



Steve Fitch, McKee Springs, Dinosaur National Park, Utah, 1983, from "Marks and Measures: Rock Art in a Modern Art Context," color photograph.

STEVE FITCH: RADIATION PINES and OTHER WORKS

RICK DINGUS

The search is what everyone would undertake if he were not stuck in the everydayness of his own life. To be aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto the search is to be in despair.

—Walter Percy¹

Long ago Steve Fitch embarked on a journey that has since never ended. A peripatetic traveler, his searching and wandering involves a constant questioning of the implications of the artifacts of culture and of his own changing responses to them. With a background in anthropology, his transition from scientist to artist allowed him to emphasize the participant side of his continuing role as "participant-observer" and made a new place for his compulsive note-taking.

An exhibition last fall at Texas Tech University in Lubbock provided a unique opportunity to trace the development and changes in Fitch's work during the last twelve years. Much of this time he has spent studying and photographing the vernacular objects and environments along the American two-lane highway—tourist spots, truckstops, drive-in movie the-

aters, billboards, motels and neon signs. This series of roadside photographs are his best known works. Some are fairly straightforward documents while others are eccentric personal responses. They explore a variety of photographic formats and processes, from the spontaneity of a hand-held camera to the careful precision of an 8" x 10" camera; from home-brewed, black and white toning techniques to a personal use of color photography.

Unlike some photographers who cling to the "archival permanence" of their photographs as to trophies representing things that are fast disappearing in the world, Fitch simply takes pictures as part of his continuous process of collecting and gathering information. His piling up of moments, objects and places remind us of photography's value, not only as a benchmark to monitor the changes in our external world, but also as a touchstone for the changes within us. Fitch began his early work with the idea that he was making portraits of people, indirectly, by photographing the things they make. At the same time, he explored the ways in which his photographs altered contexts and meaning, so his pictures became just as much portraits of himself by recording his own responses to the things around him.



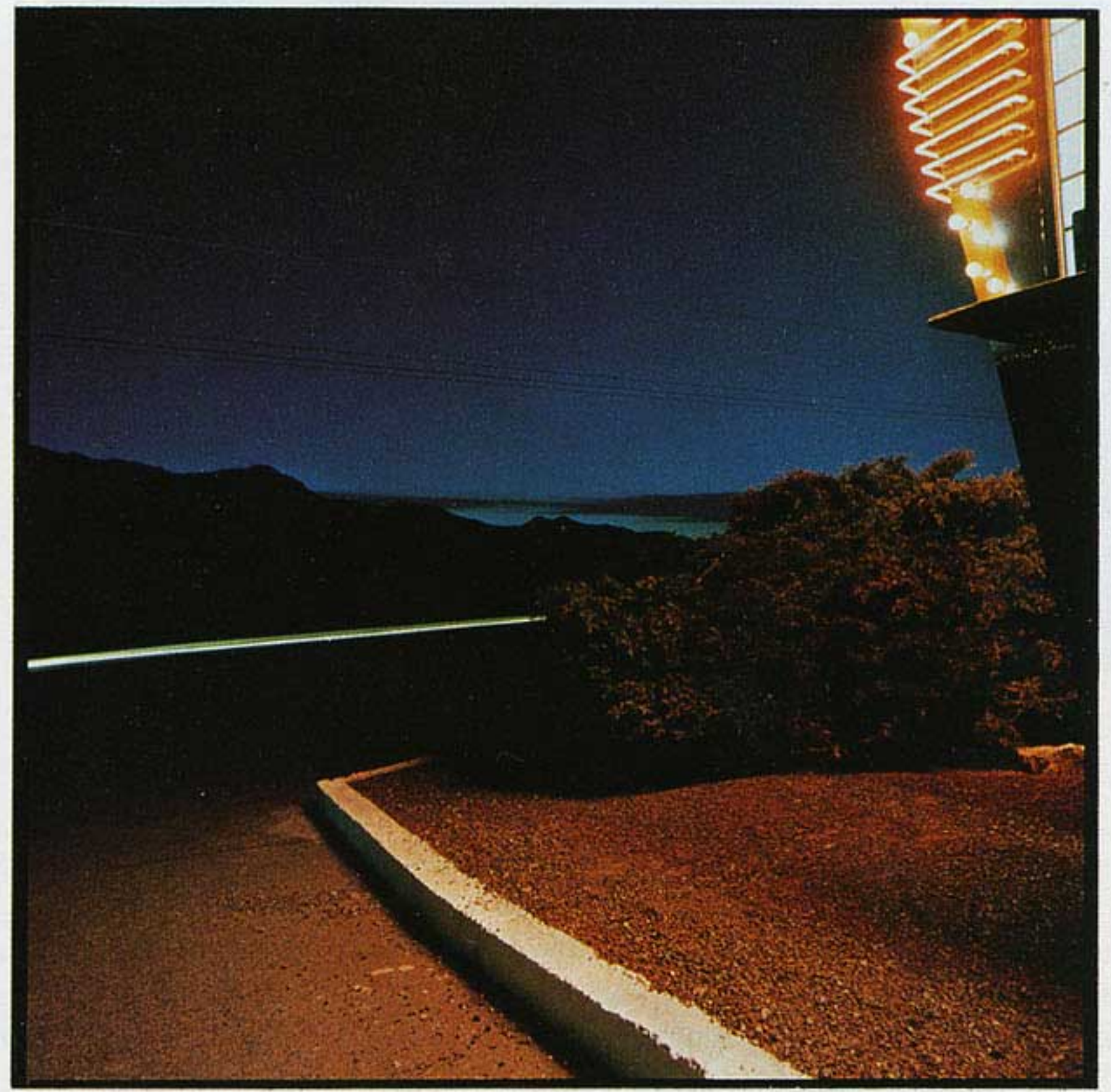
Steve Fitch, *Radiation Pines*, neon installation, 1983.

Fitch became so fascinated with neon signs that he decided to make his own. The result was *Radiation Pines*, the title piece of the exhibition. Located along one wall of the gallery, *Radiation Pines* towered above the viewer, blinking its way through a repeating, 12-second cycle of animated gesture. Its wall of burnt, wooden poles supports clear glasswork, which periodically bursts into brilliant color. Suspended in mid-air to the left, the phases of the moon first follow one another in blue light. Then an orange moon sets off the rest of the sign like an explosion, with zig-zags emanating from a double-image, life-sized human skeleton of red and blue. After that, the blue skeleton lingers on as “the blue afterglow of nuclear annihilation.” Throughout the sequence, the monotonous click-click-clicking of a timer measures the beat for a blue arrow near the top, which alternately springs up and down, “pointing toward the heavens.”

The experience of *Radiation Pines*, like the title itself, is a mixture of contradicting moods. Visually exciting and mesmerizing, it carries a sense of foreboding and sends a shudder into the midst of delight. In scale, physical presence and the gravity of the issue it confronts, it marks a departure for Fitch. Yet it follows his long-standing fascination with contradictions and is the most vociferous expression of his sardonic wit to date.

Fitch likens the title to the chance names of real estate developments, which are derived less from specific qualities of their sites than from the appeal of how the words sound. “Windmill Pointe,” with old English spelling, refers to a point of land, but the suburban development it names happens to be situated in the plains of Colorado near Denver. Fitch fantasizes about one day placing *Radiation Pines* along the highway as a marker for a tract of land he owns in the high desert of New Mexico.

Radiation Pines implies a political protest against nuclear armament, but the contradictory experiences it elicits keep it from functioning as propaganda. Instead, the piece manifests the magic of a personal ritual and the mystery of confronting the dark side of the subconscious. A clue to its meaning



Steve Fitch, *Electroglyph*: Colorado Springs, CO (8th Street Drive-In Theater #1, 1979, color photograph.

comes from one of Fitch’s drawings—an early version of his plans for *Radiation Pines* that described it as “a healing wall.” In contrast to his satirical bent, this points to his observation that producing art has always played an important role in survival and coming to terms with existence by “fulfilling a psychic need not only for individual artists, but also for the community as a whole.”

Related to this is his interest in shamanism and primitive art, which is intimately tied to myth and ritual.² Mircea Eliade has described the initiatory development of the shaman or “medicine man” as a terrifying confrontation with death, followed by a rebirth to a higher form of existence. The shaman acquires the ability to act as a mediator between man and nature because his perspective is not based on human needs alone but on the larger pattern which contains the human situation within it.³ But to describe *Radiation Pines* as a shamanistic ritual would be misleading. Although Fitch is interested in these aspects of primitive cultures, his role is more like that of the “Trickster Coyote,” his favorite character in Native American mythology, who beguiles with dazzle or humor, but always presents for consideration things with serious implications. Moreover, unlike artists who try to make their art look like primitive art, Fitch believes his work must evolve from his own time and place and incorporate his own symbols and methods of interacting.

Nevertheless, Fitch is involved with an ambitious attempt to bridge the gap between different cultures and eras. He is part of a group project called *Marks and Measures: Rock Art in a Modern Art Context*, which is aimed at exploring sites of Indian petroglyphs and pictographs in North America.⁴ Supported in part by one of the last photographic survey grants funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, the project is based on the premise that “documentary” style photographs are not the only means of “documenting” important information or attitudes. Instead of repeating the systematic recording techniques of anthropologists and rock art specialists, the photographers on this project respond personally to sites that contain rock art. They photograph not just the markings

that appear on the rocks but sometimes integrate into their images the context of the surrounding spaces and other evidence of human interaction. They are interested in the notion of photographing as a form of contemporary ritual. By including the here and now in their pictures, they emphasize that, like the rock art itself, their photographs are also artifacts; they record contemporary sensibilities responding to places that once were important to other people. Throughout is an attempt to discover a continuity that links the past with the present and future.

Unlike Fitch's other roadside subjects, the rock art sites frequently occur in remote locations that are accessible only by foot. Carrying the heavy 8" x 10" camera equipment, he sometimes returns to selected sites again and again. For years Fitch has experimented in his roadside pictures with photographing as much at dusk or late at night as in bright sunlight. He has also incorporated various kinds of artificial light—street lights, neon signs, and his electronic flash. Believing that some rock art may have been created and viewed under firelight at night, he has begun to augment his daytime photographs with those made by firelight.⁵ Along with the ritualistic character that the fires impart to the scenes, there is a careful precision and juxtaposition of other elements that keep their dramatic impact from being the only focus.

While photographing vernacular architecture and neon signs, Fitch became intrigued by the misappropriation of sym-

bols and the transformations in usage that those symbols go through in time. As a specialist, he understands much about the intended meanings of certain signs in his own culture, but his photographs of those signs disengage them from their usual setting. Like the petroglyphs and pictographs, the original meaning of which we will probably never know for certain, Fitch's photographs all have an enigmatic quality about them that prompts us to search for something more. His images do more than simply share his own experience—they invite us to participate and generate new viewpoints of our own. □

NOTES:

¹Quoted in *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin* by Lawrence Weschler (Berkeley: University of California, 1982) p. 1.

²A good reference for this interest among contemporary artists is *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* by Lucy R. Lippard (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).

³See *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* by Mircea Eliade (Princeton: Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series, 1964).

⁴Also working on this project are: Linda Connor, Rick Dingus, Nathan Lyons, Gary Metz, and Charles Roitz.

⁵In keeping with his intentions not to disturb the sites, Fitch is careful to keep the fires away from the panels so that no smoke will mar them; he also builds the fires over aluminum foil so that he can remove the ashes and all traces of his having been there when he leaves.

Steve Fitch lives in Louisville, Colorado, and teaches photography at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

© Rick Dingus.

Steve Fitch, *Motel, Highway 66, Holbrook, Arizona, 1973*, from "Diesels and Dinosaurs," a series of photographs also published as a book.

