

Art Now



CONTEMPORARY ART POST-1970
BOOK TWO

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Today it is accepted practice that artists use pieces of other objects in their own work, whether they be fragments of earlier works incorporated into new ones, wood, metal, fabric or simply pristine new objects given a new context and life.

The collage too has been a formative element in art production since the turn of the century.

Artists such as Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948), Hannah Höch (1889–1978) and Raoul Hausmann (1886–1971) have used collage and photomontage to comment on what they believe is the elitism of art and to challenge the nature of the practice of art production. Such approaches to working can particularly be found in the work of Sydney-based artist Peter Atkins.

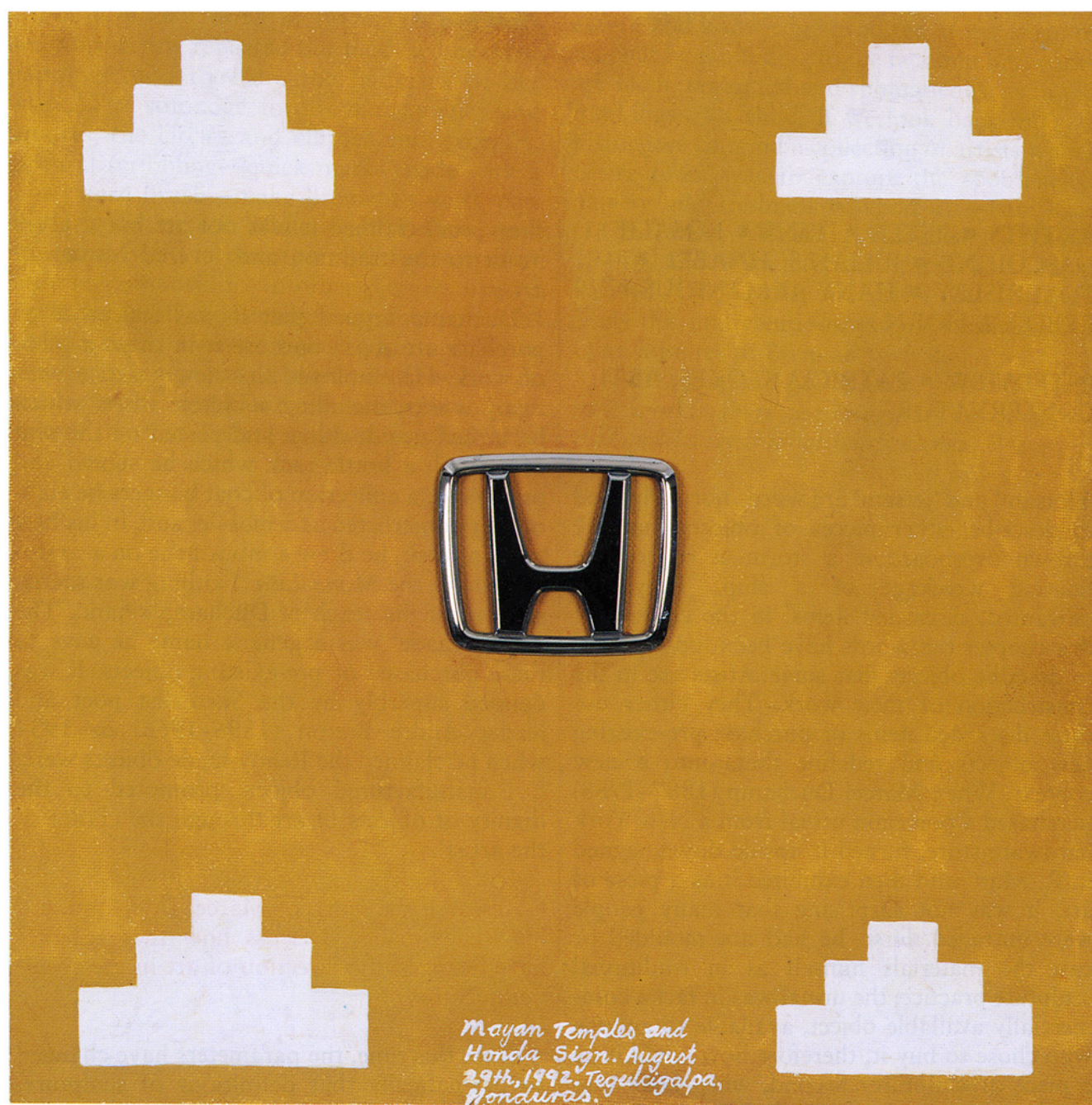


Fig. 10.1 PETER ATKINS (b. 1963). *Mayan Temple and Honda Sign August 29th, 1992, Tegucigalpa, Honduras*, 1992. From the work *World Journal*, mixed media, 30 × 30 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney

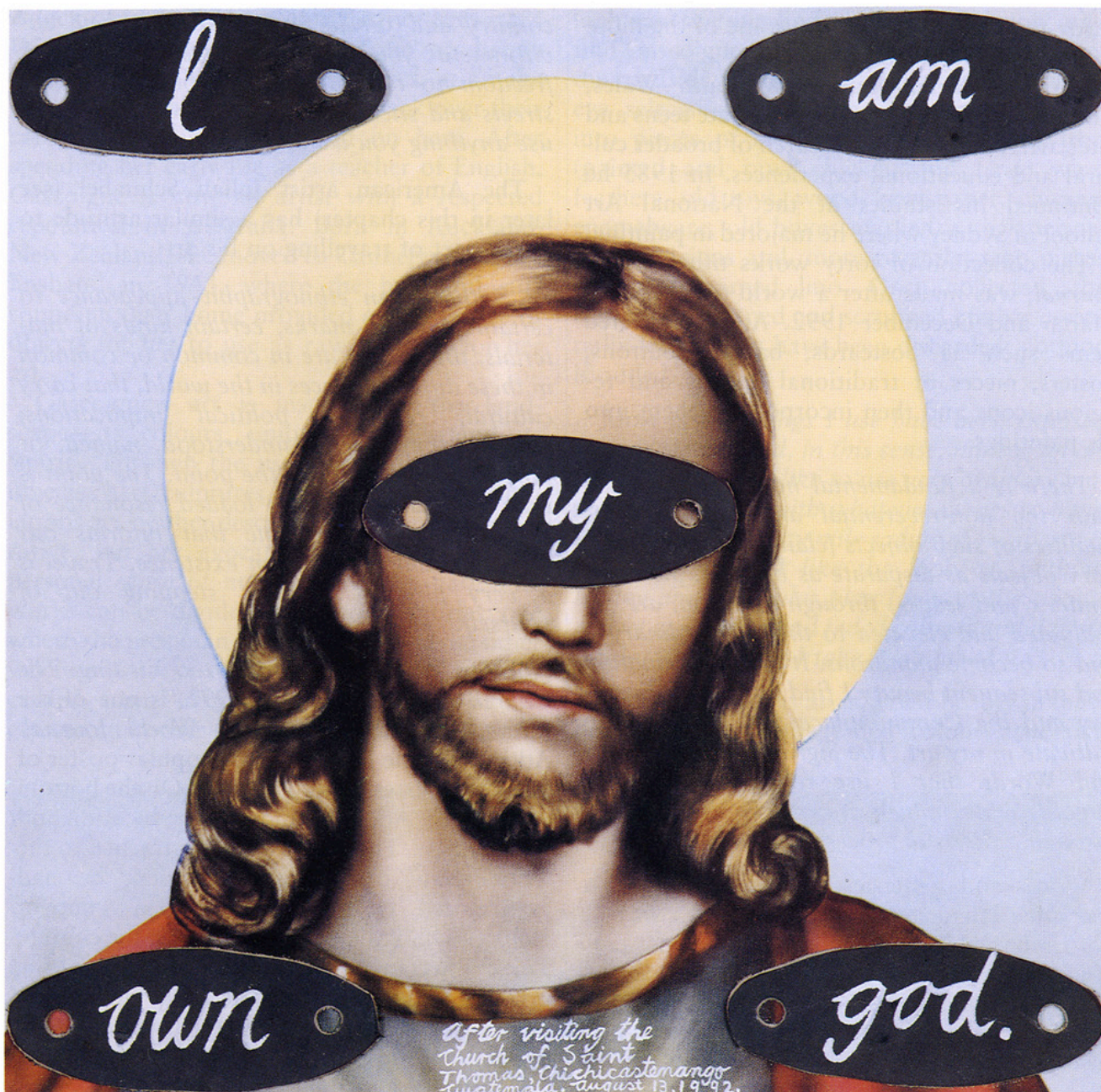


Fig. 10.2 PETER ATKINS (b. 1963). *I Am My Own God After Visiting the Church of Saint Thomas, Chicicastenango, Guatemala, August 13, 1992*. From the work *World Journal*, mixed media, 30 × 30 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney

Peter Atkins (b. 1963) is a traveller, and a keen observer of other cultures—the customs, religious observances and elements of various popular cultures. His observations, along with souvenirs of these cultures, are collected in the many diaries he keeps while he is travelling. The journal traces his journey, the events and places he has remembered and also the events that have subsequently shaped Atkins's attitudes to alternative cultures. While the journal shapes the direction of the art work and stirs the memory, the collected items—buttons,

religious icons, fridge magnets, plastic toys, fabrics and other items—find their way into his works. In particular, Atkins has a great interest in the indigenous cultures of the South Pacific, reflected in his fine personal collection of tribal artefacts. While some people choose to take photographs and purchase souvenirs as vivid reminders of their travels and past events, Atkins produces works of art. While they clearly have a personal significance, they also perform as pieces of art. With their reference to Postmodernism through their use of text and

reds of rust-encrusted metals, and the bleached pigments of wood and paint—which Gascoigne naturally exploits. This collecting ‘habit’ can be traced to excursions to an island beach in the Hauraki Gulf of New Zealand where, as a child, she walked for hours picking up shells, and other objects. The desire to collect particularly old objects discarded by the environment and humans is clearly one that has always been with her, and is at the very foundation of her work.

While Gascoigne had no formal art training as such, her art education came from her own interest and motivation accessed through the reading of international art journals, her contacts with local artists and her overseas trips, during which she visited the art museums and galleries of the world. In particular she recalls the work of the American artist Robert Rauschenberg (b. 1925) as one who has influenced her, and she often quotes him when discussing her art. Rauschenberg’s assemblage work from the 1960s is work with which Gascoigne identifies, and work from which many parallels can be drawn.

■ Compare the work of Gascoigne and Rauschenberg. Explore the similarities and differences in their work, and explain how local conditions have influenced their ideas.

Inland Sea, 1986, is an installation piece that is best suited to placement on the gallery floor, to be looked down upon from all sides. Its grid format, repetition of form and placement on the floor recalls the formal language of Minimalist sculpture discussed in Chapter 9. First used as a material by Gascoigne in 1975, the corrugated iron evokes the changing seasonal colours and the degradation of the Australian landscape’s crust. The peeling, faded paint relates to the regular droughts, blistering sun and the peeling away of layers of history, while the buckling and bent forms of the iron pieces sit like waves on the sea. Gascoigne’s use of materials is imaginative and appropriate, embodying a particular feminine aesthetic which is seen particularly in her use of objects such as domestic enamelware pots, bowls and mugs. One must not underestimate the importance of corrugated galvanised iron to Australia’s economic and social history: the traditional building material for rural

Australia—houses, farm sheds and water tanks—today it is employed by some architects to achieve a distinctive style and character. In many ways it has had a strong influence on our rural and, more recently, our urban consciousness, particularly for those of us who live in warmer climates.

■ Discuss the links between *Inland Sea* and examples of Minimalist sculpture discussed in this text.

■ ‘Gascoigne’s work challenges traditional ideas about the nature of sculpture.’ Discuss.

For most city-dwelling Australians, the bush and landscape is familiar only from the seat of a car as it speeds down the highway. The mesmerising hum of the wheels on the bitumen is broken only by the ‘thumping’ made by running over the cats eye reflectors on the white lines. Visually, the muted tones of the landscape are broken only by the frequent appearance of the yellow retro-reflector road signs, which have become as integral to the landscape as the grey-green of the gums and the blue of the sky. Gascoigne explored this element of the landscape when she started to cut up the signs and rearrange them into a jigsaw assemblage, recalling the patterns made by the subdivision of the landscape, seen so easily and distinctly from the air. In some works fragments of letters and words are faded yet evident, as a reminder of history. In other work the letters are reduced to abstract forms which act as mere marks, their original meaning and purpose lost, incoherent and now irrelevant. In one work the word ‘AVOID’, has been cut up and reconstructed to reveal ‘AVID’; it is this kind of play on words that adds another dimension to Gascoigne’s work. The intensity of the yellow is also a kind of gold in colour, and instils in the work a sort of special quality. Furthermore, the contrast between the yellow, Gascoigne’s favourite colour, and the black is striking in its presence, as the yellow glistens and reflects the light as in a mirage on an outback road.

The historical associations are strongly suggested in Gascoigne’s works from 1994, where fragments of torn lino are selectively ripped and cut into strips, the result being a strong and formal composition where the old materials are given new meaning and form. The