

Placeholder

Ingrid Mayrhofer

An empty sign is not working. Or is it?

Billboards and road signs void of their intended commercial message simply take up space. They also stand for something that is no longer there or not yet there. They can function as place holders, sentinels, or markers. During frequent road trips in Ontario and Quebec over the past three years, I have observed three types of unoccupied signs in various stages of dormancy:

1. Signs that have decayed to the point where their message is no longer decipherable. Old billboards, disintegrated following years of neglect, possess an aura of past service.
2. Middle-aged boards that show the wear and tear of having born messages in the past. Their years of service are evident in slight variations in hue, marks made by fasteners, and cracking or peeling of the reflective coating. Designated spaces in their grid could potentially acquire new functionality.
3. Newly-erected signs that are completely vacant or offer idle segments to be activated. These are the bearers of the advertisements of the future. Unspoiled by prior use, they beam with latent messaging potential.

I am not interested in the potential signified as much as in the anticipation of a purpose for the signifier. In the context of the marketing wayfinding functions of the signs, the fact that no advertisements have been placed on numerous boards along these major highways indicates economic downturn. Or perhaps they are make-work-projects. Or an exercise in minimalist marketing. Simple blue or white fields of colour with rounded edges, borders or no borders, might offer an aesthetic repose to drivers who are already overwhelmed by visuals of private or public services or attractions, or are bored by monotonous highway landscaping.

In a material sense, this project continues my exploration of a “culture versus nature ” dichotomy. At some point, the billboard may have dominated its surrounding with the advertisement of a product, service, or attraction. Placed at the edge of a forest, its message has not been legible for some time. Each year, more of the paper peels off, revealing new underlying material narratives.





Ingrid Mayrhofer, (top to bottom) *Exit 675* and *Exit 570* (*Placeholder series*), ongoing, digital photography.