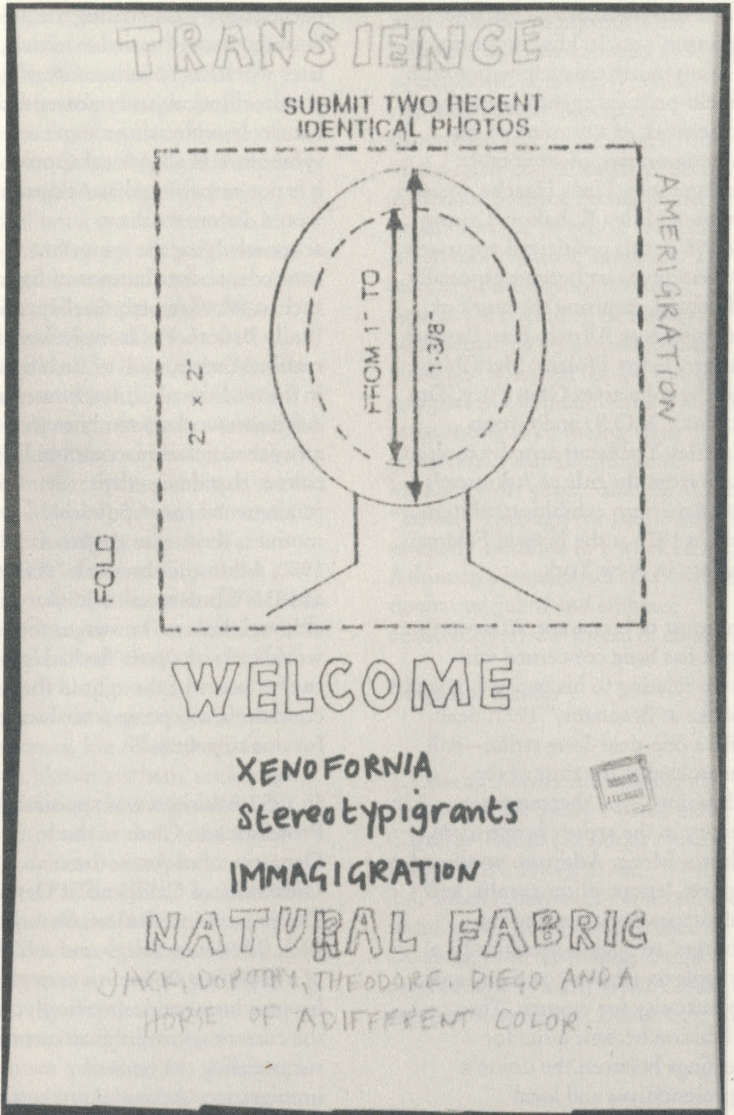


Detail of sketch for *Dorothy, Jack, Théodore, Diego and A Horse of a Different Color*, 1995



Conrad Atkinson's art melds the methods of conceptual art with the goals of political activism. In contrast to the esoteric, formalistic, and linguistic concerns of much late 1960s conceptual art, the defining principle of Atkinson's work since the early 1970s has been to function as a critical reflector of immediate political and economic realities and as a catalyst for social change.

Community participation rather than isolation, and instrumentalism rather than detachment became Atkinson's goals. His reconnection of avant-garde artistic practice with a socio-political agenda was echoed in the work of a number of his contemporaries, most notably Adrian Piper, Hans Haacke, Joseph Beuys, and Ilya Kabakov. During the 1980s, this politicized approach to conceptual art became especially influential, inspiring the work of artists such as Alfredo Jaar, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Mel Chin, and the collectives Gran Fury, Tim Rollins + K.O.S., and Group Material. The latter actually took its name from the title of Atkinson's first American exhibition, *Material*, held in 1979 at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York.

For most of his career, Atkinson's work has been concerned with issues relating to his native England. "Strike at Brannans," 1972, dealt with a one-year-long strike—still unresolved at the time of the exhibition—at a thermometer factory in the artist's home town, Cleator Moor. Atkinson presented reports, letters, photographs, and videotapes documenting the laborers' struggle—specifically, a struggle to achieve equal pay and opportunity for women. The exhibition became a site for meetings between the union's representatives and local

government leaders. Subsequent exhibitions dealt with topics such as working conditions in Cleator Moor's Crowgarth iron ore mine, the question of "acceptable risk" in the production and disposal of industrial toxic wastes such as asbestos, the troubles in Northern Ireland, and the paradox of hunger in a world glutted with food.

While Atkinson's art had always demanded that the viewer participate by construing the links between widely varied materials, his later work has become increasingly poetic, elliptical, and open-ended in nature. In embracing a more symbolic and allegorical approach, it is not surprising that Atkinson would devote works to acknowledging the important antecedent contributions of figures such as Wordsworth, Shelley, and Emily Brontë. Far from seeking to reaffirm the position of such figures in the traditional canon, however, Atkinson works actively to strip away the aura of inaccessible "high" culture that denies their fundamental socio-political motives. Writing in *Artforum* in 1980, Atkinson observed, "As late as 1833 Wordsworth said that although he was 'known to the world only as a poet' he had 'given twelve hours of thought to the conditions and prospects of society, for one to poetry.'"¹

In 1992 Atkinson was appointed Professor and Chair in the Department of Art at the University of California at Davis. The present installation, *Dorothy, Jack, Théodore, Diego and a Horse of a Different Color*, is a response to his new home and, specifically, to the current socio-political turmoil surrounding the issue of immigration. Atkinson juxtaposes

welcome mats designed by the artist and industrially produced for this exhibition, a variety of found objects, a sculptural form of the word "welcome" colored in jello powder, and images borrowed from Géricault and Velázquez. This strange collection of things is presented in the gallery to suggest subtle relations between fantasy and reality, belonging and exclusion, and past and present.

The jello-colored word "welcome" makes reference to a horse in the film *The Wizard of Oz* that spontaneously changes hue from moment to moment: a "horse of a Different Color." Indeed, Atkinson points out that Baum's seemingly fanciful book was no less than a complex allegory of the American Populist movement and the presidential campaign of 1896. Atkinson's introduction of Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* in the context of this installation draws attention to the work's origin as a kind of investigative journalism. "This incident [the sinking of the frigate *Medusa*]," Atkinson writes, "and its handling was...seen as an indication of an inability of the ruling order to change in the face of transforming social conditions. When Géricault chose this as the subject of his painting, he was conscious of competing with the newspapers. He researched his subject like an aesthetic sociologist, a politician of the imagination, in his contribution as an artist to the public debate on a topical subject...."² The "Jack" in the title is alluded to here because of his use of writing to mount an impassioned defense against the corporate state and excesses of political power. Velázquez' painting, *Las Meninas*, is presented by Atkinson for more

poetic reasons, as an emblem of disorientation: in this work the artist created for the viewer an impression of being both the subject of the work and yet weirdly absent from it. The complex spatial arrangements of this painting is echoed in Atkinson's accumulation of rearview mirrors at one end of the gallery, reflecting our gaze back to the word "welcome."

Clearly, Atkinson has come a long way from the straightforward polemics and intentionally deadpan presentation of his early work. Although based in personal experience and responding to one of the most critical issues in current American politics, Atkinson here avoids specific targets in favor of a much more allusive approach. The subject of immigration is seen against the backdrop of history, contextualized by a cosmopolitan view, and accepted for the murky, complex phenomenon that it is. The artist seems to be asking us to accept and value the inherent instability of "place" and the idea of "home." Through the subtle means uniquely available to a work of art, Atkinson's installation asks us to let down our guard and embrace constructively the forces of change.

Lawrence Rinder

1. *Conrad Atkinson: Picturing the System*, ed. by Sandy Nairne and Caroline Tisdall (London: Pluto Press / ICA, 1981), p. 73.
2. Conrad Atkinson, "Notes on the installation," in *Conrad Atkinson: Dorothy, Jack, Théodore, Diego and A Horse of a Different Color*, exhibition brochure, Davis, CA, 95.

Work in MATRIX:

Dorothy, Jack, Théodore, Diego and A Horse of a Different Color, mixed media installation, 1995; courtesy of the artist.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Institute of Contemporary Art, Strike at Brannans, London '72; Institute of Contemporary Art and Northern Arts Gallery, Work, Wages and Prices, London and Newcastle, England '74; Arts Council of Northern Ireland Gallery, A Shade of Green, an Orange Edge, Belfast '75; Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, Material--Six Works, NYC '79; Exhibition Hall at Autozavodsskaya, Particular Histories, Moscow, Russia '90; Henry Moore Sculpture Trust Studio, For Emily, Halifax, England '92; Richard L. Nelson Gallery & The Fine Arts Collection, Selected Works, University of California, Davis '93.

Selected group exhibitions:

Musée d'Art Moderne, Biennale de Paris, Paris '75; Serpentine Gallery, Arts Council of Great Britain, Art for Whom?, London '78; The Tate Gallery, Landscapes, London '81; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Content, Washington, D.C. '84.

Selected bibliography:

Richard Cork, "Conrad Atkinson: Interview," *Studio International* (March-April '76).

Timothy Rollins, "Art as Social Action: An Interview with Conrad Atkinson," *Art in America* (Feb. '80).

Caroline Tisdall and Sandy Nairne, eds., with essays by Lucy Lippard and Timothy Rollins, *Conrad Atkinson: Picturing the System* (London: Pluto Press and the Institute of Contemporary Art '81).

Vivien Raynor, "Conrad Atkinson," *New York Times* (Dec. 20, '85).

Eleanor Heartney, "Conrad Atkinson," *Art in America* (June '89).

Donald Kuspit, "Artists Safely Back in Galleries Says Chief of Police," *Artforum* (Jan. '91).

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