Confessions of an Orientalist:
Travel Writings and the Matter of Shrines

MARK COTTLE
Georgia Institute of Technology

DESCRIPTION

These installations are fashioned of paper and paper clips, folded and interlocked to create curtains of beads. In some works the strands of beads are pinned directly to the wall; in others they are suspended a few inches, or a few feet, in front of it. More recent pieces have moved further from the wall, taking the form of cylinders. Some of these are wide enough to enter (three feet in diameter); others assume a width closer to that of the human body and are spaced to encourage walking among them, as in an orchard or hypostyle hall.

Further, roughly half of the beads use papers with images on them, and half are a serene light blue — the generic light blue of photocopy paper. The precise geometric and factural relations between image- and non-image-bearing beads vary from piece to piece. But the fifty/fifty proportion remains an important constant.

While the size of the basic generative unit, the Semperian knot, necessarily remains that of the paper clip (restricted to three choices: small, medium, and jumbo), and while this size is tightly allied with the hand, the pieces themselves are scaled to the space of the gallery and to the human gait.

The most recent piece, an array of eight twelve-foot high cylinders, eighteen inches in diameter, four and a half feet apart on center, was made with 46,080 beads.

ORIGIN STORY — ONE

This work had its beginnings in a trip I took to China about seven years ago, where, in a remote farming village in the north, I was struck by the beautiful beaded curtains in the doorways of all the shops. Rather than the store-bought versions one usually sees, made of plastic, bamboo, or tape, these were fashioned by hand from candy wrappers and cigarette cartons, folded onto paper clips.

I went into one of the shops and asked the woman there if she would show me how to make them. Even though we could only understand each other through gestures, she gamely demonstrated for me. We smiled and bowed to each other, and then I left.

A few moments later, a block down the street, I heard a shout behind me. It was the woman from the shop. She ran up, slightly out of breath, and handed me a fistful of strands from her doorway. I was touched then by her generosity toward a complete stranger. But now I also know that she gave me a full day of someone's labor.

It was a few years before I had an inkling of how I might make something of this craft/technology she had taught me.

IMAGERY

The pieces in my first show, *Travel Writing*, were made from found materials: the terrifyingly banal cartoon diagrams on flight safety cards demonstrating emergency procedures, travel posters of the Ka'aba at Mecca, and calendars graced by the images of Hindu deities.

What had drawn me so profoundly to the hand-made beaded curtains I saw in China — the ones that inspired this work — were the colors, patterns, and textures of the papers: cigarette and candy wrappers that implicated a completely different world from the one I inhabit.

In fact, when I was beginning this work I had almost no interest in the imagery at all. Instead I hoped to create abstract color worlds and feeling tones by virtue of the inks and papers themselves: the air-conditioned vinyl interior evoked in the pastel cartoons of flight safety cards, the arid geometry of Mecca's desert skies, the soft vegetal blur of lotus blossoms and sweetmeats. It was only in response to a logistical problem, how to maintain a proper balance of color from one bead to the next, that I was led to consider putting the beads back together in same order I had divided them.

Because the cutting and folding of the paper around the paper clip exposes only one quarter of the image to view (half is tucked into the interior of the bead; the other quarter is on the reverse) I did not expect more than a ghost of the original picture to persist. But, through the strongly hieratic postures of the deities, the images retained their legibility. By interweaving strands from four versions, a synoptic image emerged from the dense aggregations of lushly rendered details.

Travel Posters

Bismillah was fabricated from thirty-two travel posters of Mecca, brought back from Karachi, where one may see identical versions in the private rooms of the élite as those plastered on the walls of truck stops. The same images hang in Pakistani restaurants here in America.

I have long been fascinated with these posters. In part because they index a trip I am unlikely to take in the flesh. In part because they document the space of a pilgrimage, in anticipation of the event, and after, which for the Muslim believer must be the ultimate journey in this life. But also because they 'domesticate' the remote, the 'other worldly', bringing it into direct contact with daily life.

The aerosols of color and pattern in *Bismillah* sought to delay immediate consumption, to give one time to reconstruct the experience of that distant place within the space of the gallery. The curtain of beads dematerialized the master narrative of their imagery, atomizing the story we already know, in order to allow us to examine the details, to focus for a moment on the stories we don't know.

The posters in *Bismillah* were organized so that close-ups of the Ka'aba were interwoven among more standard panoramic images of the complex, spread thinly and evenly through the piece, and shifted off-register from the panoramic panels. As they comprised only twenty-five percent of the beads, their effect on the overall composition was scarcely discernible, other than for the subtle shifts they generated in the color fields of the primary images.

But close up one could appreciate details at vastly different scales. In many of the beads, for example, the believers appeared as crowds, each individual reduced to a small, textural element. In a different context one might not even recognize them as people; they could be interpreted as roof tiles, or candy. In other strands, a believer would be three beads tall — one bead giving the head, bowed; the next the exposed arm, pressed against the white-sheeted torso; the next the foot, bare on the white marble pavement.

Calendars

Double Baby Krishna and *Ganesh* were created out of calendars bought at an Indian grocery store in Atlanta.

Calendars are by their nature ephemeral, their obsolescence a given. The one from last year is rarely saved. In the bookshops, this year's calendars were for sale at half price by mid-January. Yet the quasi-Cartesian array of dates — annotated with equinoxes and solstices of the sun, phases of the moon, and with holidays, state and religious — overlaid sometimes with personal inscriptions of birthdays, anniversaries, and appointments at the dentist — this grid of numbers we associate with our days indexes other grids of years past and years to come.

Hindu deities, of course, appear in a series of avatars, and index reincarnation, offering another scale to the cycles of days, months, weeks, and years.

For some reason, calendars are usually accompanied by pictures, sometimes referred to pejoratively as 'calendar art,' in the mistaken notion that the formulaic is also automatically cliché. Whether lifeguards, kittens, or greatest hits from a museum's collection, the visuals are oddly comforting — this year's model conforming to an already familiar type. The message of continuity is reinforced, of course, when the subject matter is of nature scenes — and even more so when religious themes enter the picture.

Registers shift again for immigrant communities, where calendars from the home country conjoin knowledge of distant space with knowledge of past and future.

The posters of Double Baby *Krishna* and *Ganesh* were printed in Delhi and imported to Atlanta, indexing an 'authentic' cultural relation to time and distance. But one can now find also American-made versions, printed with the name of an Indian pickle company based in

New Jersey. While the imagery is familiar, the feeling tone is completely different. The inks and paper are harder, shinier, more machined. The colors are more 'accurate', the images crisper, redolent of their luxuriously industrialized provenance.

The next series of pieces, *Seven Views of Twelve Months*, continued the work with calendars, this time with scenic calendars purchased in the night market in Tokyo. Into these I interwove origami, chiyagami, and kabuki papers — in hexagonal patterns — together with flyers advertising cinema schedules handed out in the Tokyo subway stations.

These calendars depicted rural landscapes, formulaic, yet beautifully rendered. January/February always featured snow on Mount Fuji. March/April always displayed cherry or plum blossoms. For one pair of months it was a mill and/or a stream; for another pair a persimmon orchard. In each scene a traditional farm building with a thatch roof figured prominently.

For me they were simultaneously exotic and familiar, recalling the calendars of New England landscapes from my childhood: red barns, white-steepled churches, covered bridges, lighthouses, autumn foliage....

I have often wondered why images form such a necessary part of a calendar — to the extent that when someone does put out one comprised only of letters and numbers, they scarcely register as such. I suspect it is because the images decorate the functional (the conventional explanation), but also because they allow this quotidian object to operate as a kind of household shrine, a domestically-scaled aperture to other realms, other times, offering a frisson of the sublime in daily doses

The Body

Recent work — installations in the curated group show, *Gone Tomorrow*, at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center last September and October, and a solo show, *Body Doubles*, at the Spiller Vincenty Gallery in Jacksonville, Florida, on exhibition in January and February this year — used the computer to 'find' the images, either by scanning or from cruising the internet. These files were then manipulated digitally, and plotted — onto 36-inch rolls of matte plastic film or, more often, onto standard eleven- by seventeen-inch sheets of photocopy paper — each bead already gridded and numbered on the sheet to facilitate the handiwork of cutting, folding, and stranding.

Further, this new work is explicitly concerned with the body — both mimetically and ontologically.

The source for *Abacus 2002* was the new Italian Euro, which featured Leonardo da Vinci's illustration of the Vitruvian man. While the original coin was about an inch in diameter, the finished work was twelve feet high, the image enlarged to bring the tiny man up to an approximation of life size.

In a world where the increasing abstraction of capital draws money further and further from human concerns, and where globally interconnected economies transfer massive funds via encrypted numbers in a digital realm, a coin with the image of a man's body on it seems almost quaint — even more so when that man, turning his perpetual cartwheels in a circle and a square, is understood to represent the Classical (and then the Renaissance) notion that man is the measure, the starting point for numbers.

Now, on the Euro, he can't even buy you an espresso. Nonetheless, in *Abacus 2002*, re-materialized out of the digital matrix and embedded in a screen of beads crafted by hand from office supplies (photocopy paper and paperclips), enlarged to human size, he may provide a dignified if ironic reminder of a time when man *was* thought to be the measure, and when counting was done by hand, with beads.

The *O Brad* series (*O brad, warm* and *O Brad, cool*) took a paparazzi image of Brad Pitt from an internet 'celebrity shrine,' resized to the scale of Greek statuary, repeated and re-colored in the manner of Andy Warhol's images of Joe Dallesandro.

The ubiquity of the stories surrounding celebrities in general, and the ruckus raised by this image in particular, combine to give 'Brad' a familiar aspect, as if one knows him. We've seen him in a candid, unposed shot — naked. We've been told with whom he was on vacation at the time. And the outcome of his lawsuit against *Playgirl*. He won, and the image was ostensibly suppressed. But google "brad pitt naked" on the web, and see how many hits you get. I just got 46,300.

The Shroud

For the cylinders of *How to Disappear Completely* I had intended to take an image of the Shroud of Turin from one of the many web sites devoted to sindonology. In the end, however, I got better results from a scan I had made from a poster of the subject. The purported image of Christ was also rescaled, repeated, and posi-

tioned so that the faces would be at eye level to the viewer.

I was interested in the 'body' of the Shroud itself as well, the texture of its weave, its patches, stains, burns, folds — which in the images acquire a decidedly forensic quality (particularly on the quasi-scientific websites, bristling with arrows tied to marginal glosses explaining, analyzing, debunking) — and the interaction between the battered, scarred physical surface of the cloth and the imprinted image of an exemplary human body — an uncanny double registration as object of scientific inquiry and object of faith.

Further, the image of the man is photographically reversed — that is, a 'negative'. Most postcards and posters invert the image to a 'positive,' which is more legible and thus ostensibly more popular with the faithful. This strange oscillation registers an entire series of questions: Is the Shroud authentic or a fake? Are we looking at the image of a man or of God? Living or dead? A good deal of the appeal of the Shroud through the centuries and its value as a devotional object must surely lie in its ambiguities, its essential unknowableness.

In 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' Walter Benjamin suggests that mass-production, by denying an object its status as something unique in the world, divorces that object from the fabric of experience (at least from the history of its making) and breaks its ritual value. What is gained, he says, is access. The object can now be brought nearer to everyone. The cult object depends for its strength upon inaccessibility. With the object close at hand (the Mona Lisa on a calendar), its cult value is diminished in favor of exhibition value.

But are the distinctions so categorical? Granted, everyone knows what the Shroud looks like, more or less, thanks to a proliferation of images. But how many know how big it is? Or what color? Or how faint or pronounced the image is on the cloth? I would wager that most people think the image is light on a dark ground, rather than the reverse.

The truth is, unless one is the Pope, one has very little chance of seeing the Shroud 'in the flesh,' even if one goes to Turin. There, it is kept under wraps, literally, in the form of a gold damask cloth draped over its case like a giant tablecloth. Above floats a yellowed black and white photographic print, at two-thirds scale. One has to take it on faith, of course, that the Shroud is actually there — and that one has seen it, even if one hasn't.

It appears that the Shroud now operates as both religious cult object, mysterious and hidden, and as an 'icon' (gravely debased word) of popular culture. As both an embodiment of the mysteries of the Roman Catholic Church and as 'information,' accessible to all.

My own installations using the image of the Shroud contemplate the ramifications of reproduction: What would happen if one could approach an image of the Shroud at full scale? And if one could touch it? If there were eight images of the body, rather than one? Further, how would one respond to work, so laboriously hand-made, that reproduces an artifact presented as outside of making?

Strangely, the installation has a surprisingly intense emotional tone. Perhaps it is the aura that still attaches to work made by hand — or to forms with a particular relationship, in dimension and position, to the human body — but they feel like things in their own right more than merely replicas of something else.

They ask you to come close, to see the details, to find out that what appeared to be glass or porphyry is just paper, that what appeared to be massive and solid is in fact a suspension of particles. Then they send you far back, to the other side of the room, to puzzle out the imagery on their surfaces.

Amateurs

Current work, provisionally entitled *Love_Box*, is drawn exclusively from jpegs of the body as found in personal ads on the internet. We now have access to a plethora of images of exemplary bodies, both celebrities and 'amateurs'. But are we closer to them? We can see but we can't touch, because there's nothing there but information. How big, after all, is a pixel?

Deriving images of the body from the internet speaks to a *lack* of access to it. The absent body can not be reconstituted by beads—pixels made flesh — only its traces. The image is disappearing even in its reappearance. In this sense the making of beads that depict an absent, untouchable body relates directly in my mind to funeral rituals that involve washing the body of the departed in preparation for burial.

ORIGIN STORY — TWO

The sixteenth century city *cum* palace complex Fatehpur Sikri, in the province of Uttar Pradesh, India. As the story goes, the Moghul Emperor Akbar lacked an heir to his throne, so he visited numerous holy men to enlist

their prayers. Sheikh Salim Chishti, from the village of Sikri, prophesied a son to the emperor. When a son was indeed born soon after, the emperor in his joy resolved to build an entirely new capital at Sikri in the saint's honor.

The red-sandstone pavements and structures are deserted today, inhabited only by screeching monkeys, small lizards, and pickle green parakeets. Yet it serves as an important stop along ''the golden triangle',' perhaps the most trafficked tourist route in India, from Delhi to Agra to Jaipur. Less known to the tourists, it hosts an important pilgrimage shrine.

In the courtyard of the grand Jama Masjid stands the tomb of Sheikh Salim Chishti, built by Akbar's grandson, Emperor Shah Jahan, the builder of the Taj Mahal in Agra. In the midst of a red city — constructed entirely of sandstone — the tomb is a softly gleaming pavilion of white marble.

A verandah surrounds the tomb, with columns infilled by delicately carved marble screens. These grilles are of exquisite craftsmanship and elegantly proportioned, as would befit an imperial construction, pierced with honeycomb patterns in a number of overlapping scales.

People of many religions in India — Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis, Jains, Buddhists, Jews — come here to pray that God (or the gods) will grant them a child. As a votive offering for their prayers, they will tie a scarlet or saffron-colored thread to the marble tracery, and often push a marigold blossom into one of the apertures.

The contrast between a vanished imperial power and the continual and fervent desire for people of all faiths and castes to have a child, the grandeur of the carved marble traceries interacting with the humble red threads and yellow blossoms, the softly voiced prayers and cries of those who would be parents — combine to make this one of the most poignant, moving, and memorable places I have ever experienced.

Even the ethereal Taj Mahal, just down the road, cannot match its emotional power. An apparition of pure geometry, revealing itself and disappearing among the river mists, the Taj appeals to the mind and to the imagination. And I would happily concur with those who name it the most beautiful building on Earth. The tomb of Sheikh Salim Chishti, however, pulls at the heart. Because it isn't only about saints and emperors; it's about any person who wants a child. It isn't just about memories and the past; it's about the present and heartfelt hopes for the future.

PROVISIONAL CONCLUSION

In 'The Storyteller,' Benjamin describes two kinds of storytellers: the sailor and the farmer. He claims these two types persisted in the craft tradition in the roles of the journeyman, still traveling as part of his apprenticeship, and the master craftsman, now resident, who had once journeyed himself.

He seems to be suggesting that these two sources of knowledge and transmissions of experience, necessarily different in their basic conditions, are yet bound together, each somehow part of the other, and states that the atelier ''combined the lore of faraway places, such as a much-traveled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place.''

Benjamin differentiates stories from mere transfers of information by stipulating that a story be an expression of lived experience. If not lived by the teller, then lived in the telling. Further, he suggests that these experiences do not require explanations to be compelling, and to be useful. By his criteria, perhaps one could consider the humble calendar a significant story.

Writing in the late thirties, he observed that ''the communicability of experience is decreasing. In consequence we have no counsel either for ourselves or for others. After all',' he goes on to say, ''counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding. To seek this counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story.''