming these spots I would like to include a short guide to surfing them:

S- Anxious breakers in front of a partially submerged rock jetty.

u- A short concrete wall implies a hump in the bottom contour, forming momentary glass floors that make apparent shallow tolerances.

s(2)- Released surges congregate in the lee of the extension while occasional bands of water exhaust themselves on the haphazard rockpiles beyond the outer ear.

a- A concrete wall separates swells into a left on its south side and a right on its north side that vainly wrap toward one another.

n(1)- Compulsive underpowered peaks.

n(2)- A short metal pier closes near shore energy while long period swells seek deeper water.

a(2)- Emancipated waves disregard the inside corner of this huge groin

Susanna

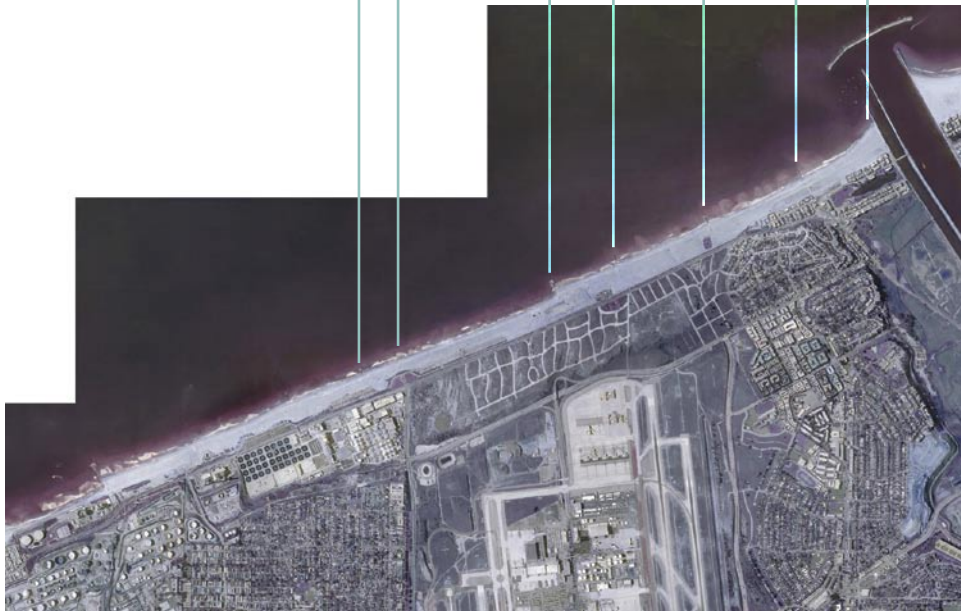


fig 5. New surfspots along the southern california coast