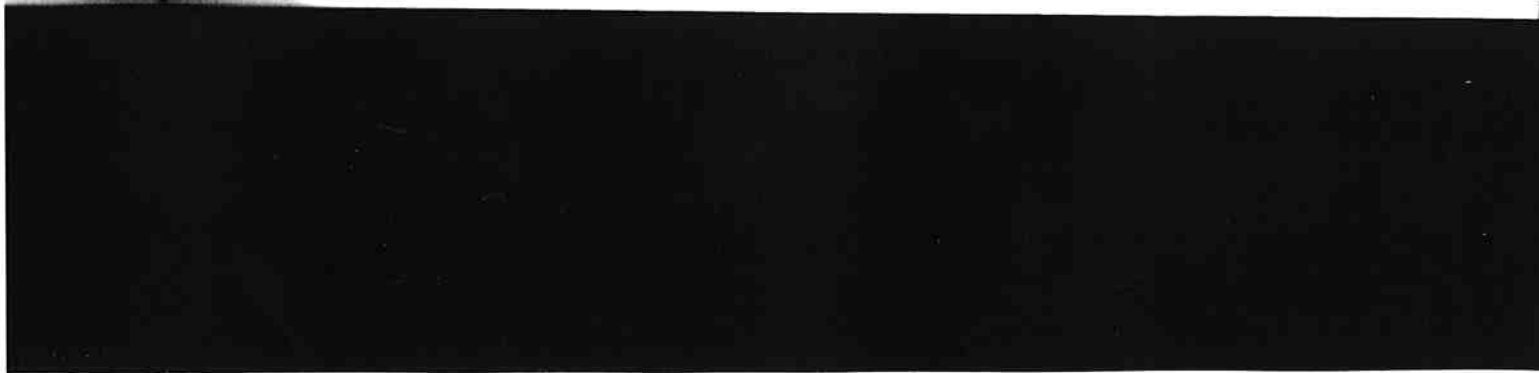


ALTERMODERN
TATE TRIENNIAL

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ALTERMODERN Nicolas BOURRIAUD

A COLLECTIVE EXHIBITION, when based around a theoretical hypothesis, needs to establish a balance between the artworks and the narrative that acts as a form (of subtitling). It needs to develop a space-time continuum where the curator's voice off, the statements of the artists, and the dialogues woven between the artefacts can co-exist. This hybrid arrangement is best compared with the production of a film, and cinematographic metaphors provide the clearest introduction to an event like *Altermodern*. According to Wim Wenders, analysing the relationship between image and narrative in the cinema, 'the narrative resembles a vampire attempting to drain the image of its blood'.¹ His observation could belong in any manual of the curator's ethics. It seems to me that that the fundamental question that exhibitions ought to be repeatedly asking concerns the interpretation of forms: what is the message they convey today? What is the narrative that drives them? We have an ethical duty not to let signs and images vanish into the abyss of indifference or commercial oblivion, to find words to animate them as something other than products destined for financial speculation or mere amusement. The very act of picking out certain images and distinguishing them from the rest of the production by exposing them is also an ethical responsibility. Keeping the ball in the air and the game alive: that is the function of the critic or the curator. Wenders pursues his reasoning by opposing text and form: 'Images are highly sensitive, rather like a snail, which retreats into its shell when you touch its horns. They don't want to work like a horse, carrying or fetching things – messages, meanings, arguments or morals. Yet that is precisely what a story demands.'² A fair riposte to the German director would be that this contradiction has its limits, since images are neither so naive nor so devoid of meaning, and that to believe in their basic 'purity' is an equally dangerous delusion. When a camera registers them, doubtless they are 'pure' in the sense he intends, but as soon as they are projected and shared they assume a host of meanings, and the battle begins anew. Every exhibition is the record of such a battle.



A MAP OF AN EAST INDIAN ARCHIPELAGO FORMATION, made by Nicholas Comberford and published in London in 1665. Collection of the National Maritime Museum, London.

'THE FIGURE IN THE CARPET' (THE TALE OF AN EXHIBITION)

USUALLY AN EXHIBITION BEGINS WITH A MENTAL IMAGE with which we need to re-connect, and whose meanings constitute a basis for discussion with the artists. The research that has preceded the Triennial 2009, however, had its origins in two elements: the idea of the archipelago, and the writings of a German émigré to the UK, Winfried Georg Sebald. The archipelago (and its kindred forms, the constellation and the cluster) functions here as a model representing the multiplicity of

global cultures. An archipelago is an example of the relationship between the one and the many. It is an abstract entity; its unity proceeds from a decision without which nothing would be signified save a scattering of islands united by no common name. Our civilisation, which bears the imprints of a multicultural explosion and the proliferation of cultural strata, resembles a structureless constellation, awaiting transformation into an archipelago. We should add that the modernism of the twentieth century, and today's mass cultural movements, amount to agglomerations that we could describe as 'continental'.

As for Sebald's writings - wanderings between 'signs', punctuated by black and white photographs - they appear to me as emblematic of a mutation in our perception of space and time, in which history and geography operate a cross-fertilisation, tracing out paths and weaving networks: a cultural evolution at the very heart of this exhibition. The two concepts - the archipelago and Sebald's excursions - do not intertwine arbitrarily: they represent the paths I followed led by my initial intuition: that of the death of postmodernism as the starting point for reading the present.

The term 'altermodern', which serves both as the title of the present exhibition and to delimit the void beyond the postmodern, has its roots in the idea of 'otherness' (Latin alter = other, with the added English connotation of 'different') and suggests a multitude of possibilities, of alternatives to a single route. In the geopolitical world, 'alterglobalisation' defines the plurality of local oppositions to the economic standardisation imposed by globalisation, i.e. the struggle for diversity. Here we are back with the image of the archipelago: instead of aiming at a kind of summation, altermodernism sees itself as a constellation of ideas linked by the emerging and ultimately irresistible will to create a form of modernism for the twenty-first century. Why is this imperative necessity? The historical role of modernism, in the sense of a phenomenon arising within the domain of art, resides in its ability to jolt us out of tradition; it embodies a cultural exodus, an escape from the confines of nationalism and identity-tagging, but also from the mainstream whose tendency is to reify thought and practice. Under threat from fundamentalism and consumer-driven uniformisation, menaced by massification and the enforced re-abandonment of individual identity, art today needs to reinvent itself, and on a planetary scale. And this new modernism, for the first time, will have resulted from global dialogue. Postmodernism, thanks to the post-colonial criticism of Western pretensions to determine the world's direction and the speed of its development, has allowed the historical counters to be reset to zero; today, temporalities intersect and weave a complex network stripped of a centre. Numerous contemporary artistic practices indicate, however, that we are on the verge of a leap, out of the postmodern period and the (essentialist) multicultural model from which it is indivisible, a leap that would give rise to a synthesis between modernism and post-colonialism.

tion to invent a kind of formal anthropology comes from one of Charles Darwin's voyages on the *Beagle*. Walead Beshty passes exposed film stock through airport X-ray scanners, or captures the cracks occurring in Perspex sculptures as they travel to exhibitions in Fedex boxes. Subodh Gupta exports commonplace utensils from India; reassembled as digitised images, they take on a significance that transcends cultural divides. Pascale Marthine Tayou employs colonised forms of African art to suggest the parameters of a truly globalised culture. The tendency of these works is to emphasise the fact that, in this era of the altermodern, displacement has become a method of depiction, and that artistic styles and formats must henceforth be regarded from the viewpoint of diaspora, migration and exodus.

These differing modes of displacement indicate, more generally, a *fragmentation* of the work of art. No longer can a work be reduced to the presence of an object in the here and now; rather, it consists of a significant network whose interrelationships the artist elaborates, and whose progression in time and space he or she controls: a circuit, in fact. Seth Price, in an essay defining the theoretical issues of his work, refers to the 'collective authorship' and 'complete decentralisation' that define our new cultural framework, to arrive at the conclusion that 'distribution is a circuit of reading', and that the artist's task 'becomes one of packaging,

W. G. SEBALD
THE RINGS OF SATURN



COVER OF THE 2002 edition of W.G. SEBALD's *The Rings of Saturn*, a book that provided one of the important starting points for the conception of the exhibition.

ing, producing, reframing and distributing'.³ Put another way, we could say that every artist manifests himself on their individual wavelength, especially by that progressive repetition of formal elements we used to call *style*. And this personal wavelength conveys in its emanations signs that are both heterogeneous (belonging to differing registers or cultural traditions) and heterochronic (borrowed from differed periods). Thus with *Feature*, Shezad Dawood has made a film that juxtaposes elements lifted from the western and the 'gore movie' in a narrative framework where Samuel Beckett has a fresh encounter with Buster Keaton. In an equally fantastical vein, Marcus Coates applies the archaic methods of shamanism to the contemporary world, seeking out 'animal spirits' to cure social problems in Israel or the Galapagos Islands. What is cutting-edge in these frolics is not the summoning-up of the past to express the present; it is the visual language with which this business is transacted – that of travelling and nomadism. There are no longer cultural roots to sustain forms, no exact cultural base to serve as a benchmark for variations, no nucleus, no boundaries for artistic language. Today's artist, in order to arrive at precise points, takes as their starting-point global culture and no longer the reverse. The line is more important than the points along its length.

Strictly speaking, then, the exhibition assembles works whose compositional principle relies on a chain of elements: the work tends to become a dynamic structure that generates forms before, during and after its production.⁴ These forms deliver narratives, the narratives of their very own production, but also their distribution