

Peter Atkins 'World Journal'

Peter Atkins 'World Journal'

CURATED BY ANNETTE LARKIN

VIII TRIENNALE – INDIA 1994

LALIT KALA AKADEMI NEW DELHI

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Foreword

The Triennale-India is one of the most significant recurrent international visual art events in the world. Since 1971 Australia has had a proud tradition of involvement and we are delighted to be represented on this occasion by artist Peter Atkins and Commissioner Annette Larkin.

The experience of exhibiting in a major international art event, and of travelling to India, has had a significant impact on the artistic practices and careers of a number of Australian artists previously involved in this event. The benefits afforded by such a cultural exchange have been extended on this occasion by Atkins' participation in a residency, whereby the artist has lived and worked in New Delhi for a number of months leading up to the exhibition. Overseas travel provides an important stimulus to Atkins' art and much of his output to date has both drawn inspiration from, and commented on, the countries he has visited.

Important to the success of Australia's representation at the Eighth Triennale-India has been the cooperative relationship between the Australian Exhibitions Touring Agency (AETA) and the Australia Council's Visual Arts/Craft Board (VACB).

The Australia Council, the Australian government's arts funding and advisory agency, maintains a lead role in the promotion of the creative arts. The VACB provides a diverse range of funding programs which foster the development of contemporary Austral-

ian arts and crafts, both nationally and internationally. It recognises the increasing importance of cultural and artistic exchange in our region and has nominated the Triennale as a priority event for Australian participation.

AETA works closely with the Australia Council on a number of important projects and is the managing body of Australia's representation at the Triennale. AETA organises and manages a diverse program of touring contemporary visual art and craft exhibitions, operates on a national and international level and ensures the broadest possible access to stimulating and innovative work by Australian artists and craftspeople.

Our special thanks are extended to those institutions and individuals whose hard work and commitment have made this project possible. Australia's participation has profited greatly by the energetic contribution made by Annette Larkin, Australia's Commissioner. We are also indebted to the Australian High Commission in New Delhi for their assistance, particularly to Brian Cummins and Asha Lele Das, and to the Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi. Finally, we are grateful to the Australia-India Council, who have been extremely generous in their support of this project.

Ann Lewis A.M. Chair, Australian Exhibitions Touring Agency

Pamille Berg Chair, Visual Arts/Craft Board, Australia Council

Discovering what is already familiar

...we do not build up complex ideas out of simple ones, but rather, the other way around, ...it is the intuition of the complex form that gives us the key to grasping the simpler one.¹

In 1892, Australian artist Ellis Rowan set off on an epic ten-year journey which was to take her half way around the world, recording the native flora as she went. Some years previously, the English landscape painter and poet, Edward Lear (he of limerick fame) made his way through Albania, recording his difficulties in a journal which was later published as that small masterpiece of grumpy maladjustment, *Travels of a Landscape Painter in Albania*.

They set off on their travels, as did so many of their contemporaries, with the confident expectation that their's would be voyages of discovery, that they would reveal new and unexpected things and bring home to an anxious and excited public evidence of worlds previously unknown. These artists and writers provided the intellectual and emotional fuel for their society's discovery of unimagined universes and for its confident expectation that all could be possessed.

For the modern traveller, all this is, of course, impossible. The exotic has been familiarised and commodified, there is no longer anything left to discover. What one brings back are

souvenirs and momentos to remind one's friends of places they have never been, but with which they nevertheless feel themselves to be familiar, places which are both as instantly recognisable and as strange as the place they live in.

Today, when we travel, we are necessarily reduced to seeing what has already been seen, to experiencing what has been experienced many times before and to recording what has been endlessly recorded. We deliberately seek out the most often sought-out icons and we photograph for ourselves what has been photographed so often that it is now not uncommon to find officially placed markers which direct us where to stand so that our photograph will exactly replicate everyone else's. It is our way of reaffirming our ordinariness, our place in the broader scheme of things. It represents our desperate need to belong.

And what can we aspire to return home with? Not, certainly, with any startling new revelation which might add to the store of human knowledge (even if we could believe any more in such a thing as a store of human knowledge). Most of us, I suspect, if we are at all alive to the potentialities of cultural interactions, would expect to arrive home not with new facts to impart but, rather, with new personal understandings: of other peoples and other cultures, yes, but, perhaps more to the point,

of ourselves and our own responses. We travel outside our normal milieux in order to become strangers to ourselves. We remove the props we normally use to establish our identity so that we can discover who we really are. Perhaps this is all a conceit, but it is indeed a powerfully attractive one.

Certainly there is, in Peter Atkins' motivation to travel, a strong element of this desire to discover the self. The works in this exhibition, the visual diary of a journey across three continents, probably tell us more about the artist himself than about the places he visited. The little objects he incorporates into the works are personal talismans, small momentos which he imbues with magical or ritual significance of a very personal nature. The words and pictures he reproduces are triggers to personal memories and reactions. They serve to remind him not so much of the specific places he has visited, but of the feelings he had while there. They attempt to capture and fix in the memory the strangeness, the heightened sense of self, which comes from being a foreigner in a foreign land. These works are not so much a narrative, then, as a series of fixed points, stations on a journey, little Proustian stabs at holding on to and fixing what is fleeting and ungraspable. Perhaps, in that sense (although I suspect that Peter may not agree with me on this point) they represent that subconscious longing of all compulsive travellers for a stable home, for a life in which the self is, finally, at home with itself. Why else would he record, sometimes, it seems, almost obsessively, the dates, times and circumstances of each small personal event, and why else

would he be so anxious (and anxiety does, indeed, strike the viewer as an important component of these works) to personalise and internalise everything he records?

Peter Atkins' records of his travels are not narratives in any traditional sense because they leave out the very business of travelling. For the modern traveller, there is no longer any sense of continuity, any sense that the journeying itself is part of the experience. The trip begins not at the time of departure but at the point of arrival. The romance of travel is now reduced to a brutal displacement, a muddle of airport terminals, bureaucratic delays and devices calculated to fill time. Guayaquil and Madras may as well be on the same continent since their location is determined simply by how many hours it takes to get to them and how many stopovers there are on the way. One is simply 'put down' at each place, one has no understanding of one's approach, no appreciation of ambience or locality.

Nevertheless, while the linkages between places may no longer be those of time and geography, places are, in fact, linked more complexly and more abstractly, through electronic communication systems, the interdependencies of the world monetary system and political and ideological alliances. In a sense, as Fredric Jameson has pointed out, place no longer exists. Jameson is talking specifically about the United States, but his observations ring true almost everywhere: "more precisely", he says, place "exists at a much feebler level, surcharged by all kinds of other more powerful but also more abstract spaces... As individuals, we are in and out of all these overlapping dimen-

sions all the time, something which makes an older kind of existential positioning of ourself in Being – the human body in the natural landscape, the individual in the older village or organic community, even the citizen in the nation state – exceedingly problematical.”²

Alienation is, then, on all these levels, a fundamental part of international travel and a large part of its motivation. The temptation, therefore, when recording one’s travel experiences, is to try to reassert some sense of wholeness or unity, to find an image or a set of images which one feels in some way ‘sums up’ one’s overall impression. It is in the somewhat self-defeating nature of Peter Atkins’ project to seek this wholeness while at the same time acknowledging and, in fact, revelling in its impossibility. The works celebrate cultural discontinuities and disruptions while longing for their opposites.

While the journals of nineteenth-century travellers such as Ellis Rowan or Edward Lear are likely to be full of incidental detail, rich in complexities of experience, and truly narrative in form, those of the modern traveller are more likely to establish a staccato rhythm at once more restricted in its experiential richness and more complex in the intricate webs of cultural connectedness they must address.

Old dualities no longer hold: the foreign is as likely to be at home as somewhere else. Everything and nothing is foreign now. As Peter Atkins himself has said, “I feel less like a foreigner in a foreign land than I do here in Australia, where I am supposed to belong.”³

That is why it would, I think, be wrong to read *Inca Cola*, for example, or *Mayan Temple and Honda Sign* as simple morality tales about the inroads of modern capitalism. They cannot be reduced so easily to politics and ideology although, at the same time, we cannot entirely discount such a reading. If anything, these works express a certain paradoxical delight at displacement, a metaphor of the artist’s own sense of being confronted with his ‘other’.

It should hardly be surprising that the moments of personal revelation (if revelation is not too strong a word) which Peter feels it is most important to hold onto have so often to do with social incongruities, with the juxtaposition of seeming opposites. Similarly, the symbols, signs, words and images he chooses are recorded here as isolated phenomena, stripped of their cultural associations and contexts, and presented to us like specimens in a museum.

Also, the fact that all the works are of identical size and are all identically framed, while it emphasises their relatedness and (importantly) draws attention to the ritualised process of their making, also serves to ‘classicise’ and regiment the series, tending to contradict any interpretation of them as expressive or spontaneous. They remain, despite their warmth of understanding and their empathy, profound images of alienation, but, I think, more of a personal than a political kind.

So, to a great extent, escape is an important element in Peter Atkins’ motivation to travel. He speaks of going to other countries as ‘getting out’. It is a telling phrase. He says that in foreign

places he is free of distractions (and one can interpret this word 'distractions' to suit oneself, of course): "The longer I travel the less complicated life becomes. I become inward. I go for long periods without talking to anyone. I become totally self-sufficient. I come to know myself."⁴

For the early Christians, there were two kinds of pilgrimage. One represented a replication of Christ's journey into the wilderness, an attempt to assume the Lord's spiritual anguish. The other was the journey of penitence, in which people guilty of crimes were required to work off their guilt by assuming the role of travelling beggars or vagabonds. If we are prepared to accept, for a moment, that Atkins' journeys might be considered pilgrimages, we can find elements of both kinds recorded in the works which make up his 'World Journal'.

If this sounds too pretentious, consider the words which are written (sometimes over and over again) on these little canvases: 'death', 'greed', 'hate', 'guilt', 'deceit', 'envy', 'morality', 'temptation', 'Nirvana', 'fear' and so on. These are words loaded with cultural resonances. Occasionally they are used almost as incantations (the word 'fear', for example, endlessly repeated in *Fear of Death*), as though the stating of these words will dilute their power. What is this if it is not, at least in part, shaking a fist at God? Consider, too, the repeated use of the cross, a reference not only to the power of religion in the South American countries he visited, but also to the artist's own middle-class Catholic upbringing and the torments of a Catholic education. Thus we return once more to the themes of individual isolation, civic

solidarity and fraternity, of rootlessness and cultural tradition, of fleetingness and of permanency (or rather, perhaps, the impossibility of permanency).

If Peter Atkins is searching, as he himself has said, for a culture which is, in some sense, 'pure' and 'untainted', then the corollary of that is escape from a society which is 'impure' or 'tainted', a recognition that something is absent, a desire to find what is lacking. As Michael Ignatieff has written:

"To define what it means to be human in terms of needs is to begin, neither with the best, nor with the worst, but only with the body and what it lacks. It is to define what we have in common, not by what we have, but by what we are missing. A language of human needs understands human beings as being naturally insufficient, incomplete, at the mercy of nature and of each other. It is an account that begins with what is absent.

"This sense of what it is to be human has its origins in the religious idea of sin. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, human nature was treated not as a fact or as a bundle of potentialities, but as a problem. How, Jews and Christians have asked, is man's fate as a creature of need to be reconciled with the ideal of the goodness of God? Why is man condemned to scarcity, toil, suffering and death? Why is he a creature of need and not of plenitude, of lack, rather than fullness, of homelessness rather than belonging?"⁵

When these works were first exhibited at Melbourne's Tolarno Galleries in August 1993, Peter Atkins stipulated that they could be sold only as a complete set. They were not available individu-

ally. This, he said, was because the series was a narrative and the works individually could not convey that. At first I was puzzled by this, since, for one thing, I did not consider them a narrative at all. It seemed to me that they were all very strong as individual works.

Indeed, only a few days later, Peter told me that a Melbourne collector had expressed interest in buying the whole series. Naturally, I thought he'd be pleased, but he seemed anything but. He asked me if there was some way he could get the buyer to formally agree never to split up the works in the future. I told him I thought that was unlikely.

I realised much later that this reluctance to let the works go, this need to keep track of their destiny long after most artists would willingly have relinquished control, was because these works were, in a very important way, a sort of spiritual home for someone who did not feel at home anywhere else, a point of fixture for a constant traveller, a referent in a life largely devoid of referents.

Each work, despite its rootedness in personal ritual, despite its mirroring of a private state of mind, includes some tangible suggestion of place, some acknowledgment of external realities, of things seen and experienced. We recognise, for example, that a Mayan temple shape is appropriate for a painting done in Honduras. We accept that "money is not wealth" was something said in conversation in Turkey. Although it is culturally displaced, a Sepik mask is a curiously appropriate icon from New York. More specifically, objects taken directly from the

environment or even painted contributions by people met along the way form direct and palpable connections with external realities. Interestingly, the one work which seems not to address at all the place of its manufacture is that done in Sydney, the artist's nominal home. That work is called *Worldwork*, as if Sydney was a place merely for considering other places but without importance in itself.

Peter Timms OCTOBER 1993

NOTES

- 1 Karl Marx, as cited in, F. Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London and New York, Verso, 1991, p. 233.
- 2 Fredric Jameson, *ibid*, p. 127.
- 3 from a conversation between the writer and Peter Atkins, September, 1993.
- 4 *Ibid*.
- 5 M. Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers*, London, Hogarth Press, 1984, p. 57.

‘World Journal’

- 1 **Holymen and Candles**
Bangkok, Thailand. 23 March 1992
- 2 **Nirvana – Death in Varanasi**
Varanasi, India. 29 March 1992
- 3 **Journey (with Completed Stations – for Garry)**
Agra, India. 2 April 1992
- 4 **Black Star and Star Ruby**
Delhi, India. 9 April 1992
- 5 **Sunflowers and Wave Shapes (for Vincent)**
Amsterdam, Holland. 13 April 1992
- 6 **Fear of Death**
Istanbul, Turkey. 16 April 1992
- 7 **Simple Kilim Pattern**
Ankara, Turkey. 21 April 1992
- 8 **Money is not Wealth – After Speaking with Mustafa**
Konya, Turkey. 23 April 1992
- 9 **F B is Dead**
Eastern Turkey. May Day 1992
- 10 **Unfinished Painting**
(with Boat, Leaf and Spire Shapes)
Dublin, Ireland. 20 May 1992
- 11 **Altered ‘Vicki Comb’ Texta Drawing**
Brixton, England. 29 May 1992
- 12 **Empty Canvas (for Charles Bukowski)**
New York City, USA. 7 June 1992
- 13 **Mask (East Sepik). Collection – Metropolitan Museum**
New York City, USA. 15 June 1992
- 14 **Red Sky and Cypress Trees**
New York City, USA. 26 June 1992
- 15 **Brown Flowers**
Calcutta, India. 27 March 1992

Reworked and retitled
(Mea Culpa) a Painting for A K
Mexico City, Mexico. 4 July 1992
- 16 **Blind Man/Priest**
Antigua, Guatemala. 19 July 1992
- 17 **Cross with Roses**
(A Painting for Indigenous People Everywhere)
Antigua, Guatemala. 25 July 1992
- 18 **Bottles and Crosses (After Visiting Antigua Cemetery)**
Antigua, Guatemala. 31 July 1992
- 19 **I Am My Own God**
After Visiting The Church of St Thomas
Chichicastenango, Guatemala. 13 August 1992
- 20 **Mayan Temple and Honda Sign**
Tegucigalpa, Honduras. 29 August 1992
- 21 **Spire (in the Distance) and Brown Lake**
Managua, Nicaragua. 2 September 1992
- 22 **The Beautiful/Ugly Painting**
San José, Costa Rica. 11 September 1992

- 23 **Panama City**
Panama City, Panama. 18 September 1992
- 24 **Objects (Pre-Colombian)**
Bogotá, Colombia. 25 September 1992
- 25 **Wooden Monkey Masks**
Guayaquil, Ecuador. 30 September 1992
- 26 **The Discovery of America (500th Anniversary)**
Quito, Ecuador. 12 October 1992
- 27 **Morality + Temptation**
Quito, Ecuador. 17 October 1992
- 28 **Memorial. Woven Cross by Salasaca Indian –
Jose Maszaquiza Caisabanda**
Banos, Ecuador. 23 October 1992
- 29 **Feather Cape and Silver Heart**
Lima, Peru. 27 October 1992
- 30 **Inca Kola**
Cuzco, Peru. 31 October 1992
- 31 **A Simple Bowl**
La Paz, Bolivia. 10 November 1992
- 32 **Buckle and Button Pattern**
Buenos Aires, Argentina. 15 November 1992
- 33 **Vanity/Poverty**
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. 21 November 1992
- 34 **Horse/Head/Cross (Carved Wood)**
Olinda-Recife, Brazil. 25 November 1992

- 35 **Thinking About Death and Bromeliads**
Belém, Amazon River, Brazil. 28 November 1992
- 36 **Meeting of the Waters (Tapajos and Amazon Rivers)
and Star Design (Used by the Kruapu Indians)**
Santarem, Brazil. 2 December 1992
- 37 **Meditation Painting (Structure for Oscar Niemeyer)**
Brázília, Brazil. 11 December 1992
- 38 **Self Portrait with Vague Shapes
and the Shadow of A Woman**
São Paulo, Brazil. 15 December 1992
- 39 **Songs of Jesus**
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. 16 December 1992
- 40 **Worldwork**
Sydney, Australia. 31 December 1992

All works in 'World Journal' are 30 x 30 cms, mixed media, including bone, brass, buttons, canvas, cardboard, enamel, felt, gouache, Irish peat bog ash, leather, marble, masonite, metal Honda insignia, mirror, newsprint, onyx, paper, paper money, plastic, postcards, record cover, religious items (metal and plastic), safety pins, shell, silver, texta, velvet, volcanic ash, wood, wool.

The artist will exhibit four paintings made during his residency in New Delhi October 1993 – February 1994.



An Interview with Peter Atkins

Over the last decade, the artworld's attention has been drawn increasingly away from Euro-American influences. As a country that since its colonial inception has followed the culture of the West, Australia is beginning to look towards centres that are closer to home. This is by no means a new thing, but it is this shift of emphasis that makes the work of Peter Atkins particularly relevant in the context of a major contemporary exhibition in the Asian region. Not only has Atkins had an active dialogue with non-Western cultures for many years, his work has raised a number of general questions about the relationship between individual artistic practice and the changing currents of international art trends.

The question of identity (whether national, religious or personal) is central to Asia-Pacific politics. Although such issues figure in Atkins' work, they are not related to any form of nationalism. Instead, the artist's obsessions are to do with a search for 'authenticity' and personal expression which is played out through his direct interaction with the many cultures he encounters on his journeys.

Formally, Atkins' work operates in two ways. On one level, the surface defines his position as both abstract painter and (at times) obsessive collector of objects. The other level in-

volves a more narrative and intimate dimension that reflects the very personal origins of his work.

Such formal tensions could perhaps be seen as functioning within the complex interplay of modernism and postmodernism, which is endlessly debated in the artworlds of both Eastern and Western cultures. In this sense, Atkins' large works have a modernist disposition that derives from his early influences – of abstract expressionism and of Australian artists such as Tony Tuckson and Ian Fairweather. From these artists he has acquired ideas of transcendentalism which he has incorporated into his own contemporary practice.

At first glance the work in the 'World Journal' seems to be engaged in postmodern strategies of collage, appropriation, the found object, pastiche and cultural nomadism. But the bricolage and appropriated text in Atkins' work does not necessarily have the irony or the surface eclecticism associated with much postmodern art. Instead this body of work is a personal selection of materials that merges his own aesthetics and interests with that of the cultures he interacts with.

Annette Larkin

AL I'd like to look at the origins of your interest in abstract painting. When you were in Paris in 1986 you came upon a letter written to *The New York Times* by Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman in 1943. It stated that "We favour the expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth." In essence, do you believe your work has drawn from a similar focus?

PA When I arrived in Paris in late 1986, I was very depressed as I felt completely unformed, artistically and spiritually. Seeing thousands of years of culture when I travelled through Asia, the Middle East and Europe was quite detrimental to me. I felt completely overwhelmed and I had to fight to regain some sense of my own identity.

I spent a lot of time at the Pompidou Library reading Freud's essay on 'Mourning and Melancholia', Albert Camus, Jean Genet, Maquis de Sade and also the letters by Gottlieb, Rothko and Newman. This quote in particular was very relevant, as it seemed to be discussing matters which I was dealing with at that time – trying to pare complex thoughts down to a simple truth and a simple image.

AL From this time the use of large simple shapes – the spire, the canoe, the poplar tree, indigenous artifacts and most often the cross – were repeatedly seen in your paintings. Can you elaborate on the origins of these forms in your work?

PA The repeated symbols that I use are about being obsessed

with particular objects, whether they be spires, boats, feathers or buttons. I try to cultivate my obsession with these forms. It seems to be intrinsic to the way I work. On the large works I begin without preconceived ideas, tending instead to let the images manifest themselves through the paint. Usually the image I end up with concerns my current preoccupations.

In the past, my use of the cross and the spire have been endowed with a negative character, due to my angst about Catholicism. But this angst has subsided recently. I've now claimed the cross as my own life-affirming symbol, with text such as faith, hope, love and charity, to affirm the positive.

AL At this time, were you interested in other notions put forward by the abstract expressionists?

PA Yes. Before I left to go overseas, I had come across the work of two Australian artists who I felt a great affinity with – Tony Tuckson and Ian Fairweather. Their work was based on the line and were themselves influenced by the abstract expressionists of the late 1940s and 1950s. What appealed to me most was their simplified, almost minimal approach to image making.

AL During your time in Paris in 1986-87 you became familiar with the work of the contemporary American painter Julian Schnabel. It would seem that his influence allowed you to follow through your own interest in abstract expressionism.

PA Yes, meeting him and viewing the two solo exhibitions of his in Paris at that time was very influential. He had used materials such as cowhide, linoleum and velvet instead of canvas. At this time I discovered some old curtains and cans of house paint in

the cellar of the Cité Internationale des Arts where I was staying for four months. They had been used as drop sheets when the Cité was being painted. This material, with all the marks on it from the painter, had its own history and it was fascinating for me to add my own marks to that fabric and make it my own.

Schnabel's use of materials gave me the confidence to carry on from those initial curtain paintings. To me, he broke down the whole idea of traditional media. When I arrived back in Australia I began using tarpaulins, dropsheets and wood. The simplified imagery I use coexists beautifully with the incidental stains and marks found on these materials.

AL During 1990 you produced a 12 panelled work titled 'United States Journal' which was a journal of your travels there. Late last year you returned to Australia, from ten months travelling the world, with a 40 panelled work titled 'World Journal'. Can you tell me a little about how these two works came about?

PA These works stem from the small works and diaries I have been making on my travels since 1985. They are made up of images, notes and found objects that in some way reflect my time spent in a certain place.

When I arrived in Los Angeles in 1990, with my itinerary of 12 cities in the United States, I thought it would be important to draw upon my experiences of travelling by making a work in every city. By the time I reached Seattle, it had already become an obsession. The U.S. is so disparate, and each work reflects the distinct nature of the city in which it was made. I didn't want to make a suite of works that related to each other in a pictorial

sense, but that related more in essence of time, material and environment.

The vast range of materials used in the 'United States Journal', is as much a comment on the American disposable society as it is on my own needs to challenge conservative attitudes towards making art. I found lots of objects on the street and in second-hand shops that I incorporated into the work.

In March of 1992, I left for ten months travel. I was away for 40 weeks and wanted to do 40 works which extended on the ideas behind the 'United States Journal'. I started in Bangkok and then went to India, Turkey, Amsterdam, London, Dublin, New York, Central and South America. I think a lot of artists can become very complacent in their working environment. Travelling can give a new impetus to one's work because the visual language is constantly changing. It seems my smaller works have become synonymous with travel – it helps me to maintain my own sense of self.

AL When viewing 'World Journal', I was fascinated by your great affinity for the use of bricolage.

PA By using predominantly found materials I was attempting to challenge the notion of fine art and fine art practice – to break down the concept that art is precious or reverential – as I believe this stifles the process of creating art. Art is everywhere, and influences come from all over. While working on the 'United States Journal' I felt an immense freedom to demonstrate the influences I received and to portray them accordingly in my work.

AL Cultural transition appears to be a predominant concern with the pieces from Latin America. After witnessing many cultures in your travels you must feel strongly about the notion of the world as a 'global village', established through the progress of communication.

PA I recently read a book by Paul Theroux, *Happy Isles of Oceania*, which is about the decline of tribal culture in Melanesia. Theroux observes that even though there is no television in Tonga, they still have video machines with videos sent out from California. As a result they have young Tongans forming rap bands. I saw many houses in Central America with satellite dishes. The Indians were sitting on their mud floors, weaving and watching CNN and Cable TV from North America with others listening to CDs of Madonna. It is a situation specific to our era. Things like that fascinate me and my work from South America deals with these ideas which is particularly evident in works like *Mayan Temple and Honda Sign*, *Inca Cola* and *Vanity/Poverty*.

The idea of cultural transition is a subject that is extremely volatile and I must stress that the works in the 'World Journal' concern my own visions at the time I was travelling. They are simple observations filtered through the eyes of a Westerner. They are not part of some critical analysis of the decline of tribal cultures. The transition that has occurred in the past century has indeed, as you have suggested, turned the world into some kind of 'global village', but this is the nature of evolution.

Because I travel so much it is only natural that these ideas

are reflected in my work. I believe that we are living in a pluralistic era where expanded travel, mass media, telecommunications and satellites have made it possible to receive an overload of imagery, instantly, from any part of the world. Contemporary world culture is multi-faceted/multi-racial. Part of my role as an artist is to document this change.

AL In the 'World Journal' do you feel that you are appropriating icons and symbols from cultures or are you capturing the essence of each country's culture in an emblematic form?

PA They are not direct appropriations. There are only a few works that use images derived from particular cultures, like the star pattern from the Kruapu in the Amazon. I was not appropriating this out of context. It was painted after visiting that tribe and I was struck by the fact that one whole tribe was almost extinct with only 49 people left. I felt a need to grab onto it before it ceased to exist, to show it to people back here.

AL A bit like snapshots?

PA More than snapshots. I don't take any photographs at all anymore. I feel that everything is one experience and you should look back at it with a feeling of that time, rather than looking back at a particular image which in time can cancel the peripheral experience that relates to it. Photography and video can too easily become a substitute for reality.

AL The use of text has increased in your work. Is this an extension of your interest in simplifying complex thoughts?

PA Yes, the use of text has become an important device in which the act of painting or image making is pared down to the

appropriate use of simple selective words. The painting *Vanity/Poverty* from Rio is a good example of this. How do I depict vanity and poverty in a painted form? Words state the acts more obviously and emotionally than I feel can usually be achieved with static images. Text can be both succinct and abstract at the same time, with the ability to conjure many images at once. When combined with appropriate imagery, text can achieve unusual power. The two words vanity and poverty overlaid on the rather absurd image of Christ the Redeemer – a monstrously high concrete statue of Christ, ‘lording’ over Rio with outstretched arms – has produced a powerful statement and, for me, the essential image of Rio. It is my attempt to display that Christ’s duty as redeemer has failed.

AL The ‘World Journal’ could be seen as your collaboration with the cultures themselves. But while you were travelling you also made collaborations with artists. What made you decide to do this?

PA I did three collaborations. The first one was in India with a craftsperson who worked with marble in Agra. I wanted to create a work which was a personal memorial to my gallerist, Garry Anderson, who had recently died. Due to its memorial connotations and being in Agra, where the Taj Mahal is, it seemed marble was the appropriate material to use. I found a craftsperson who inlaid the marble which I then painted over the top. It was an indirect collaboration. The other two were more collaborative works.

Vicki Comb was a ‘bag lady’ in London who lived on the streets and was about 80 years old. She was originally from the Caribbean and had only ever painted tropical fruit and birds in texta colours. I saw them near the Brixton subway and thought they were incredible. Over the two week period I was there, I got to know her and bought some of her work. The drawing which eventuated from this meeting is Vicki’s image of a purple pineapple which was altered to fit the journal’s format.

The other collaborative piece is from Southern Ecuador with a weaver, Jose Masaquiza Caisabanda. I met him in Banos a week after the 500th anniversary of the ‘discovery’ of America. In our collaborative work, titled *Memorial*, I chose the image and Jose wove it. I was interested in the irony associated with using Jose’s powerful Indian tradition of weaving to produce an image of the cross which it seems, has become a symbol of destruction for many indigenous cultures.

This interview was conducted in Sydney on 26 April and 18 August 1993.

'WORLD JOURNAL'
IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF
GARRY ANDERSON
AND GEORGES MORA