

Notes on Travel Writing

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This paper discusses an installation of some of my work — *Travel Writing* — recently on exhibit at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center. I undertook the installation in the spirit of research, and this paper seeks to trace a few of the issues explored in the work: The phenomena of its imagery (the experience of the remote), the phenomena of the pieces themselves as they could be experienced in the gallery, and the procedures of its manufacture — both in terms of technology and labor.

First, a brief description of the work as it was exhibited: The installation consisted of a series of bead curtains fashioned from travel posters, calendars, and flight safety cards — cut and folded onto a myriad of paper clips.

One encountered the first piece — *Volare (for Felix)* — suspended at the threshold between the lobby and the gallery, encouraging the visitor to go through it in order to enter the space. The beads in *Volare* were made from flight safety cards up to door height. Above them, for about two feet, a mesh of pale blue photocopy paper beads gathered the hundred disparate strands into four equal panels (like a large Japanese noren). One hundred chains of ‘unclad’ paper clips connected the panels to the ceiling.

From a distance, the beads of *Volare* appeared as a single grayish field, flecked with pale bits of color, through which one could see the piece on the opposite wall, with a moiré effect emerging between the two pieces. As one came close enough to the piece to touch it — and to move through it — one could make out fragments of the little cartoon images of flight safety instructions — seat belts, oxygen masks, exit doors, rafts, and so on — placebos of emergency procedures.

Entering the space of the piece itself, one’s experience of it thickened to include the interaction of the strands with one’s clothing, the measure with one’s fingers of individual beads, the delicate clicking sound of the strands in motion. One’s vision became simultaneously blurred — registering a blizzard of peripheral information — and focused — allowing the eyes to construct one’s own set of narratives in the accumulation of details.

Less than an inch thick when left to itself, *Volare* would take on for the moment the depth of the person ‘caught up’ in it, and would continue to sway for a little while after, until it calmed back into its own inertia.

This experience of passage was elaborated upon by many visitors to the gallery, some of whom took their time examining the individual beads (for imagery and/or facture), while others would strum their hands through the strands, provoking intricate interactions of sound and shadow. Over the course of the exhibition, the gallery was rented for several events: church services, Christmas parties, weddings. I heard from a guest at one of the weddings that the bride chose to pass through *Volare* to begin her bridal march.

The next piece, *Bismillah*, took twenty feet of the long wall of the gallery, just opposite the entry. The 320 strands of *Bismillah* were pinned directly to the wall with metal pushpins.

Straight on, from across the room, the piece presented itself as a craft version of a stripe painting by Bridget Riley. As one approached on the oblique, however, one could make out eight panelized pictures. While they remained ‘fuzzy’, the evidence of a black cube prominent in some clued the visitor to what the images must be: the Ka’aba at Mecca. As one moved closer, one could see that the tesserae that formed these images, rather than providing the univalent information of a pixel, were themselves small fragmentary pictures — details.

Even closer inspection would reveal the tiny dots of the four-color printing process.

Bismillah was in fact fabricated from thirty-two travel posters of Mecca, brought back from Karachi, where one could see identical versions in the private rooms of the elite 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.

As in *Volare*, which worked to extend the space of threshold and foreground the visitor’s experience of entry and passage, the aerosols of color and pattern in *Bismillah* worked to delay immediate consumption of the images, to give the visitor time to ‘reconstruct’ the experience of that distant place within the space of the gallery. Threading these posters into a 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-up images 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 to the piece, the visitor 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 possibly be read as roof tiles, or candy. In others, a believer could be three beads tall — one bead focused on the head, bowed; the next on the exposed arm, pressed against the white-sheeted torso; the next on the foot, bare on the white marble pavement.

The remaining pieces, Double Baby *Krishna* and *Ganesh*, hung in a smaller room off the main space. These two were created out of calendars, adorned with the eponymous Hindu deities, 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 book shops, 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.

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.

What drew 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 derived 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 heiratic postures of the deities, the images retained their legibility. By interweaving strands from four versions of the image (in *Ganesh*) — or four of the same image (in *Krishna*) — I could achieve a synoptic effect from the dense aggregations of lushly rendered details.

The installation was accompanied by a brochure containing the project's origin story (an account of the initiation in China) and anecdotes related to each of the pieces.

These anecdotes did not intend to explain or 'caption' the pieces, but were conceived as another register of the work: brief printed notations to supplement the nonverbal visual and tactile information in the beads themselves and reference a mesh of textual links between modes of narration.

This was also my motive for the installation's title. I hoped by these strategies to render storytelling, the description in one time and place of an experience from another, an explicit part of the visitor's apprehension of the work as a whole.

On opening night I was able to add another register: a soundtrack. I hired a DJ for the event, who set up his decks in the main space, spinning 'trip hop' — Kruder and Dorfmeister mixed with Parisian rap, qawa'ali, and Japanese pop — a blend of soulful and 'duty free'. In

the ambient imaginative worlds it evoked, and in its self-consciously mediated representations of the exotic, the soundscape expressed a strong sympathy with the imagery and feeling tone of the pieces.

But they were also connected by facture: Like the DJ's spinning — a performed manipulation 'by hand' of prerecorded materials — the bead making also appropriated products of industrial manufacture (paper clips, printed matter) and modified them through explicit, almost ostentatious, handiwork.

As Semper discusses in *Style and the Textile Arts*, the forms of both the music and bead curtains could be seen to be derived as much from the technical means of their production as they would be dependent for their form upon an extrapolation of their function.

In addition, they both carried over into new media and technologies the forms developed in previous ones. For example, in many compact disc recordings the hiss and pop of a needle on an old vinyl record is retained and often heightened — like wood grain patterns on plastic laminate. In other cases, music is edited as though recorded analog on magnetic tape, foregrounded by exaggerated cropping.

In the bead pieces, this continuity with technique-derived forms of the past can be read in the persistence of textile imagery in one's apprehension of the work — curtain, carpet, weaving, skein — imagery of facture as strong, and as recognizable, as the imagery of the printed matter employed as raw materials. Although the beads are made from paper and metal, and, with very few exceptions, are linked only vertically (what kind of textile has warp but no woof?), the work participates readily in an historical association with textiles.

First, the pieces were allied with enclosure by virtue of their disposition against the walls of the gallery space or, in one case, across the threshold. (This has perhaps historically been the case with easel painting, as the panel of the painting would be associated with the wall or ceiling to which it was affixed, while the image would represent a rupture or aperture in the enclosure, by offering a view beyond.)

Second, in an analog to textiles, they presented themselves as cladding. By their willingness to reconstitute the surface, they effectively dematerialized the substance of the wall. Cladding was critical to an understanding of the iconography of *Bismillah*, as the Ka'aba itself is an ancient stone structure draped in black cloth, and the pilgrims wear only lengths of unsewn cloth. In *Bismillah* the strands were hung in a three-to-one pattern, in order to promote a spatial perception of the surface as a rippling curtain. In addition, every eighth bead in each strand was black. While not physically linked, their alignment suggested a series of black 'threads' running horizontally through the piece.

Third, as the basic unit of manufacture, the bead references Semper's knot. It is the avatar of the joint: The wire of the paper clip bends back upon itself, as does the slip of paper. The folds of one slip onto and interlock with the folds of the other. And they are held together by their mutual dependence. This is not to suggest that the two materials are equal. In fact, they operate quite differently. The metal paper clip comes preassembled. Its dimensions are set, and it is already bent into position. The paper must be cut and folded to accommodate the clip. The paper clip can also retain its shape, and link to other clips, in a way that the paper cannot. In this sense the clip may be understood to perform structurally, whereas the paper must be considered almost ornamental, as cladding. At this scale, too, the cladding privileges surface.

A large part of the pleasure in work done by hand is that one can see clearly the evidence of one's labor. Like a Persian carpet, it becomes a record of the time and energy invested.

Making these beads required no great skill or effort. But they did take time. And there was really no way to speed it up. (Slowness was, in fact, one of the attractions.) Once I had a general idea of the size and configuration of the pieces, however, and a sense of the amount of time it would take for each strand (about an hour), I did the math and realized that it would not be possible for me to make them by myself in the time allotted. I would need help.

Labor had always been an important component in the conceptual apparatus of the work. But, by enlisting the volunteer efforts of friends to make the work with me, it acquired an entirely different dimension. For one thing, it took the pieces further in the direction of craft, in the sense of a series of 'unauthored' artifacts. In the work of so many hands it would be difficult to identify a single signature. Since the work was its own recompense, labor had value according to the amount of time spent, rather than according to whose time it was (as though one person's time were really worth more than another's).

For another, the time we spent together making the beads — talking, eating, and listening to music — was rewarding in itself, and I felt it began to affect the work in a manner described by Benjamin in *The Storyteller*. For him, storytelling was much more than a way to pass

time. In concert with the work of the hands, it was a reciprocal craft, working in tandem to render a densely textured, graspable comprehension of the world.

Such craft could imbue artifacts with tactile experience — what Ruskin called "the correspondence of workmanship with thought". For this reason I would like to add the histories and formal structures of its facture, in terms both of technology and of labor, to the interlocking narratives that comprise *TravelWriting*.

According to Benjamin, the most useful and satisfying stories are 'crafted', and combine "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 residents of a place."