

# Table of Contents

Bourriaud's "Altermodern", an eclectic mix of bullshit & bad taste . . . . . 1



# Bourriaud's Altermodern, an eclectic mix of bullshit & bad taste

By Stewart Home

More from Home's garrulous blog. Bourriaud, coiner of 'relational aesthetics' and erstwhile master of neologisms, meets his match in Home, the master of neoism, to his lasting damage. Here Home stops short of accusing Bourriaud of crypto-fascism with his doomed-to-fail proposition of an 'altermodernity'; one that will fuse post-colonialism and modernism in an 'archipelago' of individualism, anti-essentialism, and modernist shock tactics. As Home points out, modernity and post-colonialism always were part of the same historical development - late capitalist globalisation.

[<http://stewarthomesociety.org/blog/>]

February 17th, 2009

The recent trend for curators to view themselves as the 'real heroes' of the art world continues with the Parisian fashion-poodle Nicolas Bourriaud (AKA Boring Ass) using Altermodern, the 2009 Tate Triennial, to promote himself over and above anything he's actually included in this aesthetic disaster. The selection of works for Altermodern struck me as remarkably similar to the last 'big' show I'd seen curated by Bourriaud, the Lyon Biennial in 2005. The art itself doesn't really matter, it is there to illustrate a thesis. The thesis doesn't matter either since it exists to facilitate Bourriaud's career; and Bourriaud certainly doesn't matter because he is simply yet another dim-witted cultural bureaucrat thrown up by the institution of art.

In Lyon, Bourriaud's theme was Expérience de la Durée, which Frieze summed up as: 'an art-historical argument for a long 1990s'. Unlike Cinderella, methods of making and thinking about art don't become unwelcome at the ball just because the clock strikes midnight. If time, for David Bowie, 'flexes like a whore', for Bourriaud and Sans (Boring Ass's Lyon co-curator and Palais de Tokyo chum) its movements are closer to soporific languor. (Frieze 95, Nov-Dec 2005).

For the Tate Triennial, Bourriaud has adopted a technique much beloved by talentless song-smiths when record companies demand new material they haven't yet composed, take an existing riff and reverse it. Thus the back cover of the Triennial catalogue announces: 'Few books introduce a word into the language as this one does. The term altermodern has been coined by leading critical theorist and curator Nicolas Bourriaud to describe the art that has arrived at the end of the postmodern period, made in today's global context, as a reaction against cultural standardisation.' This claim singularly fails to mark out any new field for 'contemporary' cultural practice, since art in the modern sense of the term developed more than two centuries ago in reaction to the cultural standardisation of the first industrial revolution, and in the context of the development and global expansion of capitalism (the initial moves from its formal to its real domination, a process that continued until well into the 20th century). And it should hardly need stating that the justification for Bourriaud's Tate squib is simply Lyon 2005 in reverse. But forwards, backwards or anagramatised, the notions Bourriaud hangs his shows on all amount to the same thing: bullshit.

So much for the (non)-theory, what about the art? The video installation Hermitos Children by Spartacus Chetwynd looks like out-takes from a promo by a really bad indie band replete with mock-shocking nudity (zzzzzz). Nathaniel Mellors's Gaintbum is even worse, featuring as it does films of would-be luvvies rehearsing for a play about being stuck inside a huge arse (and yes, the free guide really does explain that coprophilia is 'an obsession with excrement'). While in The Plover's

Wing, Marcus Coates fakes it up as a shaman, and comes across as truly pathetic because he clearly has no idea that practices he is unable to even parody, emerged at the very moment tribal society began to stratify into class societies, and were thus a response to alienation.

That said, there is the odd decent piece in Altermodern, even if Bourriaud is only able to include the most outstanding work by completely over-indulging his taste for slipshod curatorial methods. The Tate Triennial is supposedly an exhibition of emerging British artists, Gustav Metzger is actually stateless (he does live in London) and his art world reputation dates all the way back to the 1960s. Those two things don't particularly matter to me in relation to the curation of this show, but I do object to Bourriaud re-dating Metzger's work so that it can be presented as recent art. Metzger's Liquid Crystal Environment dates from 1965, not 2006 as the labelling in Bourriaud's Altermodern exhibition would have it. This work has also been shown relatively recently as part of the Gustav Metzger Retrospectives at the Museum of Modern Art Oxford in 1998/99, and the photograph in the MOMA Papers Volume 3 (page 40) produced to accompany that exhibition is dated 1965/98? (the standard method of dating re-made work when the original is unavailable). Metzger's Liquid Crystal Environment was shown again as part of the Summer of Love show at Tate Liverpool (2005) and then toured in Europe through to late summer 2006. The piece was re-made once more for this exhibition and is correctly dated in the catalogue (page 221) as 1965/2005?. The Tate then bought the piece from Metzger, and it should have been labelled in Altermodern as 1965/2005?; but this dating would render its inclusion absurd, and a charlatan like Bourriaud - who can't be bothered to seek out decent contemporary work - has no qualms about faking the provenance of a piece like Liquid Crystal Environment.

But let's move on to the catalogue, which like the posters and other graphic elements in the show was designed by M/M, the Paris based team of Michael Amzalag and Mathias Augustyniak. The Design Museum sums up the career of these bozos with the following words: "After starting out with music projects, M/M became involved with Yamamoto and Sitbon in 1995 and have since worked for other fashion houses including Balenciaga, Louis Vuitton and Calvin Klein. Their work in the art world ranges from commissions for museums such as Centre Georges Pompidou and Palais de Tokyo in Paris, to collaborations with artists like Philippe Parreno and Pierre Hughe. Amzalag and Augustyniak also work as creative consultants to Paris Vogue." My own take is that M/M's way too self-conscious use of "centric" typefaces is unnecessarily baroque and looks like complete shit. In a classic triumph of would-be "style" over substance, M/M don't put page numbers on certain sections of the Altermodern catalogue, including the three "keynote" essays at the front (meaning that anyone wanting to cite quotes has to count off the pages by turning them); no doubt if M/M were architects the idea of getting "transgressive" by designing buildings without foundations would appeal to them. That said, the catalogue's content is even worse than its cretinous design.

Bourriaud's introduction to the Triennial catalogue exposes the lack of anything substantial behind his half-baked notion of the "altermodern". To quote Boring Ass directly: "The term 'altermodern', which serves as the title of the present exhibition and to delimit the void beyond the post-modern, has its roots in the idea of 'otherness'." (page 12). If Bourriaud sees a void beyond postmodernism, this is presumably because he is loathe to admit that capitalism (like feudalism and every other form of exploitation to be found in recorded history) has a finite life-span. Likewise by connecting alter to other, Bourriaud reminded me of a book I read a dozen years ago, *The Other Modernism: F. T. Marinetti's Futurist Fiction of Power* by Cinzia Sartini Blum (University of California Press, 1996). In this tome, Blum "investigates a diverse array of" futurist textual practices that range from formal experimentation with "words in freedom" to nationalist manifestos that advocate intervention in World War I and anticipate subsequent fascist rhetoric of power and virility." Curiously, some of Bourriaud's rhetoric does indeed echo Marinetti's "other" modernism, viz: "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. (catalogue, page 12). So don't go accusing Boring Ass of being a mainstream liberal, since he counterposes irresistible will to notions of agency! That said, it might be that natural leaders like Bourriaud have will and agency, and it is this which will determine the altermodern evolution of the masses! I am, of course, assuming here that when Boring Ass anthropomorphises altermodernism by talking about how it sees itself, he is simultaneously indulging in a process of personification in which he becomes the physical embodiment of his own ideal. In which case altermodernism might more properly be taken as a synonym for Bourriaud's personal variant on narcissism.

Moving on, Bourriaud pointedly steps back from anything as contentious as overt link-ups with full blown fascist modernism: '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.' (page 12).

All of which can be taken as so much sound and fury signifying nothing, the proverbial tale told by an idiot, because post-colonialism was always and already an integral part of modernity (just as modernism and modernity are inseparable from a process of globalisation that was already in motion in the sixteenth century; and rather than marking a break with modernism, post-modernism is actually a continuation of modernity). It strikes me that Bourriaud might benefit from sitting down with a few books written by the likes of Paul Gilroy. Likewise, Boring Ass talks of the historical role of artistic modernism, then of the historical counters being reset to zero (which he presumably sees as nullifying any historical role modernism performed); similarly, he speaks of our contemporary world being characterised by a complex network stripped of a centre, as well as the threat of the mainstream reifying thought and practice. If there is a dialectical telos at work in Bourriaud's thought to provide a methodological underpinning to these otherwise senseless inversions, then it stands in direct contradiction to the claims he makes elsewhere in this text such as: 'Our civilisation, which bears imprints of a multicultural explosion and the proliferation of cultural strata, resembles a structureless constellation awaiting transformation into an archipelago.' It looks like what is waiting to kick off here is that old idealist fallacy about consciousness being brought in from outside the masses, a trope much beloved by the likes of Lenin and Mussolini. Likewise, while artistic modernism may indeed - as Bourriaud claims - serve to 'jolt us out of tradition', it is important to remember that fundamentalism and traditionalism are also products of modernity in its broadest sense. Given the positions Bourriaud strikes, it unfortunately also becomes necessary to restate once again that artistic modernism is not necessarily incompatible with fascism and/or nationalism, and indeed that fascism is not incompatible with anarchism (see, for example, my text of a dozen years ago *Anarchist Integralism*).

Bourriaud's rant about the threat from fundamentalism and consumer driven uniformisation and being menaced by massification and the enforced re-abandonment of individual identity, like his ritual denunciations of multiculturalism, are familiar enough as political rhetoric. That said, most of us are probably more used to seeing such positions articulated by ideologically motivated crypto-fascists

than art curators. Of course, it is possible that when Bourriaud speaks of the threat from fundamentalism he means the type found in the US Bible belt, but if this is the case it is extremely foolish of him to refrain from explicitly saying so because the terminology he uses is so closely bound up with the political rhetoric of groups like the French Nouvelle Droite that many people will assume he is invoking so called Muslim fundamentalists.

In a review I wrote for Art Monthly last summer, I observed: 'Interviewed recently by Anthony Gardner and Daniel Palmer, Bourriaud claimed our new modernity is based on translation.' When in the interview just mentioned, Bourriaud speaks of the fight for autonomy and the possibility of singularity, he could be mistaken for a late-twentieth century disciple of Italian Dadaist Julius Evola. The specific disciples I was thinking of were Nouvelle Droite ideologues such as Alain de Benoist, people who were far more influenced by Evola's fascist politics than his brief involvement with the modernist avant-garde. I would, however, stress that I quite deliberately used the term 'mistaken for' and I am NOT claiming Bourriaud is an unreconstructed crypto-fascist.

The Wikipedia (on 16 February 2009) summarises Alain de Benoist's views thus: 'from being close to fascist French movements at the beginning of his writings in 1970, he moved to attacks on globalisation, unrestricted mass immigration and liberalism as being ultimately fatal to the existence of Europe through their divisiveness and internal faults. His influences include Antonio Gramsci, Ernst Jünger, Jean Baudrillard, Helmut Schelsky, Konrad Lorenz, and other intellectuals. Against the liberal melting-pot of the U.S., Benoist is in favour of separate civilisations and cultures. He also says he opposes Jean-Marie Le Pen, racism and anti-Semitism. He has opposed Arab immigration in France, while supporting ties with Islamic culture. He has also tried to distance himself from Adolf Hitler, Vichy France or Aryan supremacy, in favor of concepts like 'ethnopluralism,' in which organic, ethnic cultures and nations must live and develop in separation from one another.'

Despite Bourriaud's inflammatory rhetoric about a multicultural explosion in the Tate Triennial catalogue, I continue to view him as an over-ambitious culture industry hack rather than a political demagogue. He may have picked up the moronic phraseology he employs almost unconsciously and have no idea of what it signifies politically. On the other hand, Boring Ass may be hedging his bets, thinking that ambiguous statements of the kind he is making about the 'altermodern' will ingratiate him with the political establishment in France if there are further swings to the right. It isn't entirely clear to me what Bourriaud's ambitions are, but it wouldn't surprise me to learn he wanted to be director of an institution such as the Centre Georges Pompidou, or else running cultural policy for the French government; and if this is what he desires, then his curatorial charlatanism (viz re-dating Metzger's work) indicates that he is unscrupulous enough to attempt to achieve it through a somewhat ambiguous redeployment of Nouvelle Droite motifs.

There are only two pieces in the Altermodern show that actually resonate with Bourriaud's inflammatory catalogue essay. Curiously, Adrian Searle in his Guardian online review felt moved to link them: 'one sits and listens to Olivia Plender's description of the relationship between Robin Hood and the various splits in the scouting movement in the early 20th century, and how that eventually led via digressions on EM Forster, the Kibbo Kift and the archives at the Whitechapel Gallery to a troubling faction called the Green Shirts (not a million miles from the fascist Blackshirts), who railed against the British Credit System in the 1930s (one of their number fired an arrow at 10 Downing Street). On the table, there are last week's newspapers, with their credit-crunch headlines. The point circuitously being made is not so different from that of the mad, anti-semitic conspiracy theorist in Mike Nelson's installation. Everything is connected, they both say. We just need the key.'

I have already criticised Mike Nelson elsewhere (bottom part of that page) for his redeployment of anti-Semitic motifs in a different work, which was done without a suitable critical framing. There I also observed: the art world doesn't just represent violence, it also reproduces it; and like the rest of capitalist society, often in its most murderous forms. Art won't save the world; only the vast majority of us acting collectively can make this marvellous green planet somewhere that is really worth living.

So to sum up, Altermodern at Tate Britain isn't really about what's happening in contemporary art, it is actually about Nicolas Bourriaud and very little else. The show itself is boring and you really don't need to see it. Nonetheless, just what were the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation thinking of when they underwrote Bourriaud's altermodern activities? Answers in the comments please!

And while you're at it don't forget to check - [www.stewarthomesociety.org](http://www.stewarthomesociety.org) - you know it makes (no) sense!