



NEW YORK

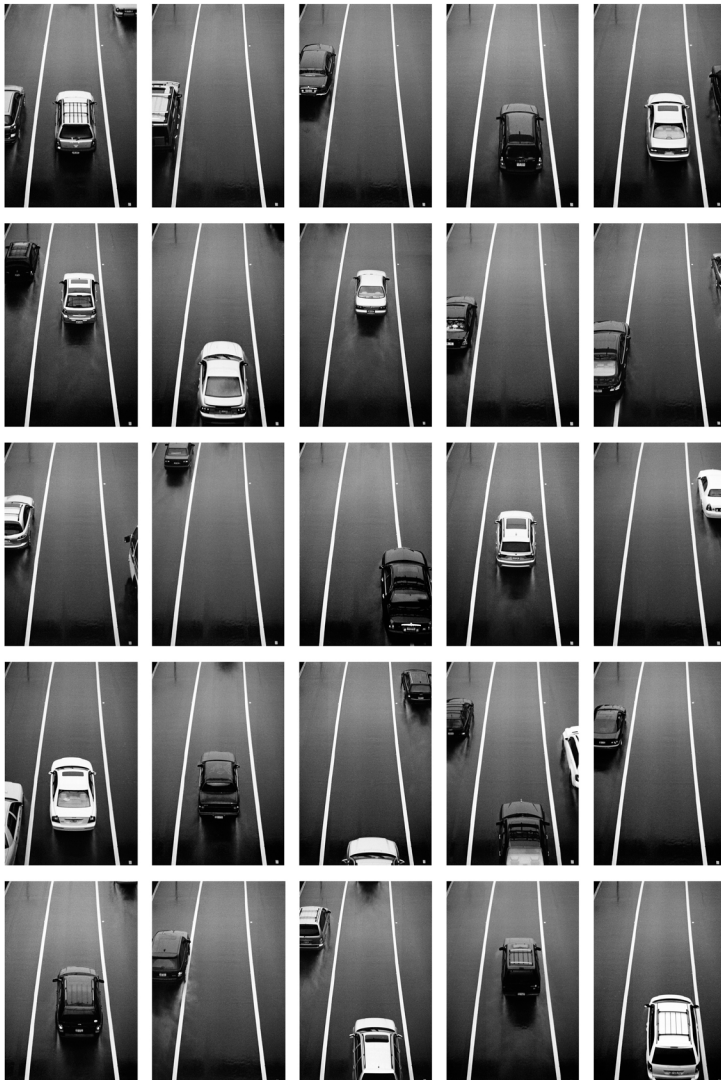
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REASONS TO **LOVE** NEW YORK '09

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Because **The Ghastliest Highway Imaginable**

Can Become a Muse



Photograph by Nathan Harger Courtesy Hasted Hunt Krautler

Few things would seem less inspirational than the blistered, tortuous Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, but that hasn't stopped Sufjan Stevens. The BQE, his 50-minute infrastructural symphony, released this year on Asthmatic Kitty Records, embraces several forms: a CD (or vinyl LP); a DVD documenting a highway odyssey in side-by-side triptychs; and a rambling essay linking the automobile, the road, and the Hula-Hoop. (Sold separately: a comic book in which hoop-twirling aliens face down evil Captain Moses. Live-action cheerleaderish counterparts appear on the DVD.)

The video begins with a portentous drone and scenes of Brooklyn's road-bound shores, shot on 16-mm. film. Stevens is announcing his ambitions: The combination of river and rumble invokes another multimedia work, Wagner's *Das Rheingold*. But he doesn't romanticize the roadway; in the notes, he calls it "a dark, spotty, viral, cancerous, bronchial, pneumatic, and convoluted mass of gray matter, at best." What fired his imagination was not love, but horror. To him, the highway represents the nadir of American transportation culture and the melancholy triumph of the dark lord Robert Moses.

That road rage translates into a blithe score for band and chamber orchestra, which sponges up American styles and squeezes out a sudsy medley. Gershwinish piano lays the groundwork for a classic tune that never materializes, segueing instead into raptures reminiscent of the Concerto in F and then into B-movie fanfares. Meanwhile, the video surveys an unholy landscape of billboards, barrier walls, commercial strips, and occasional glamour glimpses of skyline. Now and then the film speeds up, and then the BQE becomes a fluid artery as the orchestra bubbles like Philip Glass at full boil. Perhaps Stevens could now celebrate the city's other highways, the way he once planned to make albums for all 50 states. After all, there are nine Bruckner symphonies, but none for the Bruckner Expressway.