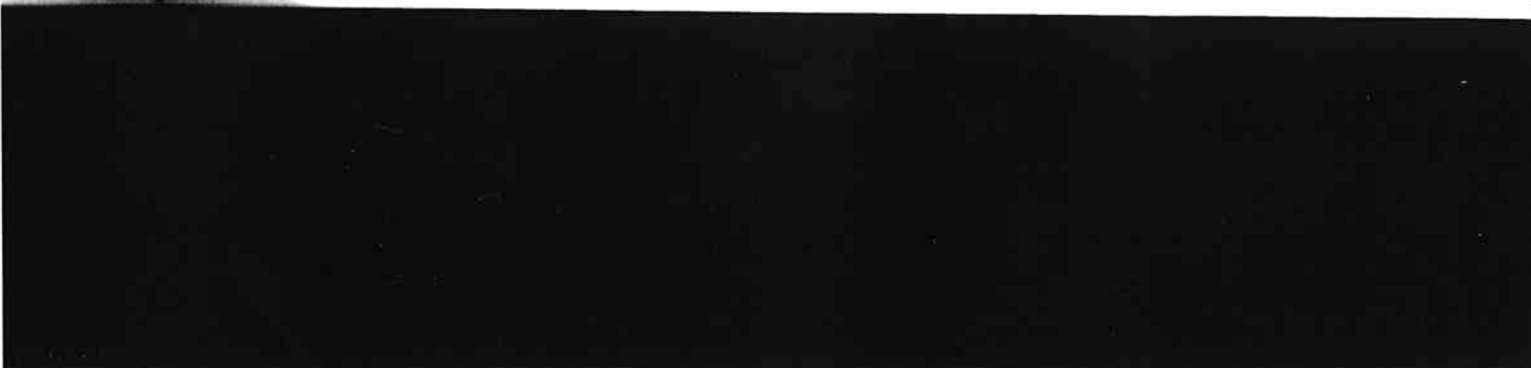
ALTERMODERN

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 reconnect, 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, producing, reframing and distributing'.[3] Put another way, we could say that every artist manifests themself 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.

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.

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

Let us then call this synthesis 'altermodernism'. It cannot be placed *after* the modernist phenomenon any more than after this aftermath: it does not 'overtake' anything, any more than it 'harks back' to a previous period. There is no question of a return to the principles or the style of twentieth-century modernism, nowadays the object of a revival far from our preoccupations. If today we can envisage a form of modernism, this is only possible starting from the issues of the present, and assuredly not by an obsessive return to the past, whatever its attributes.

Altermodernism can be defined as that moment when it became possible for us to produce something that made sense starting from an assumed heterochrony, that is, from a vision of human history as constituted of multiple temporalities, disdaining the nostalgia for the avant-garde and indeed for any era – a positive vision of chaos and complexity. It is neither a petrified kind of time advancing in loops (postmodernism) nor a linear vision of history (modernism), but a positive experience of disorientation through an art-form exploring all dimensions of the present, tracing lines in all directions of time and space. The artist turns cultural nomad: what remains of the Baudelairean model of modernism is no doubt this *flânerie*, transformed into a technique for generating creativeness and deriving knowledge.

Thus the exhibition brings together three sorts of nomadism: in space, in time and among the 'signs'. Of course, these notions are not mutually exclusive, and the same artist can simultaneously explore geographical, historical and socio-cultural realities. We need to be clear that nomadism, as a way of learning about the world, here amounts to much more than a simplistic generalisation: the term enshrines specific forms, processes of visualisation peculiar to our own epoch. In a word, trajectories have become forms: contemporary art gives the impression of being uplifted by an immense wave of displacements, voyages, translations, migrations of objects and beings, to the point that we could state that the works presented in *Altermodern* unravel themselves along receding lines of perspective, the course they follow eclipsing the static forms through which they initially manifest themselves.

Thus Simon Starling relocates a piece of furniture designed by Francis Bacon from one continent to another by radio waves. Katie Paterson transmits moments of silence from the Earth to the Moon and back, and we are placed in telephone communication with the melting of a glacier. Tris Vonna-Michell, whose exhibit comprises the narrative of a planetary drift, conceives of his exhibitions as linked series. Darren Almond teleports the bus shelters of Auschwitz into a gallery, photographs Chinese landscapes, or sets off to film the Great Wheel of Chernobyl frozen into immobility at the moment of the nuclear disaster. Franz Ackermann invents the age of painting with GPS, Joachim Koester follows the route of the Hashishins in Iran after retracing Kant's daily walks in Könisberg or – as related in *Dracula* – Jonathan Harker's trek in the Carpathians. Rachel Harrison's inspira-

and the mental journey that encompasses them. Loris Gréaud, for instance, produces electroencephalograms of his own brain as he think about an exhibition; this is transformed into a computer programme, then into light emissions and finally into electrical impulses releasing vibrations in the exhibition hall – before, as likely as not, being used somewhere else. Lindsay Seers ceaselessly re-edits the documentary of her life, from her childhood in Mauritius to life in London, in installations that explore the origins of the photographic image.

As they follow the receding perspectives of history and geography, works of art trace lines in a globalised space that now extends to time: history, the last continent to be explored, can be traversed like a territory. In Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrator journeys on foot across the landscapes of England's East Coast. He travels through various layers of time, mingling the past, the imaginary and the future. He ploughs through the works of Sir Thomas Browne in search of the burial-place of the philosopher's skull, comments on Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp*, meets Joseph Conrad en route to the Congo, recalls a film about herring-fishing, muses on ethnic cleansing in the Balkans or great naval battles and their pictorial representation, before discussing Chateaubriand and introducing us to the history of silkworm culture. The narratives are embedded in images or encounters, and Sebald constructs a kaleidoscope of fragments that reflect the footsteps of history. Later, Tris Vonna-Mitchell wrote a piece meant for a website dedicated to Sebald: 'That was in 2003, and through this serendipitous moment, the work started off as a text or prose piece, and just unfolded into this labyrinth of associations and narratives. Three years after this, I went back through my computer files and I saw those documents and photographs, these tunnels and web searches ... and the project still goes on.'[5]

The journey format, as it appears so frequently in the works of today's artists, goes hand in hand with the generalisation of hypertext as a thought process: one sign directs us to a second, then a third, creating a chain of mutually interconnected forms, mimicking mouse-clicks on a computer screen. With Nathaniel Mellors, Olivia Plender, Ruth Ewan or Spartacus Chetwynd, references to the past are coordinated according to a system of cognitive logic. To understand the present means carrying out a kind of rough-and-ready archaeological investigation of world culture, which proceeds just as well through *re-enactments* as through the presentation of artefacts – or again, through the technique of mixing. For example, Ewan installs a giant accordion from an Italian museum; it plays old revolutionary songs to accompany the reproduction of archival documents. Chetwynd, in the same work, can scramble Milton, Marx and Sesame Street; one of the constant features of her oeuvre is a playful use of forms not considered as relics of the past but as living tools that we need to grasp in order to create new narratives. In a similar way, Peter Coffin extracts the narrative potential of existing works of art by employing an audiovisual setup that parasitically appropriates their meaning and puts them to work as fictional characters.

These journeys in time result in a modification of the way in which signs are indexed with their period. In the case of Charles Avery, the artist produces not only signs, but also the context that gives them coherence, through the narrative of an imaginary world: he is the explorer of a universe inside which the idea of contemporaneity is abolished in favour of a voluntary confusion of eras and genres. Olivia Plender's comic-format book on the life of a fictitious artistic genius in 1960s London and her explorations of the archives of utopian communities or magic circles utilise forms not really belonging to any recognisable *present.* And Matthew Darbyshire links different landmarks from periods chronologically far apart, connecting for instance architecture of Stalin's era, fragments of Tate Britain and the facelifting of British public buildings, his aim being a transhistoric meditation on contemporary space. As for David Noonan's images, they seem to originate from a parallel world, once again defying precise localisation. These works peregrinate through time and space, released from the fetishistic obsession with contemporaneity. Most probably this is why they are better at describing our present, both heterochronic and heterotopic.

CREDIT CRUNCH: POSTMODERN COMES OUT OF MOURNING

THE TERMS 'MODERN', 'POSTMODERN' OR 'ALTERMODERN' do not define styles (save as ways of thinking), but here represent tools allowing us to attribute time-scales to cultural eras. In order to understand why the collapse of the globalised financial system in Autumn 2008 appears to mark a definite turning-point in history, it is necessary to re-examine modernism from the point of view of world energy consumption.

OTTO MÜHL and HERMANN NITSCH of the Viennese Actionists performing *Ten Rounds for Cassius Clay* at the *Destruction in Art Symposium*, 13 September 1966. Photographs by Tom Picton in Tate Archive.

In an enlightening text published in 2004, Peter Sloterdijk defined the modern way of living as a 'fast-burn culture', a specific condition of civilisation in the era of a 'superabundance of energy'. 'Today', he continues, 'our lifestyle still depends upon being able to squander stocks of fossil fuels. In other words, we have gambled on a sort of explosion. We are all fanatical believers in this explosion, worshippers of this rapid liberation of a massive quantity of energy. I get the impression that the focal point of today's adventure films – "action movies" – is that other primitive symbol of modern civilisation: the explosion of a car or a plane. Or rather, of a huge fuel tank that is the archetype of the religious movement of our times.'[6] This relationship between modern life and the explosion appears both literally and metaphorically throughout the twentieth century, from the Futurist eulogising of war to the 'sudden liberations of great quantities of energy' in the performances of the Gutai group or the Viennese

Actionists, not to mention the fragmented forms of Dadaism, the self-destructive machines of Jean Tinguely or the 'blown-up' imagery of pop art.

It is significant that the appearance of the term 'postmodern' coincided exactly with the 1973 oil crisis, the event that caused the entire world, for the first time, to realise that reserves of fossil fuels were limited: the end of Sloterdijk's 'superabundance'. In other words, our future was all of a sudden mortgaged. It is also no accident that the term 'postmodern' became current in the second half of the 1970s, popularised first by the architect Charles Jencks and then by the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. Jencks's ideas constituted a criticism of modernism in architecture, notably the functionalism of the Bauhaus or Le Corbusier, whilst Lyotard sought to lay down a new paradigm (essentially epistemological) that would extend the life of modernism. Postmodernism thus developed in the wake of the energy crisis and the ending of the boom that the French call the 'thirty glorious years' (1945–75), just as a fit of depression succeeds a traumatic loss: that of the ideologies of care-free superabundance and progress, technical, political or cultural. The oil crisis of 1973 could well represent the 'primitive scene' of postmodernism in the same way as, according to Sloterdijk, oil gushing from a well symbolises twentieth-century modernism. The latter was the fateful moment when the economy was founded on an unlimited confidence in the availability of energy, and culture on an infinite projection into the future. These were the two principles swept away by the oil crisis, and whose disappearance gave birth to what we call the postmodern.

Since the crisis of 1973, the economy has never again been based on the exploitation of raw materials. Capitalism has since disconnected from natural resources, reorienting itself towards technological innovation – the choice of Japan – or 'financiarisation', the route adopted at the time by the United States. And now, when the economy is cutting its ties with concrete geography, culture for its part is divorcing from history; two parallel processes tending towards the abstract.

In the view of Bernard Stiegler, here resuming the essential thread of Jean-François Lyotard's theories on the 'libidinal economy', capitalism functions through the channelling of desires; yet, he adds, 'desire underwent a downward tendency', forcing the system to 'exploit instinctive impulses', all real passions having disappeared among alienated individuals who had lost control of their

[TOP] GUSTAV METZGER, *Acid Action Painting*, Nylon, hydrochloric acid, metal, South Bank Demonstration, 3 July 1961. [BOTTOM] PRO-DIAZ produing *Painting with Explosion* at the *Destruction in Art Symposium*, 1966, organised by Gustav Metzger. Photographs by Tom Picton in Tate Archive.