Supplanting the Postmodern

An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21st Century

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Altermodernism

The essence of Nicolas Bourriaud's vision of altermodernism involves, at its root, a fusion of the aesthetic of postmodernism with the culture of globalization. The model of multiculturalism infused into the postmodern by the postcolonial thought of the 1990s has, for Bourriaud, been supplanted by a new mode of 'viatorization', characterized by the traversing and criss-crossing of geographical and cultural space. The altermodern is conceived as a new form of modernity, the defining feature of which is a tendency towards creolization, as the art of the globalized age takes the form of a journey between cultures and inevitably assumes a polyglot sensibility. This was the key contention of Bourriaud's prestigious exhibition 'Altermodern', which he curated for the Tate triennial show in 2009. The manifesto below served as a kind of 'mission statement' for the exhibition, and the essay describing the altermodern is taken from the catalogue accompanying the show.

Bourriaud is certainly right that the ascent of globalization has had a profound impact on the formation of art, thought, and culture in the years since Jameson and Lyotard set out to plot the co-ordinates of the postmodern. Moreover, his verdict that, in their current theoretical states, neither postmodernism nor postcolonialism is well equipped to describe or evaluate the changes wrought by globalization is a provocative yet judicious assessment. Bourriaud is by no means the first to point out that postmodernism, formed as a critical response to a modernism whose canon was dominated by white Europeans and Americans, developed in its stead a canon no less dominated by white Europeans and Americans. Altermodernism, however, offers an alternative that eschews what Bourriaud regards as the straightforward essentialism that underpins the simplistic model of cultural relativism (such as that often labelled in the Anglophone world as the much-maligned 'political correctness') that inflected the

postmodernism of the 1990s.

Bourriaud's altermodernism may well strike some critics of globalization as misguided: reading Jeffrey T. Nealon's writings on post-postmodernism in Part One will yield a rather less optimistic vision of the role of globalization in supplanting the postmodern. Furthermore, if 'globalization' is regarded as synonymous with 'Americanization', and viewed as the foisting of a homogenizing culture onto the rest of the world as a means of opening up new markets for global capitalism to exploit, then Bourriaud's vision of 'viatorization' is likely to appear as so much wishful thinking, and moreover an option that is wholly unavailable to most of the peoples exploited by globalization. On the other hand, though, there is nevertheless a politics of resistance to altermodernism, whereby the diversity of the world's cultures is highlighted and championed as a means of combating the seemingly unstoppable march of globalization.

In the context of a debate about the aftermath of postmodernism, though, what is most striking about Bourriaud's altermodernism is the extent to which its conceptual vocabulary echoes, or even replicates, that of the postmodernism it claims to supplant. Bourriaud's image of the artist as 'nomad' recalls instantly the thought of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (the latter an influence on Bourriaud's celebrated work Relational Aesthetics*); his description of contemporary culture as an 'archipelago' borrows the term Lyotard uses to describe the multiplicity of language games; his use of the term 'archive', to which a section of Bourriaud's exhibition was dedicated, is indebted to Derrida's usage of this term; and the metaphor of 'border crossings' deployed throughout the exhibition recycles one of the more hackneyed clichés of pseudo-postmodern scholarship. Moreover, it is unclear how Bourriaud's notion of 'creolization' differs from the key concept of 'hybridization' that is already on offer in well-established theories of postcolonialism and postmodernism. Indeed, Bourriaud's characterizing the contemporary artist as an 'exile' – another of the exhibition's key terms – harks back even further, recalling the vocabulary of early twentieth-century modernism.*

Yet the central contention of altermodernism – that the world of contemporary culture entails a different experience of space and time from that envisaged by postmodernism – is hard to refute, and indeed is shared by some of the other formulations in this book, such as

Robert Samuels's automodernism. Indeed, Bourriaud sometimes uses cyberspace as a metaphor for contemporary culture, which hints at a stronger connection between these two positions. Furthermore, Gilles Lipovetsky's emphasis on the heightened sense of individualism engendered by consumerist culture might equally lend support to Bourriaud's description of the contemporary subject as a 'homo viator'.

The extracts are by Nicolas Bourriaud, reproduced by permission of Tate Trustees, © Tate 2009. Respectively, *Altermodern Manifesto*, available from the Tate website (http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/altermodern/explain-altermodern/altermodern-explainedmanifesto), and 'Altermodern', in *Altermodern*, ed. Nicolas Bourriaud (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), pp. 11–24.

Altermodern Manifesto: Postmodernism is Dead

Nicolas Bourriaud

A new modernity is emerging, reconfigured to an age of globalization – understood in its economic, political and cultural aspects: an altermodern culture.

Increased communication, travel and migration are affecting the way we live.

Our daily lives consist of journeys in a chaotic and teeming universe.

Multiculturalism and identity is being overtaken by creolization: Artists are now starting from a globalized state of culture.

This **new universalism** is based on translations, subtitling and generalized dubbing.

Today's art explores the bonds that text and image, time and space, weave between themselves.

Artists are responding to a new globalized perception. They traverse a cultural landscape saturated with signs and create new pathways between multiple formats of expression and communication.

The Tate Triennial 2009 at Tate Britain presents a collective discussion around this premise that postmodernism is coming to an end, and we are experiencing the emergence of a global altermodernity.

Travel, cultural exchanges and examination of history are not merely fashionable themes, but markers of a profound evolution in our vision of the world and our way of inhabiting it.

More generally, our globalized perception calls for new types of representation: our daily lives are played out against a more enormous backdrop than ever before, and depend now on trans-national entities, short or long-distance journeys in a chaotic and teeming universe.

Many signs suggest that the historical period defined by postmodernism is coming to an end: multiculturalism and the discourse of identity is being overtaken by a planetary movement of creolization;

cultural relativism and deconstruction, substituted for modernist universalism, give us no weapons against the twofold threat of uniformity and mass culture and traditionalist, far-right, withdrawal.

The times seem propitious for the recomposition of a modernity in the present, reconfigured according to the specific context within which we live – crucially in the age of globalization – understood in its economic, political and cultural aspects: an altermodernity.

If twentieth-century modernism was above all a western cultural phenomenon, altermodernity arises out of planetary negotiations, discussions between agents from different cultures. Stripped of a centre, it can only be polyglot. Altermodernity is characterized by translation, unlike the modernism of the twentieth century which spoke the abstract language of the colonial west, and postmodernism, which encloses artistic phenomena in origins and identities.

We are entering the era of universal subtitling, of generalized dubbing. Today's art explores the bonds that text and image weave between themselves. Artists traverse a cultural landscape saturated with signs, creating new pathways between multiple formats of expression and communication.

The artist becomes 'homo viator', the prototype of the contemporary traveller whose passage through signs and formats refers to a contemporary experience of mobility, travel and transpassing. This evolution can be seen in the way works are made: a new type of form is appearing, the journey-form, made of lines drawn both in space and time, materializing trajectories rather than destinations. The form of the work expresses a course, a wandering, rather than a fixed space-time.

Altermodern art is thus read as a hypertext; artists translate and transcode information from one format to another, and wander in geography as well as in history. This gives rise to practices which might be referred to as 'time-specific', in response to the 'site-specific' work of the 1960s. Flight-lines, translation programmes and chains of heterogeneous elements articulate each other. Our universe becomes a territory all dimensions of which may be travelled both in time and space.

The Tate Triennial 2009 presents itself as a collective discussion around this hypothesis of the end of postmodernism, and the emergence of a global altermodernity.

Nicolas Bourriaud

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 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.

'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 civilization, 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-fertilization, 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 'other-ness' (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, 'alterglobalization' defines the plurality of local oppositions to the

economic standardization imposed by globalization, 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 uniformization, 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.

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 generalization: the term enshrines specific forms, processes of visualization 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 inspiration 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 digitized images, they take on a significance that transcends cultural divides. Pascale Marthine Tayou employs colonized forms of African art to suggest the parameters of a truly globalized culture. The tendency of these works is to emphasize 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 decentralization' 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.

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 and the mental journey that encompasses them. Loris Gréaud, for instance, produces electroencephalograms of his own brain as he thinks 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 globalized 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 generalization 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 utilize 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 localization. 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 globalized 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.

In an enlightening text published in 2004, Peter Sloterdijk defined the modern way of living as a ‘fast-burn culture’, a specific condition of civilization 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 civilization: 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 eulogizing 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 realize 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, popularized 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 carefree 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 symbolizes 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 'financiarization', 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 own lives.[7] After exhausting the consumer's desires, capitalism was thereafter reduced to exploiting his reflexes and gut reactions; sustainable sources of energy had dried up, just as with the oil crisis. In art, this assault upon our instincts was translated as a rapid rotation of works and the ascendancy of the sensational and the spectacular: those aimed simply at releasing a vast quantity of (non-renewable) energy at first sight. Gustav Metzger, master of the energy-burst, self-destruction and ecological disaster, has found his true place in this tableau of our times; a believer in the continuous development of culture, his work anticipates the evolution of capitalism and its culture, assembling the elements of a form of modernism capable of outliving the cult of the explosion.

I wrote earlier that postmodern culture had its roots in the idea of the end of history; more precisely, it posits the end of history considered as a linear narrative. In this respect, Lyotard defines the postmodern as the end of 'grand narratives', future scenarios that history is fated to fulfil,

like a film-maker following a pre-defined script. The disappearance of these 'metanarratives' (Marxism, in particular) ushers in a culture of improvisation and time-loops: if there is no more script, we have henceforth to react to a 'context', or deal in short-term measures. Forms are no longer indexed to a narrative defining them as belonging to precise historical moments, but rather embedded in the 'text' of culture, with no reference save to themselves. Palimpsests, pastiches, textuality … Signs have lost all contact with human history and are self-generating in an infinite Brownian motion, a labyrinth of signs.

It seems difficult, in retrospect, to define the postmodern otherwise than as a period of pause and levelling, brief as befits a historical moment entirely determined by the one before – a marshy delta on the river of time. We can now identify those last twenty-five years of the 1900s as an interminable 'afterwards'; after the myth of progress, after the revolutionary utopia, after the retreat of colonialism, after the battles for political, social and sexual emancipation. As a theory, postmodernism has developed in reaction to a teleological view of the world, a vision we find both in the historicism of a critic like Clement Greenberg – for whom the history of art presented itself like a train en route toward the realization of an idea – and in the various politico-aesthetic utopias that typified the century of the avant-garde. This, however, would be to reduce modernism to its most immediately 'progressist' aspect: its identification with ambitions for political change and the most radical artistic movements, i.e. those anxious to excise everything superfluous and return to the root of things. In fact, in the cases of Marcel Duchamp, Robert Filliou, On Kawara or Gordon Matta-Clark, we would have considerable difficulty in discerning the slightest tendency in this direction; their vision of history was not 'progressist', but apprehended time in all its complex and multiple dimensions. With each of these four artists, any movement towards the past – symbolism with Duchamp, Oriental philosophy with Filliou and Kawara, archaeology with Matta-Clark – was superimposed upon another towards the future, making them precursors of our heterochronic time. As for Robert Smithson, whose visual meditations on the notion of entropy or the concept of 'ruin in reverse' still remain so influential among the new generation of artists, he appears to be the first truly postmodern artist in that he anticipates and directly confronts the question of modernity *in relation to energy sources*: his entire

corpus forms the narrative of a classic ‘oil crisis’.

Postmodernism is the philosophy of mourning, a long melancholic episode in our cultural life. History having lost its direction and ability to be read, nothing remained but to come face to face with an immobilized space-time in which, like reminiscences, arose mutilated fragments of the past: the ‘museum’s ruins’, as Douglas Crimp labelled postmodernism in 1980.[8] This purely depressive attitude profoundly impregnated the first postmodern period, characterized as it was by the borrowing of identifiable forms of art history and the theme of the ‘simulacrum’, an image that substitutes itself for reality within reality itself. Grieving for a lost reality … Crimp defined the image as ‘an object of desire, the desire for the signification that is known to be absent’.[9] Frederic Jameson, in his seminal essay on postmodernism, sees its dominant trait as schizophrenia, or, to be more exact, one of the most destructive effects of it – the loss of the mind’s ability to perceive time as something ordered, an incapacity to organize experience as a collection of coherent and meaningful sequences, leading to the abandonment of the attempt in favour of a fascination with a kaleidoscopic present.[10] For Slavoj Žižek, depression proves to be ‘a perfectly postmodern posture’, for it ‘allows us to survive in a globalized society while keeping faith with our lost “roots”’.[11] Finally, according to Freud, one of the symptoms of depression associated with mourning is a process that induces the patient to adopt certain characteristics of the deceased, to the point of identifying himself/herself partially or totally with that person. This kind of depression and identity substitution, endemic to postmodernism, can be recognized in the variety of neo-avant-garde devices that have surfaced since the latter half of the 1990s: formal quotes from the vocabulary of geometrical abstraction, the adoption of politically radical concepts in critical texts, etc. The result has been to denude modernism of its meaning by transforming it into a form of nostalgic obsession.

Unable any longer to determine the direction of history, we have had to pronounce its end. The eternal reversions to modernist forms in the 1980s have been succeeded by the relativization of history itself through the medium of post-colonial thinking. This second postmodern period was less melancholy – but multiculturalist. It had its beginnings in the end of the Cold War. 1989 was the year not only of the collapse of the Berlin Wall but also of the exhibition that, for all the controversy

it provoked, marked the symbolic inauguration of planetary art. Organized by Jean-Hubert Martin at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, it was entitled *Magicians of the Earth*. At this moment, history seemed to break free from a profound Ice Age imposed by the silent confrontation of the two political blocs. The grand modernist narrative was succeeded by that of globalization, which does not designate a cultural period properly speaking, but a geopolitical standardization and the synchronization of the historical clock. With the door thrown open to artistic traditions and cultures other than those foisted on the world by the West, post-colonial postmodernism followed along the trail blazed by the world economy, enabling a re-evaluation from the ground up of our visions of time and space: a 'horizontalization' of the planet on which we need to build today.

What better characterizes this period than the mythification of origins? The meaning of a work of art, for this second-stage postmodernism, depends essentially on the social background to its production. 'Where do you come from?' appears to be its most pressing question, and essentialism its critical paradigm. Identification with genre, ethnicity, a sexual orientation or a nation sets in motion a powerful machinery: multiculturalism, now a critical methodology, has virtually become a system of allotting meanings and assigning individuals their position in the hierarchy of social demands, reducing their whole being to their identity and stripping all their significance back to their origins. Thus postmodernism has moved on from the depression of the Cold War to a neurotic preoccupation with origins typical of the era of globalization. It is this thought-model that today finds itself in crisis, this multiculturalist version of cultural diversity that must be called into question, not in favour of a 'universalism' of principles or a new modernist esperanto, but within the framework of a new modern movement based on heterochrony, a common interpretation, and freedom to explore.

Modernism and heterochrony: From 'post' to 'alter'

Certain artists were hostile to the linear timeline of modernism based on a projection into the future. Such was the case with Marcel Duchamp, whose repertoire includes a vast catalogue of traditional

craftwork, outdated or anachronistic (the croquet box of *Three Standard Stoppages* 1913–14, the door in *Etant donnés* … 1946–66, etc), thereby introducing a vision of contemporaneity very different from what was then in vogue. Reusing the tools of the past in order to confound the present, Duchamp went so far as to describe his masterpiece *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* 1915–23 as a *retard en verre*: a 'delay in glass'. Duchamp's 'delay', more significant than it would seem, thus overleaps the opposition between futurist projection and nostalgic glances at the past, an opposition that structures our view of twentieth-century art. But there is more to modernity than a kind of futurism. It is significant that a number of today's artists operate in a space-time characterized by this 'delay', playing with the anachronistic, with multi-temporality or time-lag. We could say that the ageless drawings of Charles Avery, the paintings of Spartacus Chetwynd or Shezad Dawood, the iconographic materials of Olivia Plender, Peter Coffin, Matthew Darbyshire and Ruth Ewan, or Tacita Dean's and Joachim Koester's references to the origins of the cinema – like those of Navin Rawanchaikul to Bollywood posters – all deal in the aesthetics of heterochrony: their work displays none of the obvious signs of contemporaneity, save perhaps in the process of their constitution, in the assembling of their parts into meaningful networks. Here what is 'contemporary' is the structure of the work, its method of composition: the very fact that it brings together heterochronic elements – delay (analogous to 'pre-recorded') coexists with the *immediate* (or 'live') and with the anticipated, just as documentary coexists with fiction, not according to a principle of accumulation (postmodern baroquism), but with the aim of revealing our present, in which temporalities and levels of reality are intertwined.

Rails and networks: The 'viatorization' of forms

The predominant aesthetics of this concern with intemporality reside to all appearances in the massive usage of black and white, for instance in the 16mm silent films projected by Joachim Koester, the iconography of David Noonan, Tris Vonna-Michell or Charles Avery, the drawings of Olivia Plender, Tacita Dean's series *The Russian Ending*, or the entire universe of Lindsay Seers. Today, black and white labels images

as belonging to the past and the world of archives – at the same time, however, guaranteeing the authenticity of their content, by the single fact that their technique pre-dates Photoshop. In the books of W.G. Sebald, the narrative is punctuated by similar photos, which, according to the author, are there to emphasize the truth of the story. With Sebald, then, narrative is not in conflict with image. But this is a different form of narrative from that employed by Wim Wenders, who sees images in the form of a line, in a fixed order, with a fixed chronology. The cinema, whose birth was contemporary with that of the locomotive, handles narrative spontaneously like 'a train passing in the night', to quote Francois Truffaut; that is to say, like narrative rails organizing the passage of images. What better metaphor for history as twentieth-century modernism perceived it than that of the train? Rosalind Krauss stated: 'Perspective is the visual correlative of causality: things arrange themselves one after the other according to rules'. If pictorial modernism has done away with the monocular, centrist (spatial) perspective, it has substituted for it 'a temporal perspective, i.e., history'.[12] There still remains the question, a far more difficult one, of whether the era of the worldwide web and global hypermobility is really giving rise to new ways of perceiving human space. The term 'postmodern' can be applied to art that is refractory to these two types of perspective: spatial and temporal. 'Altermodern', on the other hand, combines both; the space-time circumscribed by the oeuvre of the new generation of artists, from Koester to Chetwynd, via Avery or Dean, presents itself in the form of a Möbius loop. In their productions, perspective is simultaneously geographical (mobility, displacement and cultural nomadism as methods of composition) and historical (heterochrony as a spontaneous take on the world). Simon Starling or Darren Almond, for example, displace objects in space to illuminate their history; they could be said to 'viatorize' them (from Latin *viator*, 'traveller'). For them, historical memory, like the topography of the contemporary world, exists only in the form of a network. Signs are displaced, 'viatorized' in circuits, and the work of art presents itself in the form of this dynamic system.

But what is a network? A connected chain of distinct elements in time or space. Various materials can serve as a 'glue' to hold the component elements together, yet one of them today assumes a particular importance: storytelling. Among the artists who have

contributed to the theoretical development of this concept, Philippe Parreno explains that 'Pre-production, production, post-production, these narrative instances depend upon each other. In the course of the chaining of these sequences, a narrative unfolds'.[13] Exhibiting a work composed as a network of signs – like a computer screen reacting to a sequence of hypertext links – allows us to bypass another form of contradiction that has become unproductive: that of form and narrative. Liam Gillick defines this new structure as a 'discursive framework' or a 'discursive model of practice'. This is not to be understood as an urge to replace form by the formulaic, for 'the discursive is what produces work but is also the produced work itself in the form of critical and impromptu exchanges'.[14] In the same way as Parreno, he envisages the production of a work of art as a form of sequencing, like the continuous passage of an image to a text, from a narrative to a sign. 'This discursive is a production cycle, rather than a fixed performative moment in time … It occupies the increasing gap between the trajectory of modernity (understood here as a flow of technologies and demographic development) and the somewhat melancholic imploded self-conscious trajectory of modernism'.[15]

A strategic universalism

If the postmodern critical process *par excellence* was the detailed explanation of signs by their origins, the vital thing today, starting from the standpoint of the extreme globalization of world culture, is to grasp afresh the emblematic gesture of modernity – the exodus. This may be defined as a wrenching separation from the traditions, customs, everything in fact that anchors an individual to a 'territory' and the habits of a culture petrified by fixed ways of doing and saying things. But what exactly is being transformed and carried off? To answer this question, we must re-examine the very notion of territory – cultural or otherwise – from the viewpoint of 'viatorization'.

For sociologist Marc Augé: 'Culture has never been a spontaneous product that any one territory could appropriate. This illusory definition resurfaces today because there no longer is any territory. It is one of the illusions maintained by globalization. Contemporary art acquiesces in this ambivalence, even when seeking to make it its

subject'.[16] In a world every inch of which is under satellite surveillance, territory takes the form of a construction or a journey.

And so the artist, *homo viator*, turns nomad. They transform ideas and signs, transport them from one point to another. All modernity is vehicular, exchange-based, and translative in its essence; the variety apparently announcing its arrival today will become more extreme as it develops, for the first time in human history, on a planetary scale. And just as alterglobalization does not seek cumulative solutions to the steamrollering effect of economic globalization – rather a concatenation of singular responses within models of sustainable development – altermodern has no desire to substitute for postmodern relativism a new universalism, rather a networked 'archipelago' form of modernity. The movement is also taking shape under the urgent pressure to answer very basic questions: how do we live in this world that we are told is becoming 'global', but which seems to be buttressed on particular interests or tensed behind the barricades of fundamentalism – when not upholding icons of mass culture as role models? How to represent a power that is becoming ever more furtive as it slips into bed with economics? How, finally, to make art anything but a secondary type of merchandise in a system of values entirely oriented towards this 'general and abstract equivalent' that is money, and how can it bear witness against 'economic horror' without reducing itself to sheer militancy?

'When they created cities', argues J.M.G. Le Clézio, 'when they invented concrete, tar and glass, men invented a new jungle – but have yet to become its inhabitants. Maybe they will die out before recognizing it for what it is. The [Amazonian] Indians have thousands of years' experience of it, which is why their knowledge is so perfect. Their world is not different from ours, they simply live in it, while we are still in exile'.[17]

Notes

1 Wim Wenders, *La Logique des Images. Le Souffle de l'ange*, Paris 1995 p. 149.

2 Ibid.

3 Seth Price, 'Dispersion', 2001, on www.disputedhistory.com

4 'Fragmented Narratives', T. Vonna-Michell interviewed by Andrew Hunt, in *Untitled*, no. 45, Spring 2008, p. 27.

5 For a full description of the practice of chaining, in relation to the techniques of sampling and websurfing, see N. Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, New York 2002.

6 Peter Sloterdijk, 'La pensée sphérique', *BAM* No.2, Vies modes d'emploi, 2004, p. 192.

7 Bernard Stiegler, *Reénchanter le monde: le valeur-esprit contre le populisme industriel*, Paris 2006.

8 Douglas Crimp, with photographs by Louise Lawler, *On the Museum's Ruins*, Cambridge, Mass. 1993.

9 Ibid., p. 183.

10 Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC 1991.

11 Slavoj Žižek, *Vous Avez Dit Totalitarisme?*, Paris 2004, p. 167.

12 Rosalind Krauss, 'A View of Modernism', in *Artforum*, Sept. 1972.

13 Philippe Parreno and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, *The Conversation-Pieces*, Cologne 2007.

14 Liam Gillick, 'Maybe it would be better if we worked in groups of three?', *Hermes Lecture*, Eindhoven 2008, p. 29.

15 Ibid., p. 30.

16 Marc Augé, *L'Art du décalage*, www.multitudes.samizdat.com, 5 June 2007.

17 Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, *Haï*, Paris 1971, p. 36.