

On the Road with Marilyn Sward

By Jeff Abell

Geoffrey Chaucer noted, back in the 14th century, that as spring's arrival brought new life to the earth, human beings were filled with an urge to travel. Whether, like Alexander von Humboldt, one is emboldened to *Journey to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*, or like Xavier de Maistre, one's journeys are limited to a *Nocturnal Expedition Around my Bedroom*, the need to explore and to document those explorations in some kind of book seems to run very deep in the human psyche. In his thoughtful study *The Art of Travel*, Alain de Botton explores the joys and pitfalls of yielding to this urge. He notes, early on, the unavoidable reality that travel is seldom the escape from one's quotidian existence that one hopes for, and many a traveler has discovered, as de Botton did, that upon opening his suitcase "I had inadvertently brought myself along with me to the island."ⁱ

For artists, this urge is particularly pointed. Artists are usually more than a little self-conscious about that inevitable and inadvertent person in their suitcase, and spend much of their creative time unpacking, as it were. Encountering themselves in a new environment can yield a new vision of the self, or yield new mirrors of reflection. Most artists are also blessed with what de Botton characterizes as "a traveling mind-set":

Receptivity might be said to be its chief characteristic. Receptive, we approach new places with humility. We carry with us no rigid ideas about what is or is not interesting....We dwell at length on the layout of a menu or the clothes of the presenters on the evening news. We are alive to the layers of history beneath the present and take notes and photographs.ⁱⁱ

That combination of traits: humility, no rigid ideas, openness to new details, especially those that might be considered mundane, an awareness of layers of history, and that urge to take notes and photographs, all describe my own experience of what Marilyn Sward was like in her approach to travel. It is not insignificant that her last body of work was a series of aerial photographs: she always wanted the window seat.

I have known very few people as widely traveled as Marilyn Sward. During the quarter century of our acquaintance, it seemed that every time I turned around, Marilyn was on another continent. One minute she was bicycling through Italy with her husband and another couple, then she was in South Africa with a group of students, or leading a group of artists through a tour of India, or attending an international papermaking conference in France, or traveling to Brazil. The fact that, even in this country, she divided her time between three “homes” – in Evanston, Illinois, St. Germaine, Wisconsin, and off the west coast of Florida – meant that when she claimed to be “home” I couldn’t be sure of exactly where she was.

A veteran traveler herself, Marilyn enjoyed few things more than sharing the experiences of travel with others. As a result, she was particularly gifted at what are called “study trips,” and led groups of students to locations as far flung from the American Midwest as Indonesia and South Africa. If the reader has experienced the pressures and difficulties that international travel brings (from struggles with passports and tickets, to misdirected luggage, to the difficulty of communicating with people who do not speak English, as well as the severe sense of exhaustion and disorientation that comes after a long flight), simply multiply that with the added responsibility of tending to 18 undergraduate students at the same time, and one begins to understand just how

daunting a study trip can be. The trip that I shared with Marilyn (to three different islands in Indonesia) in 1993 took two years to develop, refine, propose, and then nurse into actuality.

For Marilyn, a crucial part of any trip was the journal. Whether this was a purchased “blank book” of some sort, or a book that one constructed specifically for the trip, did not seem to matter. An unrepentant diarist myself, I assumed a trip journal was simply a volume for making notes. But Marilyn was insistent that, in a very tangible way, the journal was a container for one’s experiences while traveling. Her first advice was to glue an envelope to the front or back cover of the journal. This envelope then became the gathering place for anything that resisted another kind of inclusion in the journal: hotel brochures, programs from performances, receipts, etc., could all be gathered in the envelope if they were resistant to being attached to the pages of the journal itself.

Marilyn also recommended carrying a small stapler and a roll of transparent tape as other essential tools. This likewise proved sage advice: a description of an amazing meal at a restaurant in a Balinese village gains in reality when the business card from the restaurant can be attached to the page narrating the meal. Moreover, in subsequent years, this practice has proved invaluable: friends traveling to places I have been asked for suggestions of restaurants or hotels, and I find I can give them very specific information (addresses, phone numbers, etc.) by tracking these through my journals. The ability to attach bits and pieces of the detritus of a journey (from baggage claim stickers to napkins to labels from food containers) gives the journal a charming, magpie aesthetic that is both messier and more memory-provoking than just words written down on a page.

In looking over Marilyn's travel journals – which had all been carefully preserved in her studio – it is clear that they constitute more than just “vacation snapshots.” For an artist who was intimately invested in paper and books, they constitute a unique body of work. In many cases the large number of inclusions added to the book has exploded the structure: the book can no longer be closed (I recall Marilyn advocated things like ribbon or twine to hold closed a bursting journal, at least while still in transit). In other cases, the juxtaposition of drawing, writing (in her distinctive if almost illegible handwriting), and *objets trouvés* has the exact same sensibility as her art, which often combined natural objects with various kinds of paper and photographic imagery. When I compare my own journal from our 1993 trip to Indonesia with Marilyn's, I get an odd jolt of *déjà vu*: in many cases, I have some of the same things attached to the pages of my journal at virtually the same place. An account of a discussion with students about what elements and animals they felt kinship to occurs in the same place in my book as in hers, preceded by a similar parade of postcards from the Honolulu airport, and empty blue packets from Garuda Airlines that proffered “refreshing tissues.” (Yet Marilyn's journal fails to note that she herself identified with the frog, something I would flash on years later, when I saw her drive off in a bright green VW. Considering how much time a papermaker spends in water, it makes sense that she felt amphibious.)

The day that Marilyn and I arrived in Indonesia (as recorded in my journal), we were met by Marilyn's friend, the clothing designer Nadya. Nadya put the two of us into her car, and we drove off to the village of Sideman, where we visited the studio of a traditional weaver. Marilyn and I both bought fabric there: I acquired a gorgeous sarong and sash (a necessary costume for visiting Balinese temples) in traditional colors of red,

black and gold. Marilyn bought a beautiful scarf with traditional patterns, but in non-traditional colors (notably a vivid green). Returning to Ubud, we had dinner at the Amandari Hotel, where Nadya discoursed on Bali:

Everything here requires your complete concentration. Even opening your water bottle. If you try to do it haphazardly, the cap will break, and you'll have to struggle to get it open. Everything requires you to give your full commitment to it: walking down the stairs, crossing the street, peeling a fruit.

Nadya then posed an essential question for artists when they travel: "Do you want to experience it, or do you want to record it? You can't necessarily do both." I have come to realize this simple question forms a central conundrum for artists working with media such as photography and video: the device necessarily distances you from the event before you. The need to capture and hold the moment effectively prevents you from "living through" the event (which is what the word "experience" means). Even those who have an easy fluidity with their cameras must still decide if they want to superimpose that object between themselves and what they are observing. Some of my most vivid recollections of Indonesia are things I have no photographs of, because I was too busy experiencing them to attempt to record them. My only record is the written account in my journal, providing the bits and pieces to jog my memory back to the original event. The journal, with its quiescent, accepting envelope attached to it, provides a home after the fact for things collected in the moment, without interposing itself between artist and event. Perhaps this is why Marilyn's travel journals seem to provide a more vivid record of her travels than photos would have, even though she was an avid photographer.

Looking at the collected work of Marilyn Sward as gathered in the exhibition *Speaking In Paper*, I was struck by certain recurring images in her work, particularly the shape of an envelope. I recall that Marilyn, when making paper, would also make envelopes out of the same pulp. “You never know,” she told me, “when you’ll want to do something with that paper, and then you’ll wish you had an envelope that matched.” This is eminently practical, in its way, but I can’t help but wonder what that envelope symbolized to Marilyn. The envelope is a container, a place to collect experiences on a journey, and hence a metaphor for both life itself and the artistic process. The envelope traditionally holds a letter, the written, paper form of communication between two individuals, a medium that is intimate and private, for once read, it can be closed up in its protective envelope and put away for safekeeping. Some of the first novels were “epistolary,” pretending to be a collection of letters, for readers were enticed to follow a protracted narrative if they could pretend to be reading someone else’s letters. And for the traveler, the letter is a way of communicating with those friends who could not join one on the journey, a way of reaching out and providing something tangible for the absent friend to touch, hold. Moreover, and most pointedly, the envelope, when its flap is lifted, takes the shape of a child’s picture of a house, and hence it is a metaphor for the home that awaits the traveler after the journey’s end.

Ultimately, “home” is the place where all journeys end. The novelist William Goyen, in his book *House of Breath*, describes this strangely familiar place that, at first, one cannot even name, but that one eventually calls “home,” noting that one comes to “put roots there, and love others there;” so that whenever one leaves this place, one writes “poems of yearning for it, like a lover...” By that token, travel journals, too, become

poems of yearning, love letters to a particular place, intended to be opened like a letter to oneself, once one has returned to that envelope called home.

Jeff Abell is a composer, writer, performance artist, and photographer, and an Associate Professor in the Interdisciplinary Arts Department of Columbia College Chicago.

ⁱ Alain de Botton, *The Art of Travel*, p. 19.

ⁱⁱ *Op. cit.* p. 242.