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Tate Triennial 2009

Tate Britain

The restless, at times contradictory, relationship between Nicolas Bourriaud – curator of ‘Altermodern’, the fourth Tate Triennial – and the work of the 28 artists included in the show is perhaps best summed up in the contribution by Bob & Roberta Smith. The scrap objects that make up *Off Voice Fly Tip* (2009) are hand-lettered like old-fashioned grocer’s signs, ranging from an indignant ‘prison sentences not bonuses’ scribbled onto a fridge door to more elaborate musings. The idea is that every Friday a new object is added, based on a weekly conversation between the artist and Bourriaud. ‘I tell him sometimes the art world feels like oligarch’s culture. He says there is too much spectacular, very simple art.’ Although the exchange is a little obvious, it’s leant a humorous twist by being hand-painted onto a shapeless piece of wood stuck in a wastepaper basket. Nevertheless, if this really is Bourriaud’s opinion, it begs the question why he included Subodh Gupta’s huge, spectacularly simplistic mushroom cloud made from thousands of pieces of steel kitchenware (*Line of Control*, 2008).

Bourriaud proposes ‘altermodern’ as his label for the present ‘void beyond the postmodern’ (as he puts it in his catalogue essay); a present that is not about modernist vanguardism but a multidirectional, nomadic drifting. It’s therefore only consequential – even though the Tate Triennial was initially conceived to be a survey of British art – that of the 28 artists about a third are UK-born, a third UK-based and a third neither. However, in order to support his theory, Bourriaud avoids analysing the alternative modernisms already discussed at length over the last decade (‘tropical modernity’, for instance). He also ignores the philosophical debate around, say, Zygmunt Bauman’s ‘liquid modernity’, which, like Bourriaud’s concept, is concerned with fragmentation and uncertainty; or of Bruno Latour’s famous assertion (and title of his 1991 book), that *We Have Never Been Modern* – which proposes that the truly modern is not about purification but hybridity.

‘Altermodern’ breaks with the principle of immediate human exchange central to Bourriaud’s 1990s’ theory of ‘relational aesthetics’, favouring instead misunderstandings and displacements. But, in so doing, he still upholds the classical opposition between art and mass culture: once it was relational aesthetics that, as he put it, shattered ‘the logic of the spectacle’, now ‘altermodern’ is pitched against ‘consumer-driven uniformization’ and the ‘menace of

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massification'. But can, say, today's Web 2.0 commerce be understood in these terms? After all, it's about the multiplication and exploitation of difference, not uniformity.

Thankfully, Bourriaud the curator doesn't stick dogmatically to what Bourriaud the theorist claims. The best works here take you down a route where radically crazy dreams and hands-on pragmatism converge. Spartacus Chetwynd's *Hermito's Children* (2008) is a case in point: presented on a wall of monitors, it is a bonkers ride into a zone where trash television meets raunchy underground culture; where transgender detectives investigate the case of a girl who died of too many orgasms on a dildo see-saw, to a soundtrack swinging between death metal and lisped monologues about opening a Jewish restaurant. (Chetwynd ran an improvised Jewish restaurant during the making of her film, channelling the experience into her recorded scenario.)

Lindsay Seers, on the other hand, presents a film in which the camera generates experience. *Extramission 6 (Black Maria)* (2009) tells the story of the artist as a child who grew up mute due to her vivid photographic memory, later transforming herself into a living camera – by placing photo paper in her mouth and exposing it through her lips – before deciding to become a projector. The deadpan tale is like a cross between a BBC documentary and the dream logic of a David Lynch movie. At one point a black model hut flies through the air, and you realize you're watching Seers' projection in a hut based on Thomas Edison's first commercial film production studio of 1893. Bourriaud contrasts this with Walead Beshty's prosaic glass cubes displayed on the cardboard boxes in which they were sent around the world; unpadded, registering every fissure like seismographs of global trade ('FedEx Sculptures', 2005–ongoing). Both Seers and Beshty present unorthodox ways of recording the world around them with very different means.

The show is full of these kinds of thoughtful shifts that juxtapose or make parallels between works. Loris Gréaud's *Tremors Where Forever (Frequency of an Image, White Edit)* (2008), is a translation of the artist's brainwaves into buzzing frequencies emitted by vibrating white boxes distributed across the room and coordinated by a hardware unit, as if taking an EEG of the space itself. In the adjacent room another work deals with invisible vibrations. In Marcus Coates' video, *The Plover's Wing* (2008), the artist offers his services as a shaman to the mayor of Holon, Israel. The mayor keeps a straight face as Coates, wearing a badger cap and with a stuffed hare poking from his jacket, moans hypnotically in an attempt to summon animal spirits to offer advice on the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. Coates comes up with the parable of the plover, which lures predators away from its nest by pretending to have a broken wing. Coates' shamanic Francis of Assisi routine is droll, but its humour is not the reason the mayor's deadpan reaction is impressive – it's because it feels aggressively insensitive to imply that this kind

of parable, especially when presented with a pinch of British eccentricity, could add anything but insult to the injuries of such a tragic, historically complex conflict.

That said, Coates personifies the tension at the heart of the exhibition: art torn between creative attempts to communicate and the failure of exchange, between narration and negation, political ambition and the anxiety of obsolescence. Making this tension palpable is one of the show's strongest qualities and is exemplified in Nathaniel Mellors' *Giantbum* (2009); not so much in terms of its slightly laboured video elements featuring actors thrown into a messy script about father figures eating shit whilst trapped inside the intestines of a giant, but in terms of how its allegory of the digestive system as a culture-processing machine (the 'mainstream' Bourriaud seems to have in mind) is expressed architecturally as a circular corridor lined with fibrous insulation. At its centre sits an uncanny trio of animatronic rubber faces singing odd tunes, while at its periphery visitors leave the show through a door marked 'exit'; through which, dare one say, they are excreted. If 'altermodern' means to suggest that today's artist hero is not a taciturn knight running at the fortress of mainstream capitalist culture but a Jonah singing in the bowels of the whale, then that message came through loud and clear.

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