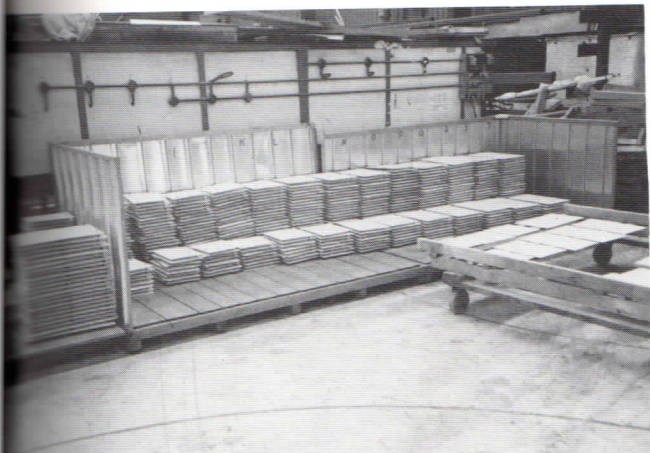
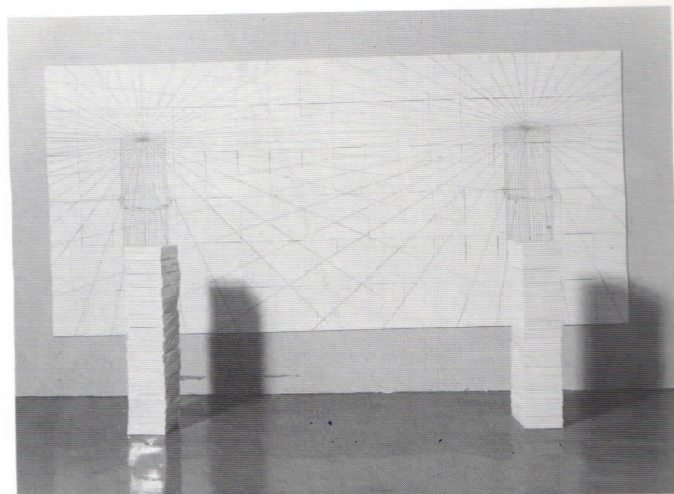


AN INTERVIEW WITH IMANTS TILLERS



Stacks 1987
 stacks of paintings (vitreous enamel on steel)
 No. 11809-13248
 Studio Geelong
 photography: the artist



The Forming of Place 1987
 gouache, pencil on 108 canvasboards;
 2 stacks of 324 canvasboards
 (No. 14901-15008; 15009-15656)
 228.6 x 457.2 cm; 38.1 x 25.4 x 88.9 cm
 Courtesy Yuill/Crowley Gallery, Sydney
 photography: Fenn Hinchcliffe

JS: Can you describe your concept of *The Book of Power*?

IT: I like to think of my work in terms of a huge, all-encompassing book, where each canvasboard panel is a page in the book. The idea comes from the French poet Mallarmé who wrote in 1895: "Everything, in the world, exists to end up in a book." The panels have been numbered right from the start and the panel count is continuous from 1 to ∞ . I've almost reached 15,000 so still have a long way to go! However, I find that the quantity has been increasing *exponentially* each year since 1981 when I began to work in this format. All modes of art can be accommodated within this book, and all modes of expression: from the trivial to the serious, the banal to the profound, the pious to the blasphemous, etc. My intention is the exhaustion of all possible categories and I'll spend the rest of my life working towards achieving this goal.

The idea of using canvasboards as the pages for this book came from Duchamp's painting *Tu m'* 1918 where coloured panels emanate from a single point — the point of consciousness. In French, Duchamp's title means something like "You bore me" (referring to the act of painting). But with me it's the exact opposite: it doesn't ever bore me. I like the idea of an infinite multiplication of panels filled by an endless sea of paint.

JS: Are the pages of your Book synonymous with canvasboards, then?

IT: After I passed a certain point in the counting (11,808 to be precise) I realised that other works

not necessarily on canvasboards could be included in the panel count by simply being assigned a number.

JS: Are you referring to the vitreous enamel on steel panels for the dome of the Federation Pavilion?

IT: Yes. The panels can be steel, lead, paper, whatever and still relate to the concept of the Book. Also, in passing certain landmarks with this way of working, new possibilities present themselves. A work such as *The Forming of Place* 1987 incorporates two stacks of completely blank panels. These blank panels are transformed into art without even unwrapping the cellophane in which they come packaged.

JS: And are their shadows the shadows cast by readymades?

IT: Yes. This is the reason I'm drawn also to the work of Giorgio de Chirico and his metaphysical painting where the relationship of things in the world to their shadows is a central theme.

JS: So when did this Book idea originate?

IT: It originated in a series of paintings I did based on a view of the Basilica of St. Francis at Assisi which I called *One Painting*. This tourist postcard view was the result of a mis-registration in the process of photo-mechanical reproduction. It was apparently aerial and was "out-of-register" — a "double vision" which I felt could only have been seen by an angel. The series of paintings was part of a search for a structure using the one image and varying it slightly in form and producing many manifestations. At the time I was impressed by Carl André's dictum that in a world

obsessed with change he was obsessed with lack of change. The Book is better though — it allows for addition and visual variety and is open to the genuinely unexpected, while maintaining a constancy in the relentless pursuit of my goal: the accumulation of mass.

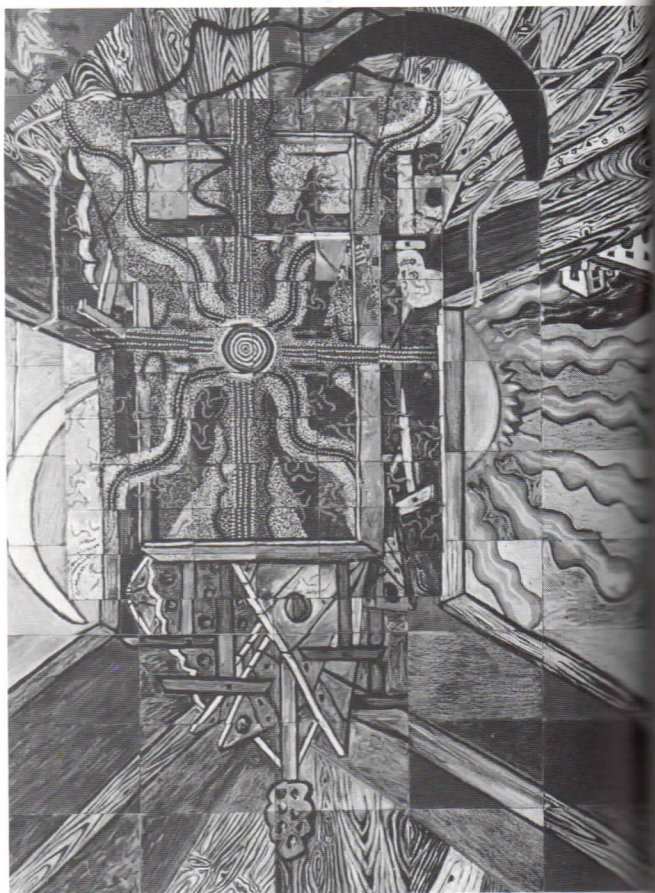
JS: In the exhibition *An Australian Accent* at P.S. 1 in New York in 1984, you exhibited two large stacks of painted canvasboards as works in themselves. The American critic Eric Gibson noted that "in a Tillers' *Stack* we have a painting taken apart and piled up as if ready for shipping. Tillers has gone to work on the descriptive language of art taking the phrase "art object" which collectors use to characterise what they own, and split it into two mutually exclusive conditions "art" and "object". His work charts the passage from one to the other." (*The New Criterion*, vol. 3 No. 1, September 1984 New York, p.62-3) What is the relationship between the paintings and the stacks for you?

IT: Any given painting, usually a composite of many canvasboards, exists while up on the wall but collapses into a stack when not on display. In this way, the power of the image is activated when a painting is installed and then dissociated into its constituent fragments when it is taken down. Simultaneously, though, it becomes something else — a stack with its own unique visual qualities and physical presence. I like to think that these mutually exclusive states of the work are akin to Duchamp's *Door* which is opening at the same time as it's closing. My process is also a form of mapping: the component parts of an image are mapped into a stack and then at a later date they can be mapped back into the correct sequence to form the image again. Mapping, however, as you know, is an activity susceptible to anomalies and to error.

JS: And uncertainty?

IT: And *undecidability*! The German mathematician Kurt Gödel discovered some interesting things using mapping. In 1931 he published a paper which had the forbidding title: *On Formally Undecidable Propositions of Principia Mathematica and Related Systems*. This revolutionary paper was published at a time when many mathematicians had been trying to axiomatise mathematics — that is, to make it more machine-like. But Gödel's paper showed that these attempts were bound to fail, for he had found some arithmetical propositions that were undecidable — they were both True and False.

And "mapping" was how Gödel got his results. He made a series of pictures, as it were: isomorphic resemblances between two categories. Like a pair of hands, whatever one did was matched by the other until he got a double reflection in his results:

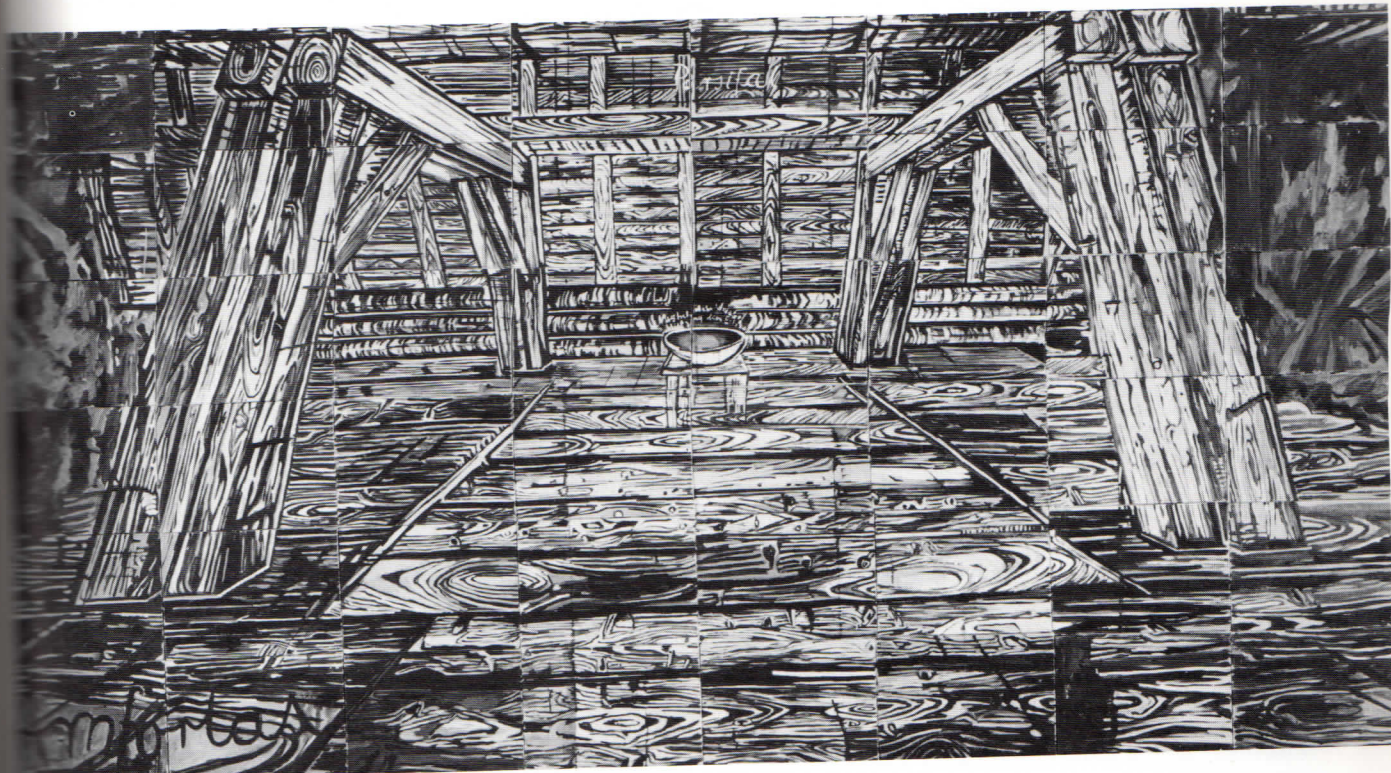


Antipodean Manifesto 1986
acrylic, oilstick, oil on 116 canvasboards
(No. 9611-9726)
254 x 190.5 cm
Courtesy Bess Cutler Gallery, New York
photography: Fenn Hinchcliffe

"There was the arithmetical proposition which implied the existence of its contrary and then there was the proposition which was isomorphic with the statement 'arithmetic is consistent' and the isomorphic picture of this was also undecidable."

Now these results are startling because the contradictions seemed to arise when an attempt was made to make a statement concerning the nature of an entire system. It was as though an attempt at "self-consciousness" by a system (without recourse to some other external system) would as a matter of course give rise to results which were self-contradicting.

In my own work, this could account for some of the anomalies and paradoxes which arise from my reference to works of art not as originals, but as isomorphic shadows mapped into the domain of mechanical reproduction.



Parsifal (Parsifal) 1987
 acrylic, gouache on 48 canvasboards
 14027-14074
 142.24 cm
 Courtesy Galerie Susan Wyss, Zurich
 Photography: Fenn Hinchclife

JS: But "mapping" has been an interest of yours since your earliest work. In the introduction to *91 Missing Works* in 1973, you describe the structure of *Still Life I* (1973), a work of 112 parts as "... the residue or diagrammatic evidence of two discrete systems (which are isomorphic to each other) and are overlaid simultaneously ..."

And then, of course, there's also your bilingual book *Three Facts* (published in 1981, in Chinese and English) in which you describe your irresistible attraction to some unusual mountain ranges in South Australia during April 1978. In it you describe your journey along "a false road to the mountain that denied its own existence" (False Mt. Hayward). This book is predominately about certain anomalies produced by the very process of mapping.

IT: Yes, this interest in "mapping" was reinforced for me when I came across the work of Arakawa and Madeleine Gins, particularly their book *The Mechanism of Meaning* 1974. At that time, too, I came across Jose Luis Borges' story of Pierre Menard, the author of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. My large work *Conversations with the Bride* 1975 which was exhibited at the Sao Paulo Bienal in Brazil was influenced by these

sources and was an attempt to map Duchamp's *Large Glass* into another visually divergent but structurally isomorphic form. I can't say that I was entirely successful in this.

JS: Were there any unexpected or paradoxical results in this experiment of "mapping"?

IT: Well, there were five panels which were damaged or stolen while on tour in South America in 1975 and although they were randomly located within the installation, they formed a remarkably coherent set in terms of their iconography. There's a more bizarre connection which revealed itself to me much later. It has to do with my use of Hans Heysen's painting *Summer* 1909. In *Conversations with the Bride* this image of *Summer* formed the basis for the majority of the 112 separate images which constituted the whole piece. But in 28 of these versions of *Summer* I added a series of 28 different woodsmen with axes and had the axes rotating through 360 in 28 steps, but leaving the landscape intact. In this series I also added an additional tree to Heysen's scene, which disappeared step by step. This ensemble was an allusion to the myth of Diana who was incarnate as a tree in a sacred grove on the shores of Lake

Nemi (Diana's Mirror) and to the King of the Wood, the subject of a strange and recurring tragedy. As J.G. Frazer relates in *The Golden Bough* (his study of magic and religion) the rule of the sanctuary was such that "a candidate for the priesthood could only succeed to office by slaying the priest, and having slain him, he retained office till he was himself slain by a stronger or craftier." In my composite scenario, I turned the setting into a mirror image of Heysen's *Summer* rather than using it the right way round.

Imagine my simultaneous dread and delight when many years later, I came upon a reproduction of another painting by Heysen which I had never seen before in a shop at Circular Quay. It was called *Morning Spell* and was painted in 1910. It's a mirror image of his previous work *Summer* except that an extra tree has been added to the foreground. The woodsman who has just felled it is sitting beside the stump smoking his pipe while his horses graze placidly nearby!

JS: Haven't you made reference to Julian Schnabel as King of the Wood?

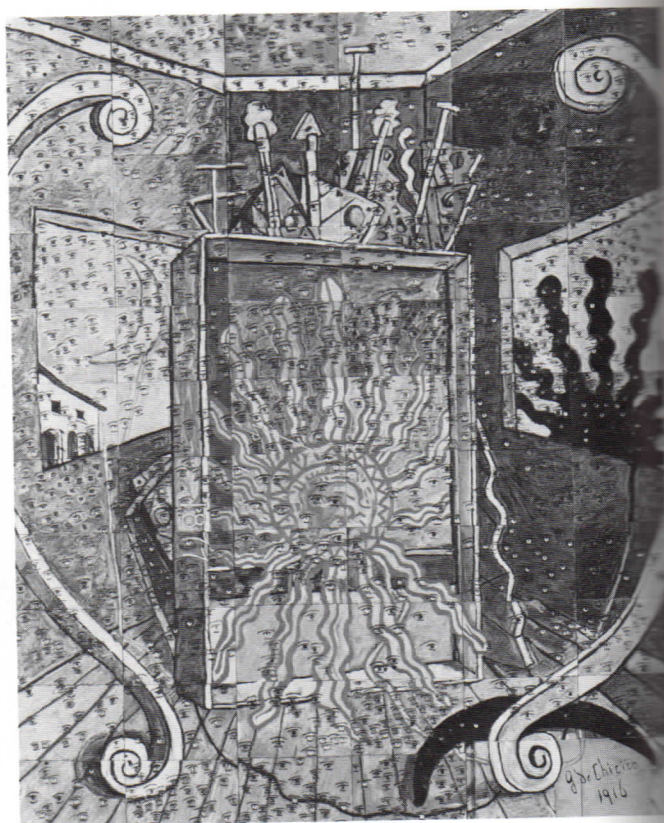
IT: In fact, Schnabel himself has used this reference as the title of one of his broken plate paintings. As a result, I was inspired to do a drawing in 1984 based on some Latvian folklore. In my drawing I depicted a huge rustic giant complete with menacing club and wearing a necklace of human skulls with a tiny man at his feet holding his own ridiculously inadequate club. My drawing was called *Julian Schnabel, Can you hear Me?*

JS: Could the first pages of your *Book of Power* also be the tentative beginnings of an enormous Map — describing the topography of the Artworld in ever-increasing detail?

IT: Like Deleuze and Guattari in their book *Rhizome*, I like to cite the images that I love (sometimes for secret or perverse reasons). The artists whose work is chosen for inclusion in my repertoire have a certain status: there's a hierarchy of choice on my part, so I don't attempt to map the artworld objectively. I'm attracted to the idea of endowing other peoples' work with a particular weighting — for example, a Sherrie Levine could become a key detail at the bottom of my Gerhard Richter, say.

Sometimes certain topographical features-to-be (on my map) even make known to me their desire to be mapped — Ross Bleckner, for example, recently in New York. Perhaps on my map he could be a beautiful shadow cast into the stillness of a dark pool.

In Australia, there's a further complication to this as well. Like the ancient explorers who were reliant on maps produced through speculation and not empirical evidence, a large part of my audience here has to take my word for it that



Iris Field 1986
acrylic, oilstick, oil on 68 canvasboards
(No. 9543-9610)
Courtesy Bess Cutler Gallery, New York
photography: Penn Hinchcliffe

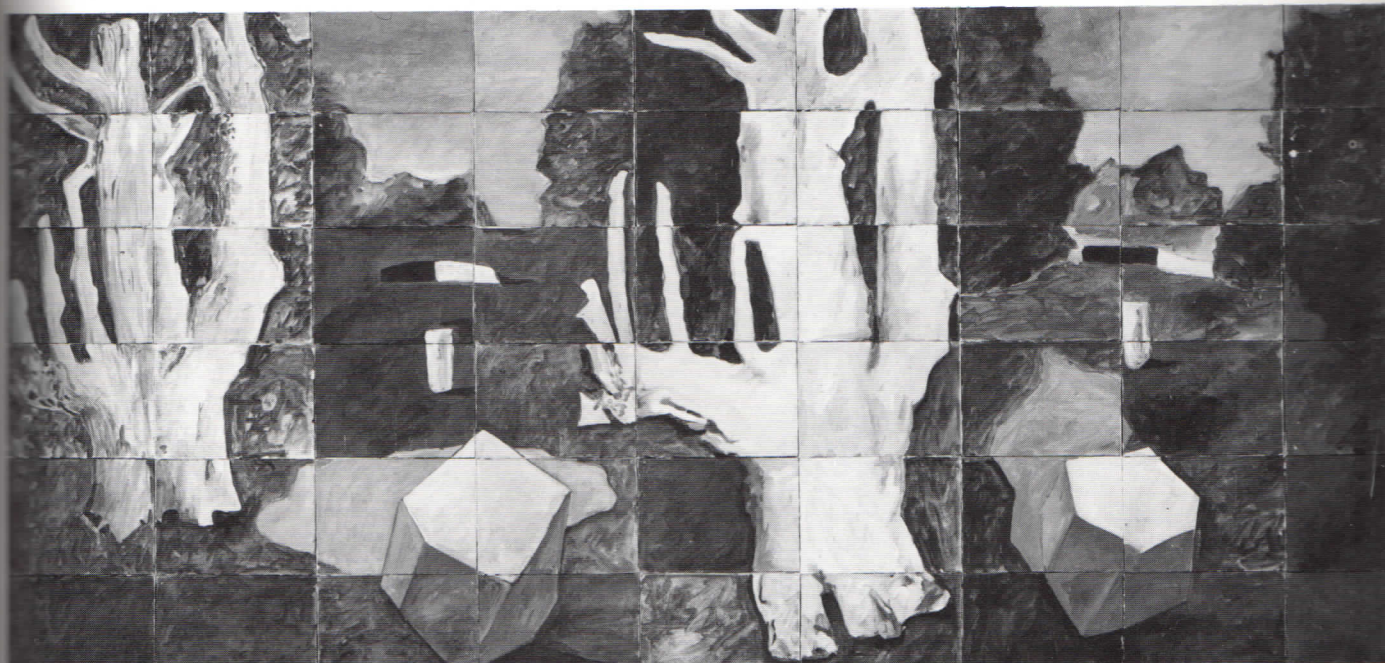
some of my paintings are done from reproductions — are second-hand — since not only are the originals unfamiliar to them but also the source of the reproduction.

JS: Do you have a strategy or a predetermined method for selecting prospective images to utilise in your work?

IT: I don't seek out specific references — I like to think of my process as one of rendezvous — it is a matter of timing. A particular painting can only come into being at a certain moment "like a speech delivered on no matter what occasion but *at such and such an hour*". In 1985, I exhibited a painting called *When False is True* in New York. It was based on an image by Giorgio de Chirico — gladiators fighting on a deserted beach — painted over fragments from several earlier paintings that I'd abandoned. On one of these earlier fragments was the image of a lizard escaping by shedding its tail, the squirming tail held firmly by a cat's paw. In my New York



Untitled (N)
acrylic, gc
No. 13907
75.2 x 160
Courtesy (C)
photograph



Untitled (Melancholy Objects) 1987
 acrylic, gouache on 54 canvasboards
 No. 13907-13960
 152 x 160 cm
 Courtesy Galerie Susan Wyss, Zurich
 photography: Fenn Hinchclife

painting this lizard ran free of the wild mêlée on the beach, its tail trapped instead by a fallen shield. The original image of the lizard came from a small detail entitled *Escapism* in Arakawa's book *The Mechanism of Meaning*. When Arakawa and Madeleine Gins saw my painting they were very impressed by this juxtaposition of motifs. They then told me that when they'd met de Chirico in New York in 1978 and had shown him *The Mechanism of Meaning*, de Chirico had been totally disinterested until he, too, came across this escaping lizard. This page struck a chord with him and triggered off an enthusiasm for the rest of this volume. After this incident, I realised that at the core of my work lies intuition and resonance.

JS: Your large painting of 220 canvasboards especially prepared for this *Perspecta* is called *The Lord's Prayer*. What is the significance of this title?

IT: In 1850, William Holman Hunt set off for the Holy Land in the hope that he would find there the types of God incarnate. But on the shores of the Dead Sea where he went to paint *The Scapegoat* he found instead "so extraordinary a

scene of beautifully arranged horrible wilderness" and a sick goat which died on him. "It is black", he wrote, "full of asphaltic scum — and in the hand slimy and smarting as a sting — no one can stand and say it is not accursed of God." My painting is based on the two versions of *The Scapegoat* executed by Hunt — the words which I've added across this cliché of the antipodean landscape are those of the Lord's Prayer, but in an Aboriginal language known as the Darling River language.

Ninnana combea, innara inguna Karkania,
 Munielie nakey, Emano pumum culpreathea,
 ona Kara canjelka yonagh patua, angella,
 Nokinda ninnana kilpoo yanice, Thickundoo
 Wantindo ninnana llla ninnana puniner,
 thullaga, Thilltil Chow norrie morrie munda,
 lullara munie. Eulpie.

Towards the end of his life in 1978, Giorgio de Chirico was asked by Madeleine Gins in New York: "What is missing from this world?" He replied, "Morality, kindness and a sense of justice."