

ONE HUNDRED DAYS

Desperate to get away was how I felt in Lisbon in the spring of 1997. The invitation to spend three months in Australia (as Artist in Residence at Claremont School of Art, Perth), was seductive: it served as a kind of beacon as my life and work jammed up against me, cornered me. I would escape from feeling besieged, escape the stifling heat and listlessness of a Portuguese summer, I might even re-invent myself.

Such notions are, of course, intrinsic to travel, or at least to travel used in a particular way: as a transformational object, an object that represents a bid for a transforming experience. A new job, a new home, a change of relationship, a move — these are all transformational objects, external manoeuvres through which we fantasise, or indeed instigate, inner change.¹ A transformational object represents, therefore, a hope. I became fascinated, even while still in Lisbon, by the future tense implicit in such a hope: fascinated, more broadly, by the ways in which dislocation in space signified also dislocation in time. This is succinctly summarised by L.P. Hartley's famous formulation, those evocative opening words that set the tone of his novel 'The Go-Between' — "the past is a foreign country." To turn that on its head, it seemed to me that travelling to a foreign country — and indeed the fantasy of that travel which precedes its actual, physical occurrence — could also mean travelling to another time.

Most obviously, this occurs when the past is displaced to another location: when we travel to the hegemonic centres of late capitalism, we imagine ourselves to be travelling in the direction of the future, whereas when we travel to and in Africa or India or the Pacific Islands, we might dream of being transported away from the modern to the pre-modern, to a past that is fantasised as purer, more pristine and authentic. Certainly, tourism cannot be detached from its colonial legacy, and an imperialist nostalgia lingers in discursive practices that reify and romanticise "other" cultural practices as more authentic. The more "different" or "exotic" the "native", the more easily relegated to a romanticising notion of anteriority. The (prosperous, occidental) subject, in visiting foreign places (the more foreign the better) is also visiting a notion of the past: a more "primitive" mode of

¹ The notion of "transformational object" comes from Christopher Bollas. See *The Shadow of the Unknown Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*, Free Association Books, London, 1987.

being as signalling greater authenticity. The indigenous object lives by virtue of its anteriority, its existence in a past time. We shop until we drop, and we think we search not for souvenirs, but for real markers of earlier times and other cultures.

So: travel dislocates time by instigating a search for the past and investing a hope in the future. It also opens out the inroads of memory. Travel brings with it a very particular temporality, a kind of future-past where nostalgias and utopias mingle promiscuously.

I fell readily prey to such commonplace cultural dreams. Australia became “Australia”: firmly framed by inverted commas, it was a mythical place, the furthest shore, a repository of future happiness which was also, in some paradoxical way, a memory already. Bizarrely, I became nostalgic for this “Australia”, a place I had never visited physically. Like any self-respecting nostalgic, I dreamed of a seamless, integrated future moment that might replicate or re-iterate an integrated past, just outside of memory's reach... for the nostalgic imagination mingles the new and the old indiscriminately. Nostalgia, from the Greek *nostos* — the journey back — is the desired (fantasised) journey back to the mythical place (the maternal body, one would say in a psychoanalytic reading of nostalgia) where the self experiences the perfection of integration, where self and other are one. Nostalgia can only ever be utopian: locked in the future-past, it invents an object which is simultaneously hoped for and recollected or constructed as memory. Susan Stewart, who has brilliantly theorised such notions as the souvenir and the collection, puts it this way: "nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as *felt lack*." ²

Certainly, I approached the prospect of this particular episode of travel and dislocation nostalgically. I dreamed I would leave the undesired parts of the self behind, and emerge unfettered, somehow purified through this passage. The friction of confrontation with the new would challenge me into somehow novel states. New work would issue forth. What I learnt, however, had less to do with novelty — the shock of the new — than with the shock of the old. I found that through temporary dislocation, the familiar and unfamiliar weave together and confront the self with vestiges that are

² Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir and the Collection*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1993, p 23.

always remainders and reminders. In the time I spent in Australia, I came to dis-member and re-member myself in unexpected ways.

Of course I have travelled sufficiently — lived in four different countries, visited many more — to know that musings about escape and transformation are also stories we tell ourselves, that — as the cliché goes — “you always take yourself with you”. Arriving in Perth, I was struck immediately by its apparent similarity to South Africa, where I had spent over twelve years of my life. The light, the sense of space, the vestiges of colonial histories, the apparent ease of lifestyle (or at least the lifestyle of a certain class): these were all too familiar. With time, I began to see how these similarities are, indeed, only skin deep or partial; however, my arrival signalled the first of many jolts. I had flown for so many hours, travelled halfway across the world, only to come up against the familiar.

The jostling for primacy between new and old, between the strange and the familiar, is a characteristic of contemporary travel at a time when global culture is becoming increasingly uniform and standardised. Tourists look for new meanings in other locations only to go home confirmed in their old meanings.³ Myths of “vanishing” native cultures posit notions of “pure” experiences which parallel the romanticisation of childhood: in both cases, distance (temporal on the one hand, spatial on the other) serves as the device through which a more pristine moment of personal or social existence is ritualised, “museumised.” We visit sites of “vanishing tribes”, “endangered species”, or simply “local habits” or habitats: the photographs and souvenirs we gather act as authenticating tokens. I might feel superior to the crassest manifestations of such facile evidence or proof of passage or authenticity (it is a hallmark of the contemporary traveller — the tourist — that he/she does not wish to be identified as such). But I fall prey to it all the same in the postcards I send home, in the paraphernalia I gather, even in my diaries and sketchbooks.

There is much that might be said about the familiar and the strange, or the familiar and the exoticisation of the unfamiliar. Such notions thread their way through 19th century travel writings, through colonial narratives, indeed through the “orientalisms” and “primitivisms” that have been intrinsic to the experience of modernity itself over the last century and a half. This is not the place to

³ Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1996, p 60. See also James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Harvard University Press, 1997.

digress into the theoretical aspects of travel as a middle-class fantasy fostered and boosted by colonial history, though indeed this is the case. I am more concerned here with the psychic uses of travel: travel as transformational object and mnemonic tool, an experience which, in confronting us with the apparently new, also fosters layered associations with our narrated pasts. The tourist's gathering of experiences easily documented through photographs or video, through the acquisition of booty either in the form of souvenirs or through the fierce shopping missions undertaken by even the most reticent of travellers: these are forms not of knowing the "Other" but of re-cognizing the self. The self as familiar.

Here is how Barry Curtis and Claire Pajaczowska put it in their essay 'Getting There: travel, time and narrative': "The search for a place in which happiness may be found is always a metaphor for the search to recover a memory of happiness. The journey is a symbol of narrative. Narrative — as a structure of development, growth and change — the acquisition of knowledge and solution of problems — is conceived as a physical process of movement, of disruption, negotiation and return. The movement beyond liminality is marked by a literal movement outside the integrated regimes of time and space. The 'trip' constitutes a lapse in the regular rhythms of mundane existence, it leads to a place where time 'stands still' or is reversed into a utopian space of freedom, abundance and transparency." ⁴ More than a structure of development, such narratives display the structure of desire itself: a utopian symbol which signifies the recovery of lost inner objects. The *nostos*, the return home is a significant part of such dreamed of transformations, for we need witnesses to generate the meaning of such events: we need to show our booty, however high-brow or popular.

"One Hundred Days" is the work I produced during my residency in Perth. The temporal frame provided the luxury of a beginning, a middle and an end. The count began on the day of my departure from Lisbon in late June and included visits to Melbourne and Sydney prior to my taking up the ten-week residency at Claremont School of Art, as well as brief (and unforgettable) forays into the Australian countryside and bush. The hundred days ended on the day of my departure from Perth in early October. I aimed, in disjunctive and necessarily fragmentary ways (I am seduced by the narrative implications of the fragment) to explore such notions as the souvenir and keepsake: more broadly, of memory (how we make memories, how we keep and transform them), and of what we

think we are doing when we travel. I say “we” but of course I mean “I”. The work stems from a personal register.

In the first instance, I set myself the task of taking a photographic self-portrait a day. These are modest snapshots in landscape format, taken either by myself or by elicited (coerced!) others with whom I spent time on the particular day. There is no other system in the choice of the photographic moment: no systematisation of time, location, dress or pose. I tried to inhibit vanity both in setting myself up for the photo and in the final choice of images, but perhaps in some senses, such a project is doomed to inner contradiction. These photographs are, for me, about the passage of time in ways which far outreach the mere passage of these hundred days. I am, of course, also interested in the tourist's use of photographs as means of validating experience: in these snapshots I aimed at once to execute the requirements of this touristic desideratum and to subvert them: many were taken in my room(s) or studio, or validating no external experience at all. As indices of mood, they seem strangely fickle.

The second part of this project initially involved making small oil paintings: paintings which depicted objects. I was interested both in souvenirs and in transitional objects: those things we use as currency in our trade (and trade-offs) within our emotional world. I wanted these paintings to be neutral, flat both physically and in their emotional resonance. But this idea died on me. I grew tired of the objects and of the lack of personal risk involved in painting them. The flatness became boring. So several weeks later and some irritation down the line, I returned to my old passion, drawing. These brush drawings spring from a different well, both in the rapidity of their execution and in the free-associative connections and clashes between image and text, between both the surprises and clichés of Australiana and my inner ghosts. Returning to Lisbon, I felt that a process of exploration, both outer and inner, had only just begun.

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⁴ Barry Curtis and Claire Pajaczkowska, 'Getting there: travel, time and narrative', in *Travellers' Tales: Narratives of Home and Displacement*, ed. George Robertson, Melinda Mash, Lisa Tickner, Jon Bird, Barry Curtis and Tim Putnam, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, p. 199.

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