

Presenting the viewer with otherwise mundane objects and materials that have been transformed and (re)invested with value, *What It Really Is* reconciles seemingly disparate experiences of the everyday and the fantastical. Here, the interplay between the real and the replica provokes perceptual shifts, forcing our familiar reality to become momentarily strange and wonderful. ▶

ALTERMODERN: TATE TRIENNIAL 2009

Franz Ackermann, Darren Almond, Charles Avery, Walead Beshty, Spartacus Chetwynd, Marcus Coates, Peter Coffin, Matthew Darbyshire, Shezad Dawood, Tacita Dean, Ruth Ewan, Loris Gréaud, Subodh Gupta, Rachel Harrison, Joachim Koester, Nathaniel Mellors, Gustav Metzger, Mike Nelson, David Noonan, Katie Paterson, Olivia Plender, Seth Price, Navin Rawanchaikul, Lindsay Seers, Bob and Roberta Smith, Simon Starling, Pascale Marthine Tayou, Tris Vonna-Michell, Tate Britain, London.

by CHARLENE LAU

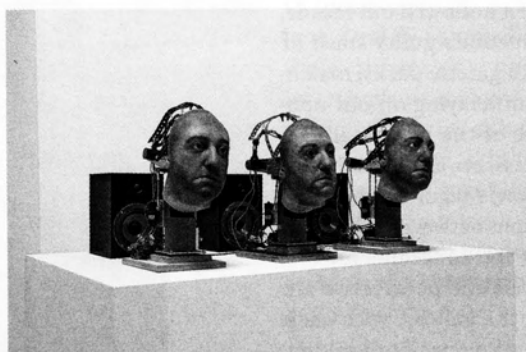
The man who fostered the regular use of the artspeak term “relational aesthetics” to describe the near end of postmodernism now brings us another term: “Altermodern.” While many people are hesitant to put labels on things, Nicholas Bourriaud is an exception. An unabashed taxonomist, he has put the kibosh on the “one thing followed by another” exercise that has been plaguing modernism and its descendents. Altermodernism attempts to free itself of postmodernism’s stranglehold, classifying the unclassifiable whilst trying to tame the conformingly nonconformist ways of artists. It seems Bourriaud is pandering to a grander stage for this neologism to be recognized on a greater cultural scale. Case in point, a look at the exhibition’s website reveals that there is a lot of didactic material: a cartoon based on a french fry named “Chipiski the Altermodernist,” short videos with Bourriaud explaining the term and a manifesto proclaiming that postmodernism is dead and breaking down the basic themes of alter-

modernism. There is even a Facebook application attuned to the teenaged girl in all of us: a quiz to determine to what extent one is altermodern.

Bourriaud says that “alter” is equivalent to otherness. It appears he is suggesting some post-colonial form of art for everyone, but I can’t help but think of Saïd and wonder what he would say to this, especially since Bourriaud is a white, French male. Are artists and their art cultural others? He also states that history is the new continent, but it sounds to me like these statements are all leftovers from postmodernism. Has he lost his way a little, forgetting that his job as curator is to reveal how this art addresses and describes a new cultural moment, not necessarily to

international tone of altermodernism; however, upon closer inspection, the exhibition belies localization and reinforces centralized cultural production. With 26 of the 28 artists either being of European descent or residing in Europe or America, the premise breaks down.

Set in the north Duveen Gallery, the front hall of the exhibition has a hush-hush museum atmosphere. It could not be a more perfect space for Ruth Ewan’s best-in-show *Squeezebox Jukebox* (2009), a giant built-to-scale sparkly accordion. Made in Castelfidardo, Italy, the international capital of accordion builders, it is the world’s largest working accordion. Every day, two people standing on stools play protest songs from Ewan’s collection that is titled



Nathaniel Mellors, *Giantbum*, 2009, video installation with animatronic sculpture
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MATT’S GALLERY, LONDON

manufacture an overarching historical exegesis? It seems that in this sense the exhibit fails, as Bourriaud stretches to arrange art to serve his context, rather than have his curatorial framework emerge from the art. However, this observation should not detract from the art itself.

Among the 28 artists, there are the usual impressive names: Franz Ackermann, Tacita Dean, Bob and Roberta Smith and Simon Starling. More importantly, there are strong presentations from young upstarts. Some hits, some misses, but overall, a notable and huge overview of what is happening in contemporary art today. According to Bourriaud, altermodern art features themes of travel, borders and exile, all part of today’s reality in the advent of globalization and the increased frequency by which issues of displacement and expanding boundaries appear. While still relevant today, these themes are not new, having prevailed within modernism. Many of these artists are dislocated from their birthplaces, superficially supporting the

“A Jukebox of People Trying to Change the World.” It is a clever instrument (pun intended) of leftist ideology, illustrating its struggle for social change with an oversized, clumsy and inelegant object.

Franz Ackermann’s <<*Gateway*>>-*Getaway* (2008–09) is a jarring, visually confrontational installation featuring a psychedelic painting, a video and a large metal cage. <<*Gateway*>>-*Getaway* provides a big splash that makes the art after it appear grey and boring, which is exactly what I experienced when I walked into a room of Tacita Dean’s melancholic series of photogravures on paper entitled *The Russian Ending* (2002). My eyes were too busy recovering from Ackermann’s visual assault to care about what I initially thought were stodgy old black-and-white photographs. Dean’s work suffers from its poor contextual placement, not from its content, for she crafts tragic endings to imagined films that are based on the visual narratives of historical images.

Aside from this misstep, the rest of the

show manages to regain balance. There is a strong showing from super-multi-disciplinarian Loris Gréaud, who elegantly transforms the interior gallery spaces in *Tremors Where Forever (Frequency of an Image, White Edit)* (2008). Using a series of futuristic and all white “micro vibrators,” Gréaud communicates his brainwaves, having converted them into electrical frequencies. The result: viewers experience the now physical brainwaves through their feet as pulsating bass is broadcasted through the vibrators. It is an aesthetic, technological, conceptually and technically dense installation. Also noteworthy are Walead Beshty’s FedExed shatterproof glass boxes (seen previously at the 2008 Whitney Biennial) paired with photographs. Printed from negatives sent through an airport X-ray machine, these images and the FedEx boxes reveal his process as recorded by international transit.

Just as the show is about to recover from motion sickness, Nathaniel Mellors’ video/animatronic installation, *Giantbum* (2009) revives the sick as a nightmarish nuisance. Housed in a partially covered, foul-smelling maze-like environment, the visitor is led through a dark tunnel containing videos of actors rehearsing and performing a play (written by Mellors), which is staged inside a giant and his bowels. In the play, coprophilia and cannibalism are presented as a method of cultural regeneration. At the end of the tunnel is a white room featuring three animatronic heads groaning and moaning with their eyes rolling about. It is ridiculous, with no apparent reason for using coprophilia as subject matter, except that it is taboo.

Luckily, the exhibition redeems itself with Subodh Gupta’s *Line of Control* (2008), a phrase used to describe disputed territories from Bosnia to Kashmir. Not to be missed, the towering mushroom cloud of stainless steel kitchen accessories gleams and threatens to engulf the viewer in all its marketplace majesty. It symbolizes the explosive point where the mundane everyday clashes with political reality in the chasm between tension and resolution. To me, this work is an apt reflection of what is happening now in art—artists struggling to define a new position of global being through an aesthetic language—regardless of whatever framework Bourriaud is attempting to construct. The curator tries a little too hard here to provide an answer to art’s ongoing existential nightmare and the show suffers at the hands of Bourriaud

because he overasserts his ideology of altermodernism. Let the art speak and leave it at that. ▶

THE HUGO BOSS PRIZE 2008: EMILY JACIR

The Guggenheim Museum, New York

by LEAH MODIGLIANI

The seventh instalment of the Hugo Boss Prize displays two related installations by the Palestinian-American artist Emily Jacir: *Material for a film* (2004–), and *Material for a film (performance)* (2006). Jacir has become well known for photo-, video- and performance-based conceptual artworks that express the psychological and physiological crises of social and political displacement.

Material for a film (2004–) is a collection of objects relating to the life and death of Palestinian intellectual and suspected (but never proven) terrorist sympathizer Wael Zuaiter, who was killed by Mossad agents in Rome in 1972, following the massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. Photographs of Zuaiter’s personal letters to and from family and friends, recordings of his voice, photographs of some of the covers of books he owned, speakers playing music he liked and other personal effects are displayed in simple white frames and vitrines placed throughout



Emily Jacir, *Material for a film*, 2005–06, installation and performance, 1000 blank books shot by the artist with a 22 caliber gun, mixed media, and photographs, dimensions variable.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ALEXANDER AND BONIN, NEW YORK. INSTALLATION VIEW, SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK, 2009

PHOTO: DAVID HEALD

three intimately sized rooms. For the most part, these objects are text-heavy, telling the story of Zuaiter’s life through physical fragments collected by Jacir and documented in photographs.

The exhibition also includes recent snapshots Jacir took of the places where Zuaiter and his family lived, accompanied by first-person narratives of the artist’s experiences visiting them. Each diary entry is dated and together they cover several years of research and travel. In many instances they feel confessional, somewhere between a scrapbook, a fanzine and a long and tragic unanswered love letter. It is important that Zuaiter’s personal effects on display are all photographic copies—no real documents are present—so that his life is clearly represented through the personal mediation of the artist who has curated what facts she deems important to the story, which also becomes her story.

A centrepiece of this work is a large grouping of 67 photographs that show the pages of Zuaiter’s copy of *A Thousand and One Nights* (Vol. 2), a literary classic that he wanted to translate directly from Arabic to Italian. Because he was carrying it when he died, this particular book was pierced by one of the 13 bullets that killed him near the elevator of his apartment building. Jacir photographed each open set of pages against a white background, and these photos are pinned directly to the wall next to each other in a formal grid that reads from right to left. As English speakers, the majority of Guggenheim visitors are blocked from reading the Arabic text, so both the absence of a translation and the violence of the bullet hole in each page become prominent features. The famous story of a queen’s trick to postpone her own death by another night by telling her murderous husband another in an endless series of tales is applied to Zuaiter’s life and translated in Jacir’s hands into a poetic metaphor of difference, politics and loss. This was the inspiration for both installations; the press release quotes Jacir as saying that the work is a “memorial to untold stories... to stories that will never be written.”

Jacir’s memorial is most obvious in the second installation, *Material for a film (performance)* (2006). A square room is lined with shallow white shelves that hold one thousand small white books, each one shot by Jacir with a .22 calibre pistol (the same kind of gun used to kill Zuaiter), and displayed with its cover facing outwards so that the small hole is visible. The white silence of the room echoes a mausoleum. In fact, the bullet holes are so small and delicate that the violence of the shooting feels less significant than the expanse of unwritten white pages, which seem doubly