Inevitably, the National Craft Conference raised the issue of new technology and its likely impact on craft practice. At the same time as possibilities for expanding markets were being aired at the Malthouse Theatre, designers were hard at work at the National Key Centre for Design at RMIT Winter School fashioning an immaterial future. With radical lifestyle changes on the horizon, it is critical that the material business of crafts and the more conceptual practice of design understand each other's mission. The following pages of *Object* present the ideas and speculations sketched by these designers with strategic reference to craft matters.

In talk of a **sustainable** future, the message is **dematerialise.** This shift is likely not to obliterate **material practices** but force a re-negotiation towards them. And craft is eminently qualified to sit at the table of that sensitive process, says **Kevin Murray.**

Where Worlds Converge: travels around an info-eco future was a week-long schedule of papers, demonstrations, performances, site-seeing and workshops. As its title suggests, *Where Worlds Converge* focused on the global forms of identity that result from a strategic alliance between ecological politics and information technology. The specific target was tourism. Designers and theorists from Europe, America and Australia converged on RMIT to speculate on the kinds of environmentally sensitive forms of tourism which might emerge from future developments in global communication.

The prospect of 'soft tourism' poses a challenge to today's designers and craftspersons. For many craft professionals, tourism is perceived as a growing outlet for their work. With the decline of manufacturing in Australia, object makers look to tourism as the silverlining—a growth industry with an insatiable appetite for material exchange. The souvenir is enduring testimony to the personal capital of travel, providing tourists with a mantle-piece museum of exotic objects on which they can hang wondrous tales. What happens, then, when tourists opt for the computer network as their means of overseas adventure—chatting with locals on live network sessions rather than venturing to distant, expensive and resource hungry hotels?

Soft tourism is an *immaterial* practice. Though mailorder souvenirs are still theoretically possible, their global accessibility degrades the aura of the foreign object. The significance of souvenirs is that they acknowledge your unique physical presence: only by 'being there' could this object have been found. (See the article *Museum of Souvenirs* on page 67 for examples of these unique objects.)

The dematerialisation of travel might well be a source of gloom for craftspeople: a valuable outlet is jeopardised. But where one door shuts, another opens. What might seem like a threat to existing markets is actually the creation of new opportunities. It's critical that craft practitioners look carefully at these developments in order to adapt to changing values. *Object* magazine has been nurturing this interest over the past couple of years.[1] Articles by Anne-Marie Willis and Tony Fry identified a 'significant cultural shift' in consumer taste towards products with ecological value.[2] While they advise scepticism towards an ecology that emphasises fashion rather than effectualness, they concur that environmental change hangs on human desire, rather than guilt.

This more cooperative strategy was initially forged in the *O2 Event,* held at Amsterdam in 1993. Addressing this conference, Chris Ryan used the phrase 'greening of desire' to describe a 'cathartic release from the contradictory and environmentally destructive aspects of fulfilment'. While enforced collective action might have been appropriate during China's cultural revolution, it has little chance of success today. The agents of sustainability are consumers, not political leaders.

Where Worlds Converge reveals the key principle guiding those designers committed to a sustainable future. Befitting this end of the millennium, their message is 'immaterialise!'. Their task is to find virtual substitutes for the material practices by which we communicate, work and play. As argued by Sandy Indlekofer-O'Sullivan and John Conomos in *Object 1/95,*[3] the gains for makers in this move include entry to a global audience and increased opportunities for mixing genres. The enduring question, though, concerns the implications for this abstraction on the fate of objects produced in craft workshops. Does new ecological sensitivity lead to a negative dispensation towards appropriation of the earth's resources to adorn our lives— digging up earth for platters, chopping down trees for bowls, quarrying mountains for neckpieces, grazing sheep for wall hangings, and so on. This is the question raised by *Where Worlds Converge.*

Keeping in touch with the arguments that forge the info-eco link helps forestall such dramatic refusals. The kind of craft which retains its materiality yet acknowledges a responsibility towards the environment is perhaps best represented in recent craft practices that evoke a 'guardianship of matter'. Margaret West's stones wrapped in gold foil put the maker in the position of interpreter rather than fabricator. Martin Corbin's surgical rejuvenation of disused kitchen chairs gives a preciousness to the old, countering the consumerist desire for sleek new plastic surfaces. Susan Cohn's recycled jewellery puts the jeweller in the position of discovering new circuits to replace dead ends. Works such as these stretch the creative imagination of makers to conceive how they might intervene in the material world with minimal debit to its environmental ledger. While this might not amount to much when compared with the heavy duty environmental toll of cars and whitegoods, it does reinforce the value shift which is necessary to effect broader global changes. The move to immateriality is likely not to obliterate material practices but force a renegotiation towards them. Craft is eminently qualified to sit at the table of that sensitive process.

As a concrete focus on the material dimensions of travel, the *Museum of Souvenirs* presents a range of travel mementoes provided by participants. A series of four theoretical interventions, *Compass* introduces concepts from social science which help us to think in an abstract way about the human habitation of space. Finally, the anecdotes in *@Glitch* present the inevitable lapses in technology which occurred during the course of *Where Worlds Converge.* These convey a feeling for the 'live event' in a conference where the 'ghost in the machine' was up to its usual tricks.

Endnotes

1   Shirley Powell, 'Towards a new ecology of consumerism' in *Object,* Spring 1993, pp40-41

2   Anne-Marie Willis and Tony Fry, 'Ecodesign and the object' in *Object,* Spring 1993, pp38-40; Anne-Marie Willis, 'Ecological objects, marketing cultural values' in *Object,* Summer 1994, pp33-35

3   Sandy Indlekofer-O'Sullivan 'geta.newaddress.ok?' in *Object,* 1/95, pp28-33; and John Conomos, 'Craft one, net 2,000' in *Object,* 1/95, pp34-37

object
42
| w h e r e
| w o r l d
object
43
| w h e r e
| w o r l d
s | c o n -