

Phillip George: Nine Mnemonic Notations **by Charles Green**

One

Recently, a new printing process in effect rather like the double images of early stereography appeared, through which fixed concentration on a certain point apparently produced a powerful holographic illusion. A display of posters featuring this process attracted flâneurs to a well-known Melbourne bookshop window; the crowd was divided into those muttering "I don't see anything", broken every so often by a blissed-out cry of "I get it", and the smug-looking remainder. The image of an instantaneous but unreliable flash of illumination has been alternately unfashionable and retro chic ever since the late 1960s. Remember (if you can) the far-fetched luminism of album covers, such as Santana's *Abraxas* and Miles Davis's *Bitches' Brew*, or the cross-cultural sampling in Richard Alpert's *The Psychedelic Experience* (a William Burroughs-like navigational update of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*). Australian versions of cross-cultural psychedelia, such as Brett Whiteley's *Alchemy* (one of the artist's few genuinely interesting paintings) are precursors of the present national desire for encounters with a whole grab-bag of disparate experiences of Asian cultures, of alternative philosophies and of ecological consciousness.

Encounters occur at borders the points where inter-cultural understanding and communication are most easily examined. As Donald Weber, in a study of the shifting Spanish frontier in North America, concludes: "Frontiers seem best examined as zones of interaction between two different cultures." Borders are where the innumerable transactions of hybrid societies in which immigrant, exotic, indigenous and dominant cultures coexist, interact and blend take place as each is forced into making creative adaptations in the process of survival. Often two or more systems are managed simultaneously (as is dramatised in Jane Campion's film, *The Piano*) not only in demonstrations of cultural resistance but also, as the historian James Axtell points out, because there is much of worth in the traditions of others:

Encounters are mutual, reciprocal, two way rather than one way streets. Encounters are generally capacious: there are encounters of people but also of ideas, habits, values, plants, animals and micro-organisms. Encounters are temporarily and spatially fluid: they can occur at any time in any place, before or after 1492, around the globe.

The encounter perpetually replayed in George's paintings is the collision of East and West. If Anselm Kiefer asserted, in a controversial Adelaide lecture on March 11, 1992, that the Fall of Byzantium represented the commencement of a state of decline in Western art, then the defeat of Constantinople is replayed a thousand times in George's paintings as a dichotomy between the Latin West and Orthodox East. Kiefer disregards the importance of present-day culture; George, whose family emigrated from Cythera to Australia during this century's successive waves of emigration, is more inclined to see a positive historical continuum between Crete, Cythera, Constantinople, Venice and present-day Sydney. Difference is an opportunity for transaction: George (whose family history of father emigrating to Australia in the 1940s from Alexandria, mother from country New South Wales, both sets of grandparents from Cythera is itself evidence of the continually complicated exchange across borders) agrees with Nikos Papastergiadis who, in the keynote lecture for the 1992 Biennale of Sydney, observed:

Firstly, borders do not presuppose isolation. Or, conterminously, we cannot make the automatic assumption that the increased mobility of people and the intensification of information exchange will dissolve borders. Borders persist despite flow, and continue to exist through the social processes which regulate exclusion and incorporation. Therefore, the function of the border is not to keep particular individuals out but to maintain the discreteness of cultural categories.

Two

The hybrid, computer-generated paintings and prints of Phillip George are located at the crossroads of magic and positivism; as Theodor Adorno observed, "That spot is bewitched." Adorno's comment (written in 1938 as a critique of Walter Benjamin's essay on Baudelaire) no longer, however, resonates with its intended negativity. The vivid condensation of manifold artistic and scientific references is symptomatic of a particularly millennial double bind: the incommensurability of intercultural experience evident to theoretically aware artists intersects in the mid-1990s with the equally obvious hybrid complexity of contemporary global culture. Phillip George synthesises postmodern science, cyber-punk image debris, Orthodox Greek mysticism, tantric Buddhist symbols, Celtic mazes, and Landsat photographs in the Mnemonic Notations, on which he has been working since 1990. In his works, there is little sign of expression in the conventional mad-painter sense. George's modifications are mainly those of editing—whether, in the earlier Mnemonic Notations such as *Headlands*, 1990, those of glazing, darkening or obliterating unwanted transitions with acrylic paint applied over a grid of laser-printed colour copies or, more recently, the near-perfect cut and paste possible with newer computer tools.

George's painting removes the appearance of collage: he adjusts tones, suppress images, reshapes and highlights others. Most crucially, George removes the signs of manufacture so that his sources whether scavenged or painstakingly painted hover in a unified aqueous space. Whether these are painted with brush or a computer stylus is, the artist asserts, immaterial. His sources are drawn from an archive of 35 mm and 6 x 7 transparencies, which the artist scans into his computer's hard disk. Over time, these documentary images mutate, stretch, dilate and are stained by the colours and shapes of contiguous areas as George re-works successive versions of a distant original. In the first of the Mnemonic Notations in the present exhibition, for example, the silhouette of a male head and shoulders is in turn superimposed and bled out into an atmospheric field of wraith-like clouds and distended textures. By *Maze*, 1993, the figure remained only as a ghostly tracery of ears and skull displaced by a fiery red swathe, a diagram of the Sun from an old astrological textbook and the decayed afterimage of a Celtic maze.

From work to work, images are made more legible than others, like cells from an animated film of lunatic complexity. George's pictures are essentially cinematic; they are also images of conflict and cultural opposites collapsed onto the eternal iconic time of a two dimensional surface. Everything in the Mnemonic Notations is moving or on its way to becoming something, or being somewhere, else. Transport in both its ecstatic and its mundane senses is instantaneous, like the hyper-travel and parallel universes of science fiction, which find their most detailed and visionary expositions in Frank Herbert's *Dune* novels, and Alfred Bester's *Tiger! Tiger!*:

Any man was capable of jaunting providing he developed two faculties, visualisation and concentration. He had to visualise, completely and precisely, the spot to which he desired to teleport himself; and he had to concentrate the latent energy of his mind into a single thrust to get him there.

The cinematic hyphenation of identity in the Mnemonic Notations is comparable with Raul Ruiz' TV Dante and Trinh T. Minh-Ha's Shoot for the Contents, 1992. George's pictures are static fictional documentaries, and take conscious advantage of the factual basis of photography.

Three

The appearance of two cultures in the same work of art is usually and correctly taken to be a representation of the metaphoric "meeting" of cultures. From the beginning of the period of European imperial expansion onwards, in the fifteenth century, artists have represented the collision of cultures. When two or more cultures are represented within a work of art, the meeting is often indicated by the juxtaposition of different representational idioms. A mēlange of voices simultaneously suggests two extremes: the possibility of mixed authorship and the historically continuous fact of cultural appropriation. In George's works, the survival of previous authors is dramatised by the persuasive and inevitable illusion of fact that attaches itself from his documentary photographs of landscape and architecture (and to all photographs, whether preserved digitally in a computer memory or on film). Fiction overtakes dialectics in hybridisations which foreshadow an elaborate world at the end of the century in which it is necessary to be two or three things at once.

Phillip George, like other artists alert to this drowning world, moves across the boundaries of nationality, fixed authorship and the now-enervated mainstream. According to Edward Said, the paradigmatic model of artistic work has shifted from the reflexive teleology of the metropolitan avant-garde to the hybridisation of Creole and exile culture. Said observes, in his recent book *Culture and Imperialism*, that: Much of what was so exciting for four decades about Western modernism and its aftermath in, say, the elaborate interpretative strategies of critical theory or the self-consciousness of literary or musical forms seems almost quaintly abstract, desperately Eurocentric today. More reliable now are the reports from the front line where struggles are being fought between domestic tyrants and idealistic oppositions, hybrid combinations of realism and fantasy, cartographic and archaeological descriptions, explorations in mixed forms (essay, video or film, photograph, memoir, story, aphorism) of unhoused exilic experiences.

At issue in such reports is the role of translation of, firstly the ability to move across the borders (of nationality, class or gender) of the constructed self and, secondly, the improbability of inter-cultural understanding. Encounters create confusion: the complicated stratagems from the suspension of will created by mystification are described by Stephen Greenblatt in *Marvellous Possessions*, an account of the fateful meeting between Christopher Columbus and Native Americans in 1492. George's works are images of such operations. Each veil, cloud, disintegrating form and pentimento is a metaphorical record of the poetic outcomes of translation and misunderstanding. There are various types of image that appear in descriptions of

alternate visions of reality; each type appears in George's pictures. These images of correlation, cartography, mutation and permeability are linked by George's identification of each within an overall schema of the body and, as in European art (paraphrasing Claude Gandelman) several such identifications occur.

Four

Firstly, there are images of the mapping of one culture in terms of another. The new is related to the familiar in an effort to shrink mental distance and unfamiliarity. The body is also projected over a map (in the Middle Ages the body was that of Christ. Spain was seen in cartoons as the head of a prone European body; Italy is familiar as the boot of Europe). The equation of the West Indies with India or British colonial geographers' correlations of England with Australia (demonstrated in the name New South Wales) is paralleled by George's composite skyscapes, in which points corresponding to the features of a phantom body are emphasised in order to expose a compelling but arbitrary logic organising disparate visual phenomena. The ordering of tantric disks and ghostly mandalas into the contours of a transparent human form in *Icon*, 1992, allows a point of visual entry that enables the viewer to make sense out of undifferentiated chaos. This organisation is a mnemonic.

Five

Secondly, other cultures and realities are represented in terms of a re figured geography. The spaces of George's paintings are both aqueous and cartographic, demonstrating links with gilded Greek Orthodox icons. The recontextualisation of objects into a floating global sea of images relativises traditional Eurocentric hierarchies of knowledge (Chilean artist Arthur Duclos does much the same thing in his heraldic maps of the contemporary art world). Graham Huggan observed that the coherence of Western cartography is associated with the desire to stabilise the foundations of the self-privileging West and so, in Mercator's Projection, Australia is drawn smaller than Greenland and coherence is undermined by blind spots. "Universal" representation is a rhetorical strategy, as are George's deliberately incoherent voids and abysses.

Six

Thirdly, the iconography and the mutability of the images, which are depicted in a state of flux, torsion or incompleteness, reflects the repeated presence, in both curatorial and theoretical formations, of the trope of cultural nomadism. This trope is central to George's work; it lay undeveloped in Achille Bonito Oliva's direction of the 1993 Venice Biennale (at which, in an associated event, George collaborated with Ralph Wayment on an interactive work based on the Mnemonic Notations, installed as *The 1993 Venice Biennale Casino Container Project*); it is explored, through the concept of the War Machine, in Deleuze and Guattari's formidable, influential book, *Mille Plateaux*. In the Mnemonic Notations, pentimento from earlier images resurface like ghosts; continual accretion is matched by a surprising quantity of re-emergence. Equally unexpected is the degree to which images are represented by simulacra. One of the Mnemonic Notations, painted mid-way through the series, is dominated by a central maze; the image of fire on water to the right of this form is drawn from a

photograph the artist took in Las Vegas of a mock sea-battle staged several times each day in a casino lobby.

Seven

Fourthly, the universe is anthropomorphised and made to look like a human body, as in sixteenth century Mannerist painting's composite heads. The most familiar examples of these are Archimboldo's bodies composed of vegetables. For a moment they look like deformed people; after an instant they decompose and deconstruct into rotting fruit. Another type of deception showed faces more or less concealed in landscape: a huge rock, for example, might be the face of an old man with white hair. Phillip George's giant computer-generated heads fall into this category. Assembled out of a landslide of recognisable or hermetic components, *Headlands*, 1990, coheres into the shape of the body, but also dissolves into a cross-cultural amalgam. The tantric iconography and aerial maps constitute a symbolic, electric body which, despite Western landscape paintings' traditional identification of landscape with the feminine, is not female. The seamless recombination, manipulation and mimicry possible through computer application results, instead, in an X-ray view of the body as permeable and androgynous. This is paralleled in science fiction where genders are multiple and bodies, like borders, are permeable, transparent and engraved with signposted messages. Gully Foyle, the illustrated man in Alfred Bester's *Tiger! Tiger!*, is kidnapped and covered in extravagant tattoos:

He recoiled in terror as the orderly thrust the picture of a hideous tattooed face before him. It was a Maori mask, Cheeks, chin, nose and eyelids were decorated with stripes and swirls. Across the brow was blazoned Nomad. Foyle stared, then cried out in agony. The picture was a mirror. The face was his own.

Later, after an operation has removed the tattoos, he discovers that they reappear whenever his tempers flares: He saw the old tattoo marks flaming blood-red under the skin, turning his face into a scarlet and white tiger mask. He was so chilled by the appalling spectacle that his rage died at once, and simultaneously the mask disappeared.

Eight

The legibility of maps superimposed on the body is, here, in itself a sign of an image in the process of becoming another. The thirty or forty transparencies buried within George's pictures surface as pentimenti; Gully Foyle's skin is the site of translation the border between action and reaction and between face and tattooed map. Borders and maps on the face pose the same questions about the truth of experience: reliance on the "I" as a source of authority can only be tenuous in a liquid, electric world of pre- and post-Cartesian bodies. The Mnemonic Notations are images of a globally interdependent lack of an autonomous self. The elimination of a stable, monocultural self is thus also a refutation of the associated construction of time. As philosopher Daryl Reaney observes:

real motion through spacetime (movement along a "worldline") gets transfigured into the false feeling of motion through (or across) the sequence-templated states of the mind's recording system. Another analogy may help. When we visualise time we usually think of a timekeeper, like a watch. The moving hands of a watch seem a

perfect representation of our sense of the passage of time. But the hands of a watch trace out a circle in space, not a movement through time. Onto the physical movement of the watch's hand, which is real, we have grafted a sense of the psychological motion of "time", which is illusionary.

Transport occurs across physical space, but time represents the organisation of the experience of space.

Nine

The relevance, I think, of George's association of transport, optics, computers and illumination lies in its reformulation of one of the key insights of post-colonialism, which was explored in an essay by Homi Bhabha in response to the 1991 Washington exhibition "Circa 1492: Art in The Age of Exploration", which commemorated the voyage of Columbus. Bhabha's essay, "Double Visions", noted that the emergence of global culture around 1492 was accompanied by the "sciences" of mapping and measurement, which were together implicated in the project of imperial expansion. The exhibition attempted a revision of Eurocentric self-absorption, through the presentation of each civilisation on its own terms. This resulted in a curious and often unintentional parallelism. As Bhabha succinctly observed:

"Circa 1492" is an exhibit with a double vision: the eye expanding to hold the world in one space; the eye averted, awry, attenuated, trying to see the uniqueness of each specific cultural tradition and production.

Bhabha described the creative tension between art as map (calculating the world on a continuous two-dimensional surface) and art that attempts to break up that surface, creating illusions of depth and perspective. He suggested that when we present other cultures, Western and non-Western, we adopt "parallax" rather than parallel perspectives. His definition of parallax was as follows: "The apparent displacement or difference in the apparent position of an object caused by actual change or difference of position of the point of observation." He demanded that we distinguish between works of art whose pasts have known the colonial violence of domination, and works that evolved in a continuum from court to collection to museum. Inca remains, for example, have been turned from the signs of a powerful empire to symbols of a destroyed culture. If we do not analyse these issues and reverse the direction of the imperial gaze we will, in effect, become conspirators in the death of History. From the vantage point of post-colonial Australia and the Greek fulcrum between Asia and Europe, George

Donald J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America*, Yale: Yale University Press, 1993, quoted in J.H. Elliott, "The Rediscovery of America", *New York Review of Books*, XL/12, 23 June 1993, pp. 36-41, p. 39. James Axtell, *Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America*, Oxford: O.U.P., 1993, quoted in J.H. Elliott, "The Rediscovery of America", *New York Review of Books*, XL/12, 23 June 1993, pp. 36-41, p. 36. Nikos Papastergiadis, "The Ends of Migration", 9th Biennale of Sydney Keynote Lecture, presented at the Art Gallery of New South Wales on 15 December, 1992, Reprinted *Agenda*, no. 29, March 1993, pp. 7-13, p. 7. Theodor Adorno, "Letter to Walter Benjamin" in Walter Taylor (ed.), *Aesthetics and Politics*, London: Verso, 1977, pp. 129-130. Alfred Bester, *Tiger! Tiger!*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967, pp. 8-9. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1993, p. 400. Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. This section borrows from "Bodies, Maps, Texts", Chapter VII, in Claude Gandelman, *Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. 81-93. Graham Huggan, "Decolonising the Map: Post-Colonialism, Post-Structuralism and the Cartographic Connection", in Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin (eds.), *Past the Last Post: Theorising post-colonialism and*

post-modernism, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, pp. 125-138. Bester, *Tiger! Tiger!*, p. 31. *Ibid.*, p. 108. Daryl Rearney, *The Death of Forever*, Melbourne: Langmans Cheshire, 1991, p. 82. Homi K. Bhabha, "Double Visions", *Artforum*, 30/5, January 1992, pp. 85-89, p. 85. *Ibid.*, p. 89.