



WONDERLANDS

CRISTO REDENTOR

TIM WEBSTER



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Experiencing Experience

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN TIM WEBSTER AND AMELIA DOUGLAS

WONDERLANDS Cristo Redentor
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AD Hi Tim!

TW Hey...

AD Before we get to the Wonderlands, I'd like to take a quick detour through some of your earlier projects. In your projection works and VJ performances, you were interested in elements that could not be controlled – the subjective experiences of a crowd, or the effect that context has upon content. There was a strong focus on the necessity of 'being there' and on environmental factors. For this most recent series, however, you've been travelling to places that exist as images almost in excess of their status as environments. These iconic tourist destinations – such as Machu Picchu and the Cristo in Rio – constitute some of the most photographed areas of the world. How does your earlier interest in site-specificity and duration figure in these new works?

TW My earlier interests in site-specificity and the subjective experience of duration are still there, but I've shifted from exploring these elements for others (via live performance) through to a more internalised process. For the Wonderlands series, I've been looking at the differences between perceived and remembered experiences and their representations. We continually remap histories and experiences, and images are an important part of that process. Places are experienced as durational fragments, which are then later re-experienced and shifted through memory.

Cristo Redentor, or Christ the Redeemer, is the second installation I've made that focuses on the 'Wonders of the World' (following on from Machu Picchu in 2007). The Cristo is the statue that overlooks Rio de Janeiro. It was popularly elected as one of the new wonders of the world in 2000. In 2008, I travelled to Rio to film the Cristo as the basis of a 'folded time collage' – essentially a collage of video loops. An hour of video may be made up of six, ten-minute loops that are fragments of the whole. The loops are then collaged to compose a larger scene: looking up at the statue and around at the harbour, which is Rio's other natural wonder of the world. And taking in also, of course, the tourists, who were everywhere. I think the tourists in this piece really became a focal point.



Machu Picchu, 2007, High Definition Video 22mins

AD That focus also fed into the way the piece is presented. You've chosen to display the footage on domestic, digital photo frames, almost like a collection of souvenirs

TW Yes, unlike Machu Picchu, which was a composited, single-screen projection, each fragment in the Cristo is presented on an individual screen. I'm using forty, 15-inch LCD screens, more specifically digital photo frames. Over the last couple of years there's been a big surge of these trashy consumer items for displaying digital photographs and I was always interested in using them as self-contained playback units. In the gallery, the screens themselves are suspended from the ceiling and arranged as a physical collage. So whereas in the Machu Picchu work you could really get a sense of the image it was mapping itself to, this piece is a bit different in that it really does rely on the viewer to stitch the pieces together for themselves.

AD Was the process of production for Machu Picchu and Cristo essentially the same?

TW It was essentially the same – in terms of production. But every place has its own challenges, its own history and a very different journey to get there. After observing the tourists during the first day of filming, I felt I had to take a different approach to this monument. Machu Picchu enveloped you. What did the Cristo do? And I realised that monuments like the Cristo (which are built as an offering or as an adoration), actually create a point of rupture.

They are like lightning rods.

They attract people to go there.

AD The Cristo has definitely become a metonym, almost like shorthand for Rio. It was commissioned from a competition, wasn't it, so from its conception the statue had this tourist attraction status attached to it...

TW It also sits at around 800 metres above sea level. When Brazil was home to the entire Portuguese court during the Napoleonic wars, the Prince used the site as a

retreat: as a place to observe his capital. And it's quite fascinating the way that that historical context is now packaged as part of the attraction. It's painted up on the wall, not just the early monarchy, but also the church, looking down from on high.

AD So historically, the site was a vantage point for power.

TW Exactly. But today, it's the people who go there, who are actually moving to these places or moving through these places, who provide the temporal connection. They're the ones who are actually pulling it together. And when they look at their photos of the site, the photo is just a marker, like a bookmark for a whole lot of other things, the moments leading up to it and what came after. The present moment is that combination of everything leading up to now and the possibility of what's to come. Each photograph is like a preserved present.

AD It's been suggested that the kind of movement generated by mass tourism transforms places into passages – places just become spaces of transit. Not necessarily connected to their geographical context. The narrative of the place is then inseparable from the way it's been marketed to the tourist, through signposts, or brochures, or other images. Can you explain what you mean by the tourist becoming the statue?

TW For me, this was probably the most entertaining thing that happened up there. The first thing that every person does who arrives at the top of that mountain is pose like the statue. They don't look at the statue, they pose like the statue, and they look out at the city and harbour.

*The journey up the mountain is a
journey towards what they are going to become.*

And when they arrive, after they've become the destination, then maybe they'll try and get down on the ground and try and take a photograph of the Cristo. The point is that the statue itself is so large that it can only be consumed in these fractured moments. But maybe what people remember later (and I mean this very generally, because everyone's got their own way of remembering) is also influenced by what they've seen elsewhere. Whether it's from helicopter flybys, from other photographs, or when they're in Central, looking up at the statue, or seeing it illuminated at night ... The experience of being there is a coming together of all of these little things. These details aren't reflected in the photograph, but they are still present when the photograph is viewed.

AD But when we make sense of the world, or when we experience moments, we necessarily synthesise different memories and histories together, like a collage. Would you use the word synthesis here?

TW I am interested in the experience of experience. This is not a process that we're necessarily aware of, or even care about. So I suppose the question is: why do I care? I think it's because we base so much of who we are on these subconscious gatherings, or subconscious bricolage: elements coming together to make our experiences of the world. And I think the other thing with this particular work is that I'm not trying to re-present what I filmed by presenting it as a whole. And I'm also not trying to give that scene back to the viewer as something worthwhile to look at. They've been given it already, that's already happened...



Making Memory 2, 2009, Chromira print, 50x70cm

AD Because we've seen this image before, elsewhere...

TW That's right. And in and of themselves, the loops are not special. There's nothing special about the shots, or the individual pieces of footage in this installation. It's only when they come together as they're viewed, and are presented together with the other loops, that anything can be deduced. The space in between the screens becomes important. Nothing is in between the screens, but that is the space in which the viewer fuses their own experience to the spectacle on screen.

AD Have you considered the difference in consumption for viewers who've actually been to the Cristo, and those that have just seen it in other images – does this matter at all?

TW No, I don't think it matters because the actual process is the same. Years ago, I wrote about VJing, and I said that individuals are their own biological wetware. We do it (VJing reality) all the time. That's how we make sense of things, that's how we sense and that's why we have senses. We pull it together and that's how we formulate experiences - by directing our attention. But afterwards, in the retelling, we have a memory and an imagination, and these also affect the way we think we may have actually experienced whatever we experienced. In other words,

we direct our attention in our memory of the past in the same way as our experience of the present.

AD How does this relate to your idea of 'folded time collages' – and where does that term come from? It's got a bit of a Deleuzian flavour to it.

TW The folded time collage is literally an experiment into the possibility of folding time. But before I go into that ... If you look at a white wall with a black dot on it for even ten minutes, after a while you don't see the black dot anymore. This is partly because of our physiology. You don't see the dot because it's just not considered important information by the brain. Or if you watch a real time recording of one scene – I'm thinking of Michael Snow's *Wavelength*, for example – it's great, but there are things going on that our minds can write off as unimportant information. So the folded time idea came about because I was interested in asking: how do we view difference, and how do we see time, without this taking up the amount of the time it took to record it? Bill Viola, in his early days, made all of these audio recordings – hours and hours and hours of recordings, he wanted to record everything. And he realised that if he wanted to play it back... you know, if you spend half your life recording it would take the other half of your life to replay it...

AD Yeah, so it's like making a one to one scale map of the territory that you live in, which then becomes indistinguishable from the territory itself!

TW Exactly! So I was interested in finding a way that would enable me to present video, which is essentially a linear format, in a way that allows us to see the difference between times. If you imagine taking a long piece of tape, and you fold it up – that's like a way of spatialising time. The spatialising aspect was also related to collage – filming one part of a scene from a certain amount of time and then another part

of the scene, and then putting those together so that they run simultaneously. So I have two different spaces, from two different times, together in one space and one time.

AD Why do you think monuments and icons are the ideal subject matter for that kind of treatment? I think of a wonderland as an imaginary realm, something that has that element of awe and a kind of distance surrounding it. But then it's also got that Lewis Carroll, through-the-looking-glass association too, like something fantastical...

TW I chose the wonders because there is a contemporary familiarity about them. I mean, relatively few people have been there, but they are familiar.

AD Within certain contexts, though – familiar to those with access to technology, who are part of the world that consumes and circulates images on that level...

TW True. And that's probably the same people who have the opportunity to travel. Afternoon television gave me my first awareness of a world out there, a world to be known. Machu Picchu presented itself to me in the title sequence of *The Mysterious Cities of Gold*. The ECO 92 conference in Rio introduced me to Rio and the Cristo with helicopter footage of the statue and the harbour. The Wonders fascinate me because of the way my memory and imagination become entwined with my eventual, actual experience of these places.

AD Have you been thinking at all about the idea of 'counter-monuments', or monuments that work against the idea of the monumental?

TW I've been thinking about creating my own monuments. It was interesting when [the artist] Julian White and I discovered that we've been working with similar themes. His recent photographs looked at comparative monuments: monuments that aren't yet wonders, but that have aesthetic connections between them. He cites as one reference the Eiffel Tower in Paris versus the Eiffel Tower in Tokyo, and there's also a much smaller one on top of a building in Sao Paolo as well. Rio de Janeiro has the World shopping mall, which houses rather enormous replicas of all the Wonders. Or we can think of the Cristos in Bolivia, and Brazil. But still, for me the really interesting question is: why do we continue to go to these places?

AD I think this might circle back to your interest in pilgrimages.

TW Yes, and to the idea of narrative as journey. A pilgrimage is a voluntary displacement. Religious associations aside, the etymology of pilgrim is 'traveller'. So a pilgrimage was an act of voluntary displacement to go from one place to another.

AD So what's the difference between a tourist and a pilgrim?

TW Not much. Both choose to go, and (more often than not), both tourists and pilgrims return different or affected because of their experience.

*Displacement has caused a rupture in
the general ongoingness of their lives.*

I relate this to the edge of the frame: a disjunction in continuity within a larger, overall scene. Experience is punctuated by other experiences. It's almost like fractals. Within each environment there is another environment. And with every iteration of that breakdown, time continues to pass. And we arrive at this point where we're re-consuming, re-living. Like you were saying before about mapping your own territory on a one to one scale.

AD How long would it take to 'see' the whole of the Cristo installation in the gallery?

TW It's pretty much impossible to see the whole piece, because it changes all the time. There is I think nearly four hours of footage in total. The loops repeat but they're not time-locked, so you will never see the same thing on the same screen at the same time.

AD The fragments are constantly rearranged into new configurations across the individual screens...

TW Yes. What I'm doing is taking my experience, my experience over time, with fragments, and I'm breaking that apart and presenting it in a way that allows people to have an experience of the experience.

AD It's kind of like seeing seeing. We should also mention that this video installation is exhibited in tandem with a photographic component. How does this relate to the moving image content?

TW The photographs were actually shot by my wife, Nicole, whilst I was filming. They are of people taking photos and of people posing as the statue. I've treated them so that elements in each photo jump out at you a little bit – those parts are much sharper than the rest of the image. For me,

*photographs of people making their memories
have a particular resonance because I'm reminded of how
I can never see what you see.*



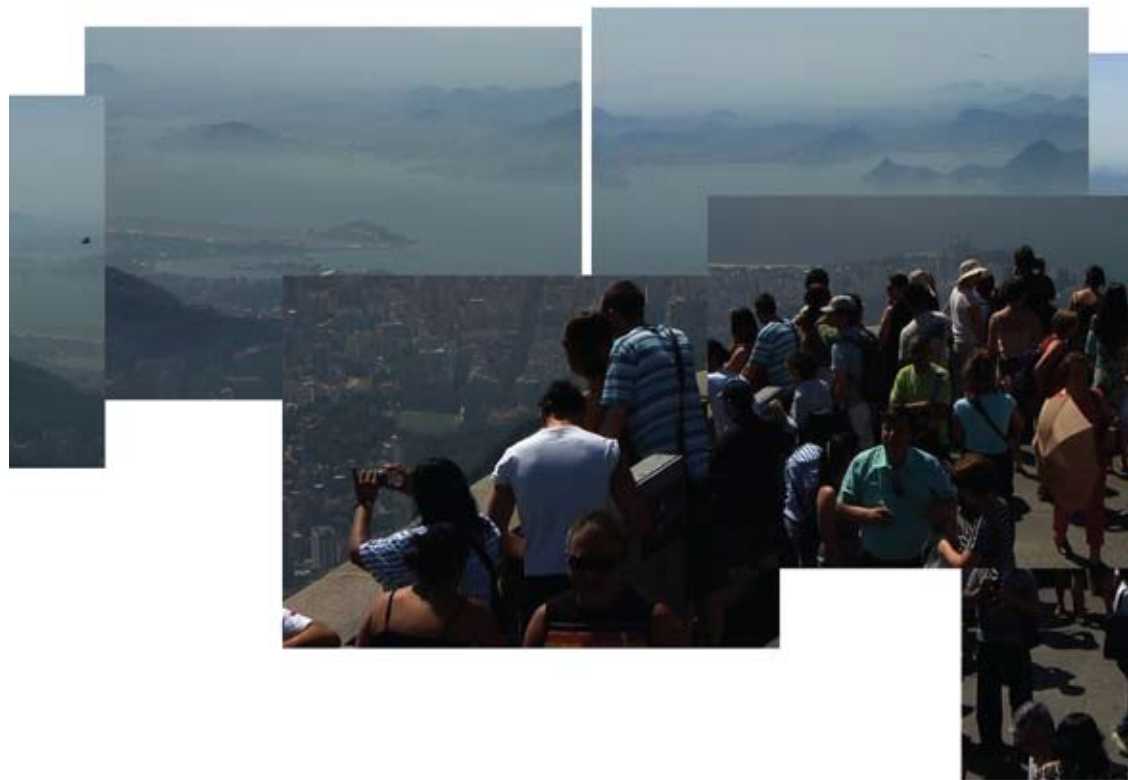
Making Memory 1, 2009, Chromira print, 100x70cm

- AD** Weren't you originally also going to do a panorama?
- TW** Yes, there was an early idea to create a number of panoramas or 'interrupted photos' as I was calling them – a wall long panorama of the city, with the statue removed but with other objects composited into the photo, like my Cristo fridge magnet for instance, that serve as mementoes or memory containers for what isn't in the photograph.
- AD** Is that something you would come back to? Taken together, the photographs and the videos could act as a reminder for what you don't know, for what's not there.
- TW** Overall, these are definitely things to come back to. The idea is

*to take in that space in between,
which is where subjective experience lies.
To take in that 'nothingness' which is, actually, everything.*

That's the element that makes the experience of a mass tourist destination different and unique for every person, even if it's still a package deal. You know, if you eat a mass produced frozen dinner in a really, really lush environment, just being in that environment will totally change your experience of the frozen dinner. Context is really, really important.

- AD** For sure, but what's the specific context here?
- TW** I can relate it back to the connection between surface and image. Surface is complicit in making the image. In the case of video projection, and particularly in site-specific VJ performances, all the different elements that come together in a space can actually work to create place. I wonder what the Bangkok airport was like, for example, when it was occupied in early 2009? The airport might be the poster boy for the non-place, but what did it become during that time of occupation, with stranded tourists camping out in the terminal?
- AD** Yes I know what you mean! That touches on issues of use and agency – of the tactical use of space in a way that changes its normative function. So where to now? Are you planning on continuing this series, and exploring other wonders?
- TW** Most definitely. I have already shot the footage of Iguazu on the border of Brazil and Argentina and am planning another shoot here in Australia – Uluru. It's technically not a wonder, although it's vying for a place as a New Natural Wonder. I have been to Alice Springs once before, but didn't drive down to the rock. When I arrived there and saw that amazingly saturated red and blue landscape, I remember thinking 'so this is my country.' Kind of weird for a city kid, but then again, all those tourism campaigns for the Northern Territory – the Never Never and all that – while growing up must have had an effect. After all, that's what we sell to the world.



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