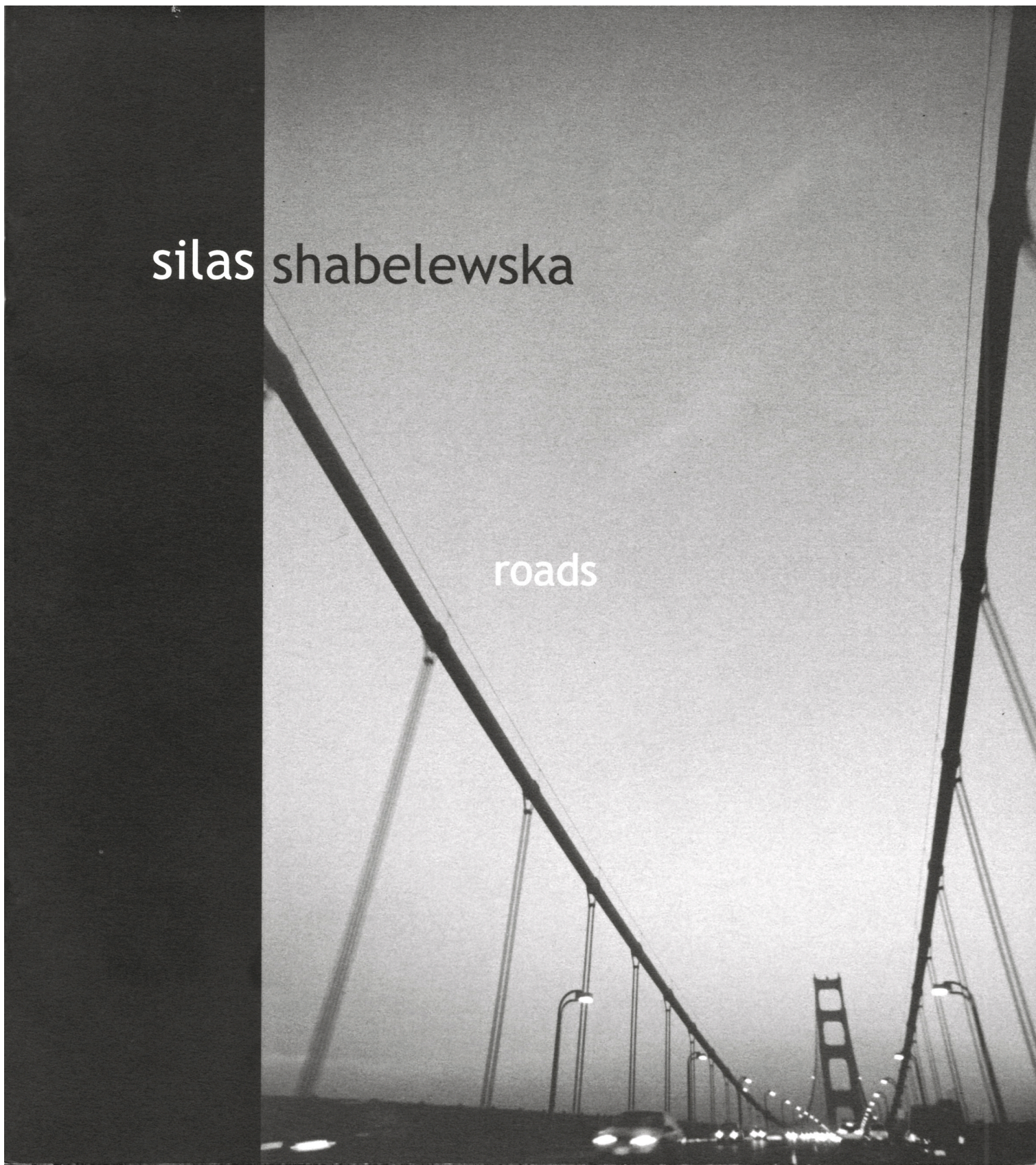


silas shabelewska

roads



"What is the meaning of this voyage to New York? What kind of sordid business are you on now? I mean, man, whither goest thou? Whither goest thou America, in thy shiny car in the night?"

Carlo, *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac

Perhaps it takes a photographer originally from somewhere else (in this case, Nice, France) to capture, in an objective manner, the distinctive, unsettling beauty of the American road. Most native-born Americans have long-standing associations with the endless web of streets across the country that would dilute any awareness of the particular character and variety of America's highways. The Swiss born Robert Frank traveled across the US on a Guggenheim grant, documenting his vision of small town America in his magnum opus of the 50s *The Americans*.

That Robert Frank and Jack Kerouac (who wrote an introduction to *The Americans*) were coming to similar conclusions about the American experience in the 1950s is no surprise, as the notion of dislocation, isolation and the illusions generated by mobility permeated society in the US in the post-war years. Since that time, the potential for re-exploring the American landscape has been taken on by photographers, including William Eggleston, whose saturated color images represent an increasing nostalgia for rural America. From another perspective, Bruce Davidson had photographed the wild side of those who live their lives on the road, their gleaming motorcycles and leather jackets emblems of freedom.

Silas Shabelewska's series of photographs of roads that are America's circulatory system comes out of a disciplined, reductive process. Within this minimalist approach, Shabelewska is in search of the essential rather than signs or symbols of civilization that, from the perspective of a non-native, may well be past its prime. Rather her vision is that of an artist whose self-imposed limits result in images that are breathtakingly simple; traffic at twilight on the sweeping Golden Gate Bridge, or highway lights viewed


against a luminous and ominous sky, their slender limbs arched like winged angels. Power lines stand like sentinels, dissolving in darkness. Another image of highway signs, distant and low on the horizon, street lamps glowing like torches, seems more like a memory or a mirage than the real thing.

A singular and appealing aspect of Shabelewska's photographs is that of a kind of anti-picture postcard. Almost anywhere along Route 78, from Pennsylvania to Utah, New Mexico and San Francisco, the way that these places are rendered defies any sense of identification with the picturesque as tourist attraction. On the contrary, these images are decidedly anonymous. Yet within their anonymity, these photos speak volumes about the vast space and spareness that epitomizes the American road. Their timelessness is their veracity. In this sense, these images suggest that imagination precedes realization; we can make real what we envision.

There is also a longing in these pictures that is perhaps personally as well as visually determined. About this series, Shabelewska writes, "All destinations become fragile and unattainable. Where do these roads lead us, to which dreams? Can we reach them? And ultimately, what is the road to our personal freedom?"

As if to discover America for herself, Shabelewska has found in its roadways a metaphor for what most of us believe this country still to be - an open, relatively unspoiled canvas which all are free to personally traverse and, like some nomadic Jackson Pollock, make their mark(s). Shabelewska finds her subject matter in places where most of us don't even bother to look, much less see for their poetic potential. Fortunately, the artist is compelled to investigate, observe and respond, in this case in an instant, and bring us pleasure from an unexpected source; the things we drive by everyday unnoticed. It's almost as if Shabelewska is challenging us with her images, "pay attention, you're missing the good stuff!"

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A grainy, black and white photograph of a cloudy sky. A bright light source, possibly the sun, is visible through the clouds on the left side, creating a lens flare effect. In the lower-left foreground, the silhouette of a highway sign structure is visible. The word "america" is printed in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font in the center-right area of the image.

america