

## **Tate Triennial 2009: Positioning Global Strategies at Tate Britain**

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### **Introduction**

Tate Britain is a national art gallery with a remit to display and interpret British art, yet it is located within one of the most multicultural cities in the world. In recent years, Tate Britain has demonstrated a strong desire to position itself within a global context, as highlighted in the organisation's current government funding agreement which states that 'Tate seeks to become more...*Global* – by acknowledging multiple viewpoints, reflecting the world in Britain and Britain into the world'<sup>1</sup>. The following article is derived from an MA research project [2009] with the Department of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, and investigates the extent to which Tate Britain's practices reflect the increasingly global culture which exist outside of its walls using the case study of *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, a major contemporary art exhibition which opened at Tate Britain in February 2009.

The *Altermodern* exhibition thesis, conceived by the French curator Nicolas Bourriaud, was based on the concept of the 'altermodern', a new term devised to reflect 'art made in today's global context that is...characterised by artists' cross-border, cross-cultural negotiations'<sup>2</sup>. After working within the Adult Programmes team alongside the Curator: Cross-Cultural and as a member of the Tate for All strategy group, I was particularly interested in exploring the synergy between the curatorial remit of this exhibition, and the cross-cultural, arguably global practices currently emerging at Tate Britain. My position within this article is as an independent academic researcher, yet, as an employee working within the Tate Development department, it is inevitable that my perspective is subject to organisational values.

This article will firstly explore current cultural 'global' theory before going on to investigate Tate's own responses and activities in this field. Following a contextual summary of strategic, education and research initiatives (including Tate Encounters) emerging at Tate around the idea of the 'global', this article will go on to explore the *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* exhibition in greater detail. To conclude, it will unravel questions raised by this temporary exhibition in terms of the challenges and opportunities which lie ahead for Tate Britain as a national art museum aspiring to embed notions of the 'global' within its longer-term strategies and practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Anon. *Tate Funding Agreement 2008-2011* (2008), ([http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/Tate\\_Signed\\_Funding\\_Agreement.pdf](http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/Tate_Signed_Funding_Agreement.pdf)), p.1.

<sup>2</sup> *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* microsite (<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/tatetriennial/>), 1 December 2008.

## Towards a Global Culture

*'In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.'*<sup>3</sup>

Paul Goodwin, Curator: Cross-Cultural at Tate Britain suggests that 'if you look at it [multiculturalism] as a way that people live their lives it is actually a kind of fact ... in the sense that people absorb various cultural influences ... there are a multitude of connections, or motions or identities that come into one person'<sup>4</sup>. Goodwin's comments highlight the fact that in a global world, cultural identity is no longer limited to the singular categories of race, gender, sexuality, class or national identity. Instead, global technologies have inspired the non-stop flow of ideas and communication, whilst the social trends of exile, travel and migration have affected a wide-scale and constant movement of people across borders. Whereas the power relations of the modernist and post-colonial modes could be defined by the negotiation between two subjects: coloniser and colonised; oppressor and oppressed; museum and public; there is no such sense of centre and periphery in the culturally plural mode, where the boundaries of nationhood, community and identity are called into question. As Homi Bhabha points out, these notions of cultural fixity have been replaced by 'a complex on-going negotiation – amongst minorities, against assimilation.'<sup>5</sup>. The social impact of these phenomena has been investigated in the fields of cultural anthropology and human sciences and has more recently been absorbed into cultural studies and literary theory.

However, as Kobena Mercer highlights, the influence of globalisation has taken longer to filter into art historical practices and therefore also public gallery spaces<sup>6</sup>. The emergence of an accompanying rhetoric for global culture is reflected by the proliferation of new terms such as 'inter-cultural', 'trans-cultural' and 'cross-cultural'. These terms are increasingly being used to displace the well-worn politicised terms of 'cultural diversity' and 'multiculturalism'. In order to reflect the influence of these global trends on both artistic practice and the complex identities of today's visitor populations, museums are starting to develop strategies which reflect this shifting notion of cultural identity in their exhibitions, education and marketing strategies.

Jan Nederveen Pieterse suggests that 'reflexivity' and 'play' offer a useful means by which to approach the complexities of global culture in practical terms. He defines 'reflexivity' as a means of 'questioning one's own position'<sup>7</sup>, a strategy which particularly applies to museums, institutions such as Tate which are eager to escape their modernist roots and the constraints of public cultural policy. In order to achieve this, I would argue that museums are increasingly moving away from the 'notion of

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<sup>3</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (trans. C.L.Markmann; Grove Press, 1967), p.229.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Goodwin (Curator: Cross-Cultural, Tate Britain), interview by author.

<sup>5</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, 'Beyond the pale: Art in the age of multicultural translation' in R Lavrijsen (ed.) *Cultural diversity in the arts: Art, art policies and the facelift of Europe* (Amsterdam : Royal Tropical Institute, c.1993), p.22.

<sup>6</sup> Kobena Mercer (ed.) *Exiles, Diasporas and Strangers* (inIVA: MIT Press; 2008), p.12.

<sup>7</sup> Pieterse, and Parekh, 'Shifting imaginaries: decolonization, internal decolonization, p.11.

the curator as the sole interpreter, handing down wisdom to a passive public<sup>8</sup>. Instead, a space is being created for dialogue, interaction and the 'complex on-going negotiation'<sup>9</sup> between museum, visitor and artist. In terms of 'play', museums in a globalised world are increasingly becoming 'intermediaries and laboratories for experimenting with new cultural combinations and encounters'<sup>10</sup>. This is reflected by the growing use of interactive methods and constructivist approaches in museum learning. Pieterse suggests that this mode of encounter is made possible because the global world 'is more fluid, less rigid than the space of confrontation and re-conquest; boundaries, to those who have experience crossing them, become a matter of play rather than an obsession.'<sup>11</sup>.

In these ways, museums are stepping away from the models of 'ethnic arts', 'cultural diversity' and 'multiculturalism' which, some would argue, failed because of the West's inability 'to relinquish its control over meaning production.'<sup>12</sup> Instead, the concepts of open dialogue, cultural negotiation, and fluid notions of meaning-making offer a means for museums to explore cultural identity in a global world, in which people and ideas are no longer limited to essentialist notions of national identity or ethnicity.

### **Tate Britain: Reflecting Britain Into the World**

In recent years, Tate has developed a number of strategies which suggest a shift away from 'cultural diversity' and 'multicultural' models and towards the notions of fluid cultural identity, reflexive practice and experimentation offered by the 'global' model. In terms of organisational strategy, the Tate for All policy group devised by Tate National has been working to develop areas of Tate's work where 'it is known that there are gaps and silences, in Tate's audiences, partners, programmes, collections and workforce.'<sup>13</sup> In this way, the group has been negotiating concepts of difference which move beyond concepts of Equal Opportunities in the workforce, and towards more fluid and inclusive definitions of diversity. For example, the first iteration of the Tate diversity strategy purposefully avoided setting specific audience targets, instead focusing on 'bringing in all sorts of approaches and knowledge'<sup>14</sup> to the museum in order to affect long-term change. Although these shifts in practice towards a more circumspect approach will take time to be embedded within Tate's everyday working practice, Caroline Collier, Director of Tate National points out that there have already been major positive outcomes, such as the growing internal awareness amongst senior level staff as to the importance 'for Tate to step outside ... its sort of comfortable area ... [and] to take a wider view of the world.'<sup>15</sup> As an example, Collier highlights the need for Tate to work on extending its international relationships

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<sup>8</sup> N. Merriman 'The dilemma of representation' (1992) in Jan Nederveen Pieterse, 'Multiculturalism and Museums: Discourse about others in the age of globalization' in G Corsane (ed.) 'Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader'(London & New York: Routledge, 2005), p.178.

<sup>9</sup> Bhabha, 'Beyond the pale: Art in the age of multicultural translation', p.22.

<sup>10</sup> Pieterse, 'Multiculturalism and Museums: Discourse about others in the age of globalization', p.178.

<sup>11</sup> Pieterse, and Parekh, 'Shifting imaginaries: decolonization, internal decolonization, p.11.

<sup>12</sup> Fisher, Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts, p.xi.

<sup>13</sup> Tate Gallery. *Tate for All: The Tate Diversity Strategy*, p.1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Caroline Collier (Director, Tate National), interview by author.

beyond the established network of existing links with Western Europe and North America. However, the Tate for All diversity strategy will take time to embed such long-term strategies within all areas of Tate's work, during which time specific galleries have been exploring the possibilities of more localised shifts in practice.

Tate Modern, as the site of international modern and contemporary art has been particularly focused on developing a 'social museum'<sup>16</sup> model by engaging its local Southwark community with its international art collection. Meanwhile, Tate Britain, a gallery rooted in concepts of national identity, has been developing specific ways to open up global perspectives, thereby '[reflecting] Britain into the world'<sup>17</sup>, particularly within the work of the Learning department. A key example is the Tate Encounters research programme, which was established with Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funding in 2005 to investigate the gallery as a 'zone of encounter' between individuals from 'different diasporic groups and an important national cultural site.'<sup>18</sup> The collaboration between Tate Britain, London South Bank University and Wimbledon College of Arts has been an integral part of the programme, which has focused on bringing cross-disciplinary methods of analysis into the gallery as a means of improving Tate Britain's relatively low proportion of attendees from cultural minority backgrounds<sup>19</sup>. The use of ethnographic techniques to analyse responses to Tate Britain demonstrates recognition of the need to move away from the prevalent disciplines of museology and art history which have long been entrenched in the gallery's practice, but have had little effect on boosting audience diversity figures. Instead, the research focus has been on 'bringing together a different set of disciplines in this project that have different types of knowledge and theorising about how the museum functions for an individual.'<sup>20</sup> This approach reflects the Tate for All diversity strategy with its desire to draw in new perspectives to the gallery's practices in order to fill in the current 'gaps and silences'<sup>21</sup>.

At the time that this MA research was conducted in Spring 2009, the Tate Encounters team had recently finished its fieldwork stage. Even at this early stage, the emergent findings highlighted interesting features in relation to the subject of cultural identity in the contemporary art museum. Originally, the project was entitled 'Tate Encounters: 'Britishness' and Visual Culture, Black and Asian Identities' with the aim of developing a group of co-researchers who fitted these specific ethnic categories. However, the recruitment process was soon hindered by low numbers of students wishing to sign up to the project under these terms because 'it became apparent that what we were provoking was ... the absolute resistance to being categorised in these ways'<sup>22</sup>. Young people from migrant

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<sup>16</sup> Victoria Walsh (Head of Adult Programmes, Tate Britain), interview by author, digital voice recording, 10 February 2009, London.

<sup>17</sup> Anon. *Tate Funding Agreement 2008-2011*, p.1.

<sup>18</sup> Dewdney and Walsh, *Tate Encounters: 'Britishness' and Visual Culture Research Programme 2007-9. Aims and Methodology Report No. 1*, p.8.

<sup>19</sup> 3% audience from ethnic minorities at Tate Britain at the start of the Tate Encounters programme. Cited in Walsh, 'Tate Britain: Curating 'Britishness' and Cultural Diversity', p.1.

<sup>20</sup> Victoria Walsh (Head of Adult Programmes, Tate Britain), interview by author.

<sup>21</sup> Tate Gallery. *Tate for All: The Tate Diversity Strategy*, p.1.

<sup>22</sup> Victoria Walsh (Head of Adult Programmes, Tate Britain), interview by author.

communities have demonstrably grown wary of the terms 'Black' and 'Asian', which have historically limited them to a specific form of cultural engagement synonymous with 'multiculturalism', 'cultural diversity' and targeted ethnic programmes. The title of the research programme was changed to *Tate Encounters: Britishness and Visual Culture* to counter these assumptions and to broaden the field of study. This early resistance to fixed markers of ethnicity has been further reflected by the programme's emergent findings, which reinforce the notion of a more fluid and complex understanding of cultural identity in operation during this time of 'global migration'<sup>23</sup> when young people no longer fit within established social categories. As Victoria Walsh, a co-investigator on the programme highlights, the findings show that 'we're not just in post-multiculturalism, we're in a moment of complex identities, complex narratives, complex accounts which are all a kind of matrix and an accumulative set of narratives'<sup>24</sup>.

The idea of developing cross-disciplinary knowledge within the museum as a means of affecting cultural change was one of the key triggers behind the inception of the Curator: Cross-Cultural role at Tate Britain in 2005. Felicity Allen, Head of Learning at Tate Britain, conceived the role:

'I felt very strongly that there was a real lack of knowledge ... and confidence, and that actually what we really needed to do was to get more people from different backgrounds into the department to help generate the knowledge that we could then use to generate the audiences and the content ...it was also true that several others in the department that I recruited had different specialisms and didn't come from visual arts backgrounds. When I inherited the department the majority of staff had art history degrees and, as a group, represented a narrow range of age, culture and religion. I shifted this to include people with a much broader range of disciplinary specialisms and life experience (including class and culture) - the latter was as important as subject specialism - and, if you like, a habit of reflexivity.'<sup>25</sup>

The creation of this new role offered a means for Tate Britain to engage with complex questions of cultural identity which at that time lay outside of the specialist fields of knowledge of Tate's curators, who were understandably afraid of 'getting it wrong, both, if you like, academically and politically'<sup>26</sup>. In January 2008, Paul Goodwin succeeded the writer Mike Phillips and took up this post with an academic background as a critical theorist and urban geographer. Significantly, neither of these post holders came from visual arts backgrounds. From this position they have been able to avoid re-invoking past structures of cultural representation in gallery practice, instead embedding their practice in the wider social and political contexts relating to cultural difference.

Whilst multicultural education practitioners in the museums sector have tended to focus on drawing in new audiences through targeted education programmes and activities, the Cross-Cultural role at Tate Britain does not develop targeted programmes in this way. Instead, the role aims to open up new

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<sup>23</sup> Andrew Dewdney, 'Identity, difference and the art museum', p.3.

<sup>24</sup> Victoria Walsh (Head of Adult Programmes, Tate Britain), interview by author.

<sup>25</sup> Felicity Allen (Head of Learning, Tate Britain), interview by author.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

perspectives and cultural debates within the museum through an 'intellectual programme'<sup>27</sup> of conferences, seminars and events, providing an alternative to the 'notion of the curator as the sole interpreter'<sup>28</sup> and offering a stimulating and varied programme of activity for one of Tate Britain's previously absent audience groups, namely 'people who were interested in ideas from different cultural backgrounds who were living in London'<sup>29</sup>. As Paul Goodwin puts it, the role was conceived as a means of 'trying to mark out a new territory'<sup>30</sup> which moved away from the cultural pigeon-holing and stereotyping which was so criticised in multicultural museum practices. Indeed, as Felicity Allen further recounts, this shift in approach along with other roles in the Learning Department was designed to counteract the fact that it is 'sometimes expedient to assume an ambassadorial role in institutions - representing a particular, specialist area - and this was the opposite of what I was aiming at.' Instead, the role embraced the concept that 'a cross-cultural perspective speaks to a global world'<sup>31</sup>, thereby allowing the museum to challenge received perceptions and promoting debate around issues of cultural identity and visual culture.

It is within this context that the *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* opened at Tate Britain in 2009, to which this article will now turn to explore the ways in which this temporary exhibition introduced a global manifesto to the curatorial practices at Tate Britain.

### **Altermodern: Tate Triennial**

*"I think this Triennial has the potential hopefully to open up the Tate Triennial to a more global audience, to have a stronger legacy within Tate Britain ... and [to] open up a more cross-cultural discourse."*<sup>32</sup>

*Altermodern: Tate Triennial* (3 February – 26 April 2009) was the fourth Triennial exhibition at Tate Britain, a series established in 2000 when the gallery was reinstated as a museum holding the national collection of British art. Biennial and Triennial exhibitions provide opportunities for institutions to explore and problematise concepts of regional, national and global identity. At Tate Britain, the series was designed to unravel the various facets of the British identity specifically by 'showcasing the work of contemporary British artists of all generations'<sup>33</sup>. *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* was curated by Nicolas Bourriaud, a French curator who is also the founding director of the *Palais de Tokyo*, an experimental contemporary art gallery in Paris. The exhibition is based on the concept of the 'altermodern' or 'an in-progress redefinition of modernity in the era of globalisation, stressing the

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<sup>27</sup> Felicity Allen (Head of Learning, Tate Britain), interview by author.

<sup>28</sup> N. Merriman 'The dilemma of representation' (1992) in Jan Nederveen Pieterse, 'Multiculturalism and Museums: Discourse about others in the age of globalization', p.178.

<sup>29</sup> Felicity Allen (Head of Learning, Tate Britain), interview by author.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Goodwin (Curator: Cross-Cultural, Tate Britain), interview by author.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Paul Goodwin (Curator: Cross-Cultural, Tate Britain), interview by author.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Deuchar, 'Foreword' in Ruf, B (ed.), *Tate Triennial 2006: New British Art* (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), p.7.

experience of wandering in time, space and mediums.<sup>34</sup> From the outset, this Triennial attempted to position itself within a more international and global context than its predecessors. In the following analysis, I will investigate how these ambitions have been put into motion through the exhibition's curatorial strategies and featured artists' work, as well as looking at press and programming responses to the exhibition. This chapter is divided by the four key themes which Bourriaud uses to define *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*: 'Altermodern'; 'Borders'; 'Travels' and 'Exiles'<sup>35</sup>.

### 1.1 Altermodern: Curatorial Authorship

The visible curatorial voice and highly-authored nature of the Triennial exhibitions are key factors which distinguish this series from other regular contemporary exhibitions such as the Turner Prize. The Triennial exhibitions are usually curated by external, often international specialists despite the national focus of the artistic content because, as Judith Nesbitt, Chief Curator at Tate Britain states, 'we absolutely want to avoid any risk of parochialism in our programme and the 'Britishness' has to be seen within an international context. That's the only way to understand what's happening here ... there is a wider understanding that comes perhaps from someone that hasn't lived and worked here.'<sup>36</sup>

It is within this wider context that Nicolas Bourriaud was selected to curate *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*. For Bourriaud, contemporary British art at this moment is defined by an alternative form of modernity which supercedes postmodernism. In his definition, artists are no longer bound to cultural roots, singular artistic practices or linear histories, but rather free to roam across boundaries and practices, locating their work in fluid 'cross-cultural, cross-border negotiations'<sup>37</sup>, which he defines using a new term: 'altermodern'. Bourriaud offers a different exhibiting strategy to preceding Tate Triennial exhibitions, in which curators have spun subtle webs of interpretation to connect art works. Instead, his exhibition was launched with a bold manifesto on the current state of British art, which aimed to spark debate and dialogue amongst artists and audiences as the exhibition's starting-point. The key points of the manifesto are that 'Multiculturalism and identity is being overtaken by creolisation: Artists are now starting from a globalised state of culture' and 'Artists are responding to a new globalised perception. They traverse a cultural landscape saturated with signs and create new pathways between multiple formats of expression and communication.'<sup>38</sup> The idea of multiple and fluid cultural identities and artistic practices are synonymous with the theoretical notions of the 'global' defined earlier in this report.

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<sup>34</sup> McSwein and Gaskin (eds.), *Altermodern: Exhibition Guide*, Exhibition Guide, p.1.

<sup>35</sup> Tate Triennial 2009 microsite: (<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/triennial2009/>), 17 November 2009.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Tate Triennial 2009*, Tate microsite, (<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/triennial2009/>), 17 November 2008.

<sup>38</sup> *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* microsite; (<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/altermodern/>), 25 February 2009.

Despite the possibility for 'wider understanding'<sup>39</sup> that comes from an international, external curator, Tate Britain's use of the external curatorial voice to introduce the notion of the 'global' into its practices, perhaps reflects a current lack of knowledge within the institution to address a topic of such international scope. The exhibition also came under early criticism from those questioning whether a global exhibition could feasibly be selected from a singular Western curatorial perspective. Biennial and Triennial format exhibitions are typically authored by single curators, yet this category of exhibition often deals with broad global issues as well as a vast number of artists. In the case of *Altermodern*, this issue could be reflected by the fact that only nine of the twenty-eight artists featured in *Tate Triennial: Altermodern* bear cultural roots outside of the Western world. As Paul Goodwin suggests, 'it's a Eurocentric approach. Paradoxically, *Altermodern* is about global modernity but yet ... the representation of cultural identity within the exhibition doesn't seem to be reflective of that.'<sup>40</sup>

Bourriaud attempted to escape the narrow limitations of a single curatorial perspective by using a purposefully collaborative and discursive curatorial model to subvert the powerful position of the curator as bearer of knowledge by promoting dialogue with the artist and the viewer: 'an art exhibition is the moment when you are really asking any artist participating to ... provide with you with feedback on [an] idea'<sup>41</sup>. This dialogic approach was introduced with a year-long series of Prologue events, which acted as a testing-ground for ideas in the year leading up to the exhibition (26 April 2008 - 17 January 2009). The Prologues brought together artists, curators and theorists, such as Okwui Enwezor, T J Demos and Carsten Höller to discuss the four key themes of the exhibition: 'Altermodern'; 'Exiles'; 'Travels' and 'Borders' with a public audience, allowing the theory to feed questions, which in turn would feed the artistic production of works displayed in the exhibition, and finally the display strategies used by the curatorial team. By setting up the exhibition within these terms, Bourriaud established a framework which attempted to avoid curatorial ownership. This approach would appear to reflect Jan Nederveen Pieterse's idea that global museums should be 'intermediaries and laboratories for experimenting with new cultural combinations and encounters'<sup>42</sup>, rather than spaces defined by fixed or singular curatorial interpretation.

## 1.2 Borders: The Archipelago

Bourriaud summarises the notion of the 'altermodern' as 'an archipelago of different answers', 'a cluster or constellations' consisting of 'points which are connected, one to the other' rather than 'a continental, or totalizing form'<sup>43</sup>. In this exhibition, the 'constellations' in question were the selected twenty-eight artists. The artists were identified to participate in the exhibition because their work resonates with a sense of the 'freedom to explore' and the 'multiple formats of expression and

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<sup>39</sup> Judith Nesbitt (Chief Curator, Tate Britain), interview by author.

<sup>40</sup> Paul Goodwin (Curator: Cross-Cultural, Tate Britain), interview by author.

<sup>41</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud. Interview by Kirstie Beaven online recording. (<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/altermodern/>).

<sup>42</sup> Pieterse, 'Multiculturalism and Museums: Discourse about others in the age of globalization', p.178.

<sup>43</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud. Interview by Kirstie Beaven.



communication'<sup>44</sup>, moving between time, space, history and culture without being bound or fixed to any particular position. The broad scope of the exhibition left a seemingly impossible task for the curator, required to bring together these seemingly disparate artistic perspectives. However, the spatial layout of the exhibition was such that the Upper Galleries at Tate Britain were transformed into a physical reflection of the 'archipelago' of Bourriaud's curatorial thesis. The exhibition space contained a series of corridors and intimate spaces in which visitors could freely explore the world of each artist's constellation of ideas without being forced to make any direct connections between the works. The subtlety of this approach to meaning-making is perhaps surprising given the existence of such a strong theoretical manifesto. As Judith Nesbitt reflected at the time of the show, 'it's impressive in the extent to which it comes together as an ensemble, so there are rich associations that begin to emerge as you move from one work to another, and that for me is the test of a really good exhibition.'<sup>45</sup>

An exhibition based on the notion of contemporary artistic practice as a 'structureless constellation'<sup>46</sup> presents an intriguing dilemma for the visitor attempting to navigate their way around twenty-eight artists whose work incorporates such a diverse range of artistic methods and cultural influences. Unlike exhibitions designed with a historical framework or thematically-arranged rooms, visitors to *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* were required to make their own connections and unravel the 'rich associations'<sup>47</sup> between the art works. As with many of Tate Britain's contemporary exhibitions, interpretive panels next to the works were also kept to a minimum. This purposeful lack of structure was noted by press responses to the exhibition. For example, London's *Metro* encouraged visitors to 'browse Altermodern as a curiosity shop'<sup>48</sup> rather than a coherent whole, whilst Laura Cumming viewed any links between works as insubstantial: 'Altermodernism does not work as an idea so much as a web of observations'<sup>49</sup>. However, other critics such as Richard Dorment found the sheer variety and depth of the exhibition as a powerful and exciting alternative to other current exhibitions, such as the Saatchi Gallery's *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East*, whose terms of reference are 'rooted in one time and one place'<sup>50</sup>. By comparison *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* whilst baffling, ('A seemingly endless stream of politics, porn, science fiction, history, culture and science flows past you so fast that when you leave it its hard to say where you've been'<sup>51</sup>) also offers intrigue and the desire to 'return again and again'<sup>52</sup> to uncover the networks of connections between works which is offered by Bourriaud's concept.

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<sup>44</sup> Bourriaud, N., (ed.) *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), p.20.

<sup>45</sup> Judith Nesbitt (Chief Curator, Tate Britain), interview by author.

<sup>46</sup> Bourriaud, N., (ed.) *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, p.12.

<sup>47</sup> Judith Nesbitt (Chief Curator, Tate Britain), interview by author.

<sup>48</sup> F. Macdonald, 'Altermodern' *Metro* (9 February 2009), p.25.

<sup>49</sup> Laura Cumming, 'The world as a waste of space' *The Observer Review* (8 February 2009), p.19.

<sup>50</sup> Dorment, R., 'Altermodern, Tate Triennial 2009, review' *The Daily Telegraph* (2 February 2009).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

### 1.3 Travels: Artistic Mobility

*Altermodern: Tate Triennial* spilled out and migrated across the entire length of Tate Britain's Duveen Galleries, with a collection of works commissioned for the Triennial also being displayed through some of the free, public spaces of the gallery. These itinerant art works symbolised another key facet of the 'altermodern': the notion of mobility both in terms of artist's ability to travel and migrate between different cultural influences, and the use of a plethora of artistic techniques within each particular work: 'a new real and virtual mobility; the surfing of different disciplines'<sup>53</sup>. As Judith Nesbitt explained, the placement of art works throughout the gallery spaces of Tate Britain was a purposeful strategy to reflect this: 'There is a kind of web that is spun across the galleries at the moment ... we wanted this Triennial to seep out and to have presence in different parts of the gallery and to be drawing people in ... And we knew that the exhibition needed a certain girth, it needed to be able to spread laterally to cumulatively have enough space to do its work.'<sup>54</sup> As well as the works in the Duveen Galleries, Triennial artists Peter Coffin and Shezad Dawood used other spaces within Tate Britain to exhibit their responses to the exhibition. For example, Peter Coffin's work *Untitled (Tate Britain)* (2009) re-mixed works from Tate's permanent Collection using a projected animation to produce a new narrative to connect works by artists from a range of periods including William Hogarth (1697-1764) and Nan Goldin (b. 1953). The central positioning of this exhibition within the gallery spaces of Tate Britain perhaps highlighted a new curatorial commitment to exploring issues around cultural difference. In previous years, many displays devised to investigate ideas around difference, such as *Picturing Blackness in British Art* (1995); *Seeing Africa* (2005) and *Outsider Art* (2006), have been consigned to a dedicated yet marginal display space known as the Goodison Room, designed to 'adopt different approaches to the rest of the Collection displays and address a different range of issues, including ... assumptions about art, art history and the museum.'<sup>55</sup> In this way, *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* provided the opportunity to explore the complex notions associated with the 'global' in an appropriately central, open-ended and fluid display space.

The idea of mobility is also reflected in the idea of producing art works on the move or in transit. As Laura Cumming put it, 'altermodernism ... is international art that never quite touches down but keeps on moving through places and ideas'<sup>56</sup>. This concept is reflected by the work of Walead Beshty who presents an installation of glass boxes which have been transported across the world in the Fedex boxes on which they stand in the exhibition. The boxes have become broken in places and altered in shape by each journey, and are 'in a continual state of change'. As the exhibition guide explains, these pieces 'are formed in the "non-places" that exist within international airspace'<sup>57</sup>. Rather than being bound to a particular space or time, these art works produced through the transient mode of travel. This idea is further exemplified by Beshty's partner pieces, large-scale photographs produced by exposing film to airport x-ray machines. Each piece is identified by the three-letter acronym

<sup>53</sup> Bourriaud, (ed.) *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, p.25.

<sup>54</sup> Judith Nesbitt (Chief Curator, Tate Britain), interview by author.

<sup>55</sup> Tate Report 2004-5.

<sup>56</sup> Laura Cumming, 'The world as a waste of space' *The Observer Review*.

<sup>57</sup> McSwein and Gaskin (eds.), *Altermodern: Exhibition Guide*, Exhibition Guide.

associated with each specific airport, such as [LAX/LHR LHR/LAX]<sup>58</sup>. The resulting images have a blurred, ethereal quality<sup>59</sup>, impossible to place but powerfully beautiful.

Despite the beauty of these pieces, the idealistic notion of artistic 'mobility' has been prone to questioning. At the Prologue event entitled 'Travels'<sup>60</sup>, artist Carsten Höller's keynote speech about his travels in the Congo was criticised by some members of the audience who felt the notion of the Western traveller as a free agent with no sense of cultural responsibility to be reminiscent of the ideologies of colonial travel during the nineteenth century. As Madeleine Keep, Curator: Adult Programmes notes, the position of the 'artist as wanderer' is problematic because 'the appropriation, the taking of aspects of another culture and then positioning it in their own culture in another country ... ignores a history, a contentious history.'<sup>61</sup> This contention provokes the question of whether the idea of a globe with no boundaries which allows artists the 'freedom to explore'<sup>62</sup> is realistic in a world where familial and national ties are still highly relevant.

#### 1.4 Exiles: The 'Passer-By'

Throughout this article, I have suggested that fixed notions of cultural identity are currently being called into question. Bourriaud responds to this crisis of identity with the idea that 'artists nowadays start from a globalized cultural state, from where they try to reach more specific fields, and not the other way round.'<sup>63</sup> He notes that artists 'no longer need to sell their cultural roots' in the global world, and instead seek to 'escape from the confines of nationalism and identity-tagging' as a reaction against the 'economic standardisation of globalisation'<sup>64</sup>. In this respect, the relevance of locating such an exhibition in a national institution is linked more to the role of Tate Britain as a meeting-place, than as a point of origin, 'I prefer to show London as a magnet for influences and energies that originate elsewhere.'<sup>65</sup> To highlight this point further, Bourriaud has identified a new category of artist for *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*: the 'passer-by'<sup>66</sup>. The 'passer-by' defines those artists who were neither born nor live in Britain, but whose practices and perspectives have somehow been influenced by passing through British culture. The emergence of this new category offers Tate Britain the first significant opportunity to engage with international contemporary artists since its opening in 2000.

Nine of Bourriaud's selected artists fall into the category of 'passer-by'. One of these artists is Subodh Gupta, an artist who was born and currently lives and works in India. His colossal mushroom-cloud sculpture created from Indian stainless steel cooking utensils, 'Line of Control' (2008), was located at

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Lizzie Carey-Thomas, *Altermodern: Tate Triennial 2009* Curator's talk, Tate Britain.

<sup>60</sup> Tate Triennial 2009: Prologue 3 'Travels', Saturday 18 October 2008, Tate Britain Auditorium.

<sup>61</sup> Madeleine Keep (Curator: Adult Programmes, Tate Britain), interview by author, digital voice recording, 1 December 2008, London.

<sup>62</sup> Bourriaud, (ed.) *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), p.20.

<sup>63</sup> Tom Morton, 'Tate Triennial 2009' *Frieze* (Issue 120, January 2009), ([www.frieze.com/issue/article/tate\\_triennial\\_2009](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/tate_triennial_2009))

<sup>64</sup> Bourriaud, N., (ed.) *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, p.11.

<sup>65</sup> Morton, T., 'Tate Triennial 2009' *Frieze*.

<sup>66</sup> *Tate Triennial 2009* microsite, 17 November 2008.

the heart of Tate Britain's Duveen Galleries. The title of the work referred to the military border between the Indian- and Pakistan-controlled parts of Kashmir. The work displays contradictory elements as both an imposing and seemingly terrifying structure evoking destruction and atomic war; and a joyful 'cloud-burst of prosperity, peace and harmony', evoking ideas of Indian modernity and progression<sup>67</sup>. The placement of this piece in the free non-exhibition spaces of the Duveen Galleries was designed to give Tate Britain visitors the opportunity to become 'passers-by' themselves with the freedom to wander past Triennial pieces on their journeys to or from Tate Britain's permanent historic or contemporary display spaces. As Victoria Walsh puts it, 'I think there is a correlation between the recognition that not just the artists but the viewing subjects, the visitors, all come from within very fluid viewing practices and very fluid sets of visual cultures.'<sup>68</sup>. In this way, the exhibition strategy allows a reflection on the multitude of possibilities for visitors to interact with art works that refuse to be constrained by the limits of assigned exhibition spaces.

The notion of the 'passer-by' and the idea of a global identity which is not fixed to a particular space or place is certainly resonant with the emergent findings of Tate Encounters, which showed that young people no longer wish to be categorised primarily by their cultural roots. In a recent interview on race relations in contemporary Britain, Shezad Dawood, an British-born artist who is part of *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, further supports the notion that artists are moving away from fixed notions of cultural identity, 'With disappointment, I've seen a younger generation of Asians go back to their roots in a very one-dimensional way ... But what are your roots? They've multiplied and fragmented since then. Rather than getting alarmist about losing culture, that multiplicity is actually where it becomes interesting and is something we should all embrace.'<sup>69</sup>

Whilst the 'passer-by' is a new category for Tate Britain, a dominant critique of the exhibition has been that the terms and definitions of the 'altermodern' are not new or different to existing notions of postmodern art practice: 'It is most definitely postcolonial, transitional and to some extent provisional, but what it is not, I don't think, is anything as grand, or significant, as a movement'<sup>70</sup>. As Victoria Walsh highlights, one of the student co-researchers on the Tate Encounters project shared this notion that '[the exhibition] really wasn't radical ... at all'<sup>71</sup>, instead it could be seen to comprise of works which link as much to postmodern artistic movements as to a global 'altermodern' state. However, the co-researcher did note that, 'It was radical ... that Tate Britain would be home to this kind of manifesto'<sup>72</sup>.

Whilst *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* may not offer a radical interpretation within the wider field of contemporary art, it has already raised new debates and questions for Tate Britain. In the concluding

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<sup>67</sup> McSwein and Gaskin (eds.), *Altermodern: Exhibition Guide*, Exhibition Guide.

<sup>68</sup> Victoria Walsh (Head of Adult Programmes, Tate Britain), interview by author.

<sup>69</sup> Shezad Dawood in 'All Together Now? A Portrait of Race in Britain' *The Observer Magazine* (18 January 2009), 25.

<sup>70</sup> Laura Cumming, 'The world as a waste of space' *The Observer Review*.

<sup>71</sup> Victoria Walsh (Head of Adult Programmes, Tate Britain), interview by author.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

section of this report, I will further investigate whether the *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* has left a legacy in relation to the future development of global cultural practices at Tate Britain.

## Conclusion

The term 'global' can be simply defined in terms of gallery practice by virtue of its fluid notions of cultural identity and an emphasis on discursive and experimental practice. As I have discussed, the 'global' can demonstrably be seen within Tate Britain's current practices, most evidently in relation to the Curator: Cross-Cultural role and the Tate Encounters research programme, but also through exhibitions such as *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*. Whilst this article has been limited to an examination of one specific exhibition, it is worth noting that the 'global' is a concept which is equally relevant to the other public-facing practices of the gallery, including Marketing, Visitor Services, Development and Human Resources. In a longer study, it would be interesting to investigate this model in relation to these wider aspects of activity at Tate.

Within the scope of this particular study, I would argue that new terms such as the 'cross-cultural' or 'global' are most significantly embedded within the gallery's education practices. This is perhaps largely due to the fact that both the Curator: Cross-Cultural post and the Tate Encounters research programme have been in place since 2005, and have had a more sustained opportunity to influence wider education practice within the gallery. However, the range of education programming around *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* engaging specifically with the complex notions of global identity and cross-disciplinary dialogue further proved the Learning department's expertise in this field. Whilst this first 'global' exhibition at Tate Britain has been led by an external curator, *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* highlights a willingness on the part of the institution to investigate contemporary global perspectives within its exhibition programme, as well as demonstrating an awareness of the important role that the 'global' plays in understanding the 'British' identity in contemporary culture.

As Victoria Walsh highlights, the exhibition 'has facilitated some great discussions and debate ['at an institutional level'], and ... has complicated the notion of Tate Britain as the place of British art'<sup>73</sup>. Bourriaud's manifesto provokes interesting questions in relation to Tate Britain's cultural positioning, which Tate Britain has energetically taken on board with a wide range of related exhibition programming to contextualise and interrogate these questions further. The 'passer-by' as an equivalent category to the British citizen, and the concept of London as a cultural meeting-place rather than a point of origin are particularly pertinent in relation to the gallery's partner site, Tate Modern which focuses specifically on displaying modern and contemporary international art. However, Judith Nesbitt suggests that 'it can only be helpful to have these two lenses at work simultaneously ... [it] doesn't mean that the British doesn't come into the international perspective at

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<sup>73</sup> Victoria Walsh (Head of Adult Programmes, Tate Britain), interview by author.

Tate Modern, and nor does it mean that the international doesn't come into the British perspective here ... it should be a rich doubling.'<sup>74</sup>

By its very nature, the term 'cross-cultural' is rooted in notions of fluidity, dialogue and the refusal to be trapped by essential definitions. However, as T J Demos highlights in relation to this global condition, and specifically the figure of the cultural nomad, 'what means of social commonality or solidarity is available to this class of itinerant individuals? How does the nomadic avoid collapsing ...?'<sup>75</sup> T J Demos suggests that the figure of the nomad is perhaps too idealistic: In reality, all people are still bound by strong national and familial ties. For the museum, the nomadic ideal of the 'cross-cultural' risks falling into the same politicised and overly-simplistic categories of cultural difference that were mapped out by 'cultural diversity' and 'multiculturalism' in the 1990s. For example, by categorising the number of 'passer-by' artists who took part in *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, do we fall into the same target-setting trends of cultural diversity politics? If so, it is important that new markers for achievement are mapped out which reflect more closely the free-flowing theory of globalisation.

In order to continue to reflect the ever-changing culture outside its gallery walls, the 'global' at Tate Britain should remain a discursive, self-reflexive and critical approach across all areas of its work, in order to avoid definitions of culture becoming static or outdated. This emerging institution-wide dedication to promoting an informed approach to diversity in all areas of Tate Britain's work is evident in the terms of the 'Tate for All' Diversity Strategy and Tate Encounters. Meanwhile, *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* has offered a valuable opportunity for Tate Britain to re-assess its own positioning in relation to the global trends affecting artistic practice, museum theory and visitor make-up in today's society. Through such approaches, Tate Britain could successfully develop to mirror the fluid and shifting nature of the current global condition within its every day gallery practice, 'reflecting the world in Britain and Britain into the world'<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Judith Nesbitt (Chief Curator, Tate Britain), interview by author.

<sup>75</sup> T J Demos 'The Ends of Exile: Toward a Coming Universality?' in N Bourriaud (ed.), *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), p.78.

<sup>76</sup> Anon. *Tate Funding Agreement 2008-2011*, p.1.