

ALTERMODERN

Altermodern was the first in a series of four one-day events, the Prologues, preceding the Tate Triennial exhibition. With contributions from prominent writers, art historians, artists and philosophers, each Prologue comprised lectures, performances, films and discussions attempting to introduce and provoke debate around the Triennial's themes.

The first Prologue opened the debate with the proposition that the period defined by postmodernism has come to an end and what can be called 'altermodernity' has taken its place. Art made in the times we live in belongs to the global era, and is conceived and produced as a reaction against standardisation and nationalism. The art is characterised by artists' cross-border, cross-cultural negotiations; a new real and virtual mobility; the surfing of different disciplines; the use of fiction as an expression of autonomy.

SATURDAY 28 APRIL 2008
TATE BRITAIN

14:00
MILLBANK ENTRANCE
NAVIN
RAWANCHAIKUL
Navins of Bollywood

14:00 and 15.15
AUDITORIUM
STÉPHANE GOXE
and JORDI VIDAL
Servitude and Simulacra

16:00
GALLERY 62
TRIS VONNA-MICHELL
Auto Tracking:
From Cellar to Garret

16:30
AUDITORIUM
OKWUI ENWEZOR
chaired by
J.J. CHARLESWORTH
Specious Modernity:
Speculations on the End
of Postcolonial Utopia

MODERNITY AND POSTCOLONIAL AMBIVALENCE

Okwui ENWEZOR

FROM *GRAND* MODERNITY TO *PETIT* MODERNITY

THERE IS A DUAL NARRATIVE that is often taken to be characteristic of modernity: the first is the idea of its unique Europeanness, and the second is its translatability into non-European cultures. This narrative argues for the mutability of modernity, thus permitting its export and enhancing its universal character while putting a European epistemological stamp on its subsequent reception. The travelling character of this dimension of modernity as export understands modernity as emerging from Europe, say from the mid-fifteenth century, and slowly spreading outward like a million points of light into the patches of darkness that lie outside its foundational centre. Modernity in this guise was projected as an instrument of progress. The guiding concepts often associated with it – instrumental rationality, the development of capitalism – emerged in the debate between theological and scientific reason, and provided the foundation for the period of European Renaissance and Enlightenment, in which two structures of power and domination that marked the Middle Ages – feudalism and theological absolutism – collapsed. Scientific rationality and individual property that formed the basis of capital accumulation were triumphant. This collapse shifted the scales of sovereign power from the theological to the secular.

The chief principles of secularism – individual liberty, political sovereignty, democratic forms of governance, capitalism, etc. – defined its universal character and furnished its master narrative. Thus emerged the rightness of the European model, not only for its diverse societies, but also for other societies and civilisations across the rest of the world. Most importantly, the export of European modernity became not only a justification for, but a principal part of global imperialism. Among serious critics, the master narrative made the claims of universality susceptible to epistemological and historical distortion when deployed in the service of European imperialism. There is good reason for the criticism. Some historians on the right, such as Niall Ferguson, have argued that modern European imperialism, specifically that of

the British Empire, was actually a good thing, not to be regretted, as it bestowed a semblance of modernity on those privileged enough to have been recipients of the Empire's civilising zeal.¹ So on the one hand there is *grand* modernity in all its European manifestations in reason and progress, and on the other is what could be called *petit* modernity, which represents the export kind, a sort of quotation, which some would go so far as to designate a mimic modernity through its various European references.

It is this relation between *grand* and *petit* modernity that has contributed to the widespread search for facilities of modernity that represent what the Indian Marxist historian Dipesh Chakrabarty would call modernity's heterotemporal history.² Chakrabarty argues that the various scenes of modernity observed from the point of view of a heterotemporal composition of history reveals the extent to which experiences of modernity are shot through with the particularities of each given locale, therefore deregulating any idea of one dominant universalism of historical experience. Such experiences, he argues, are structured within specific epistemological conditions that take account of diverse modes of social identity and discourse. Throughout the twentieth century, all across the world, diverse cultural contexts made adapting or translating modernity into specific local variants a pathway towards modernisation, by acquiring the accoutrements of a modern society. Because of colonial experience this resulted in what could be referred to as *grand* modernity writ small in cultures – Chakrabarty's case study was India – perceived to be in historical transition from colonialism to post-colonialism. In comparing different types of modernity, and in our attempts to describe their different characteristics we are constantly confronted with the persistent tension between *grand* modernity and *petit* modernity. How can this tension be resolved? And how can the fundamental historical experiences and the particularities of locale that attend them be reconciled or even compared? It strikes me that all recent attempts to make sense of modernity and bend it toward the multiple situated *petit* modernities – again Chakrabarty would have called these 'provincialities' – are premised on finding a way to render the divergent experiences and uses of modernity, namely

the necessity to historicise and ground them in traditions of thought and practice.

FORMS OF TRANSFORMATION: MODERNITY AS META-LANGUAGE

TO HISTORICISE MODERNITY is not only to ground it within the conditions of social, political and economic life, it is also to recognise it as a meta-language with which cultural systems become codified and gain modern legitimisation.

The idea of modernity as a meta-language has been particularly acute for me over the past year. To travel in China and South Korea recently is to encounter this meta-language in action and in many guises. All around cities like Seoul, Busan, Shanghai, Beijing, Chengdu, Hangzhou, Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Taipei, etc., the clatter of machinery erecting impressive infrastructures sounded like the drill of the Morse code typing out the meta-language of modernisation. These structures – from museums, opera houses and theatres to stadiums, sporting centres, high-speed train lines, airports, stock exchanges, shopping malls and luxury apartments – bring alive to our very eyes brand new urban conditions

and cultural spheres that were not remotely imaginable a generation ago. The cities of East Asia have become the playground of global architects enjoying the patronage of both public and private developers.

In fact, over the course of the last sixteen months,³ I have had occasion to travel repeatedly to South Korea and China. On numerous trips, as part of my research work as a curator, this situation of urban transformation and social renewal was visible everywhere. Underscoring the experiences of these trips is an observation of the scale of growth of the contemporary art world: artists, galleries, collectors, exhibition

spaces, museums and art fairs all are making their way to Beijing and Shanghai. In China alone, the restless imagination and ambition shaping the landscape of contemporary art is breathtaking. Along with this shift, especially among intellectuals and artists, a reverse phenomenon of migration is occurring, namely the relocation back to an Asian context from which many of them had emigrated years before. Yet it is not only the infrastructures of the state and private speculation that are being revived, but the artistic and intellectual cultures of many cities are also being

remapped. New centres are definitely emerging, but rather than cultural and intellectual capital being concentrated in a limited number of cities, it is being dispersed in many cities as the reverse migration of ideas continues to explode and expand the cultural parameters of new China and South Korea.



OKWUI ENWEZOR [BELOW] responding to NICOLAS BOURRIAUD'S [TOP] definition of the new 'modern': 'altermodern'. The session was chaired by London-based writer, curator and artist J.J. CHARLESWORTH.

THE BAZAAR OR WORLD'S FAIR OF MODERNISATION

I HAVE WITNESSED and marvelled at the breathtaking speed and scale of the modernisation occurring in both countries. Of course, the economies of these two countries – along with their modernisation, both in depth and in breadth – pale in compar-

ison to Japan's, the immediate East Asian reference that lies equidistant to its two newly modernising neighbours. Both China and South Korea's financial strengths derive from a massive export economy. China, of course, is known as the factory of the world, a designation made possible by the fact that its factories are disproportionately the production centres of cheap global consumer goods that have transformed the 'Made in China' brand into a ubiquitous logo of global commerce. South Korea's industrial power, on the other hand, is characterised by a focus on advanced technology and heavy industry. Each of these two countries has built up its infrastructure through

the combination of *grand* and *petit* modernity, bringing together successful models from both East and West. That is, they are both undergoing modernisation based on the acquisition of instruments and institutions of Western modernity – I mean this in a superficial sense – within a relatively short span of time, yet without the wholesale discarding of local values that modify the importations.

The ongoing, large-scale process of modernisation in China and South Korea underscores part of the energy, excitement and sense of newness coursing through the various strata of each country, making them contemporary emblems of a new modernity. Travelling in Europe, on the other hand, conveys no such sense of energy, excitement or newness. Europe, on the contrary, feels old and dour in its majestic petrification. In fact, many European cities feel less like part of our time. With their miles of imperious ceremonial architecture and in the quaintness of the narrow, tourist-friendly, cobble-stoned streets, walking through these cities feels like being in a museum of modernity. The museumification of Europe is in fact the intention: the display of heritage, historical glory and dead past. Preservationists of this heritage and glory play the role of morticians of modernity.

Yet ancient cities like Beijing and Hangzhou – in a country that possesses a very old civilisation and society – in contrast feel nothing like museums. Where vestiges of the past exist, they tend to be peripheral rather than central to modern Chinese cities. These cities, if anything, could be likened to temporary exhibitions of city-making, a succession of dizzying obsolescence; a bazaar or world's fair of modernisation. The cities' skylines are full of glass boxes crowned with the pitched green roofs of the classical Chinese

pagoda. This hybridisation may appear absurd to us now, until we remember that, not too long ago, post-modern architecture in the West was busily inventing these trumped-up styles of the classical and the modern based on a similarly invented autochthonous Western past. Like latter-day biennales, Chinese cities are theatres of the grand statement, a lot of which have no other purpose than to impress and inspire awe. This has been achieved by what some have argued as indiscriminate modernisation and urbanisation schemes that have erased much of the cultural heritage of old China, sweeping out and destroying many old neighbourhoods and putting in their place unremarkable architecture.⁴ Chinese bureaucrats, urban planners and developers, like latter-day Baron Hausmanns, are simply unsympathetic to any idea that cities like Beijing need to be historicised, that is to say museumified. Modernity is a continuous project. Its principal features, they may reason, are at best contingent. By this conjecture, I want to seek out what is currently at play in the relations of discourse in which the particularities or provincialities – I take this to mean the conditions and situations that generate them – of modernity are situated through the practice, production, dissemination and reception of contemporary art,

far from any claims to a *grand* heritage or an arriviste, mimic *petit* translation.

THE ALTERMODERN AND HABITATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY ART

IF THE CURRENT SPATE of modernisation in China effectively lays waste to heritage and historical glory and instead emphasises contingency, might it not be reasonable to argue for the non-universal nature



IN HIS LECTURE AND SUBSEQUENT ESSAY, ENWEZOR drew on works such as THOMAS HIRSCHORN's *Bataille Monument* 2002 [TOP] and [BELOW] GUY TILLIM's *Congo Series* (this work showing supporters of Jean-Pierre Bemba on their way to a rally in Kinshasa, July 2006).