

PREFACE

In writing about the genesis of this book, I might look deep into my past for the sources of influence and inspiration: to the wry collision of distinct forces that was growing up as part of a family of classical musicians in the capital of country music, Nashville, Tennessee; to being, like so many Americans, an automotive citizen for as far back as I can remember; or to my early graduate training as an art historian by scholars who viewed this discipline through the prism of landscape and architecture. Yet, the more resonant, even causal sources of this book are located in the shallows of deep memory, in the first years of my time in Dallas.

I came to Dallas from Cambridge, Massachusetts, in January 2004 to teach contemporary art history at Southern Methodist University in what was then called the Division of Art History. After years traveling the edges of the intellectual universe on a ship called architectural theory, I was not so much happy to land as I was curious and open to explore yet again new terrains, the discipline of art history some eight years after my departure from it within a small liberal arts school in the heart of Texas. The constraints on my teaching were minimal and the collegiality high. I incorporated a fair bit of architectural theory in the form of structuralism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction into the two-semester survey of contemporary art of which I was in charge. And it is from the second semester of this yearly course that *Automotive Prosthetic: Technological Mediation and the Car in Conceptual Art* emerged. What had started as a single lecture on conceptual art and language bifurcated, for there were, in my opinion, several photo-text pieces that were simply not done justice by this rubric. So emerged two lectures on what was long ago a new kind of art: “Conceptualism I: Language and Semiotics” and “Conceptualism II: Architecture, Urbanism, and Landscape.” The second lecture became the engine of the book and, more precisely, Chapter 2.

Seeing Marie-Josée Jean’s sharply curated exhibition *Road Runners* in March 2009 at vox, Center for the Contemporary Image in Montreal, marked another pivotal moment in the project. Jean’s exhibition brought together the fine-arts populism of the Warner Brothers’ 1949 cartoon *Fast and Furry-ous*, the stately, golden-age conceptualism of works like Ed Ruscha’s *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), and new works by young artists, such as Kerry Tribe’s disparate yet recursive *Near Miss* (2005), a video

installation unfolding around the reenactment of a car crash in a snowstorm. The exhibition was about the road but not the repercussions of uniting conceptual art and the car. While not recognizing or theorizing this union, Jean had put together an extremely smart exhibition in precisely the realm with which I was toying. In its first incarnation, the book was to be about the car and contemporary art; however, I found that too daunting a task. Contemporary art is far more amorphous and expansive a field than conceptual art, or so it seemed at the time. The experience of Jean's show gave me the confidence to explore the reaches of this project, to write this book and develop the ideas about the automobile, conceptual art, and technology.

And then there is Dallas, Texas, a city not prized for its love of intellectuals but porous and open enough to provide comfortable homes to more than a few. I would never have been able to write this book while living in a city other than Dallas, under the watchful eyes of certain of those inside the intellectual bubble—that is, a number (not all) of the people defining the parameters of the greater field of art and architectural history and theory, many of whom are located in the cities where I lived and institutions where I was trained. Liberating most of the time and painful on occasion, being here outside of the bubble, writing along the periphery, gave me the necessary space, autonomy, and simply put, distance from those who decide what is allowed and what is not allowed to complete *Automotive Prosthetic*.