"Teeth-grittingly awful": Gateway-Getaway 2008-09, one of Franz Ackermann's collages in Tate Triennial 2009. Photograph: PR

The big thing about the fourth Tate Triennial, which is otherwise only as good, bad or dispiriting as all the others (except the last, which was unusually poor), is that it centres upon a governing idea. Everything in it has been chosen because it flows with a current, or at least a drift, in contemporary art that the curator has identified and labelled. Altermodernism, he calls it, with no attempt at seductive poetry.

**Altermodern: Tate Triennial 2009**
Tate Britain,
London
SW1
Until 26 April

It is worth paying attention to Nicolas Bourriaud if you are a watcher on the art promontory. He co-founded the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, which trumps our ICA by being both suave and exciting as a venue for experimental art. And he came up with practically the only substantial theory of art in recent years - relational aesthetics, in which art is what you might call user-friendly, creating environments and experiences that are open to all kinds of human relationships rather than just the conventional one-to-one encounter of person with object. Think of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's heaps of take-away sweeties or Carsten Höller's Tate Modern slides.

Compared with other French theorists, or indeed theorist-curators, Bourriaud is not especially hard to follow and never too lofty to cite actual examples. The whole of this show, for instance, plays out his latest notion through the work of 28 artists and some very concentrated wall-texts. The artists are invited to disagree with him (there is sporadic dissent in the catalogue) and precisely the same conditions hold for the public.

Altermodernism, if I understand it, is international art that never quite touches down but keeps on moving through places and ideas, made by artists connected across the globe rather than grouped around any central hub such as New York or London. You
might take the worldwide web as a model and think in terms of hyperlinks, continuous updates and cultural hybrids. 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.

Bourriaud is not wrong, it seems to me, to find affinities among the artists represented. English artist Darren Almond has been orbiting the world taking long-exposure photographs of the full moon, in this case over China. German artist Franz Ackermann never stops travelling and some of his wall-sized collages of semi-abstract fragments were actually made in transit.

Almond's photographs are as beautiful as the watercolour scrolls they echo. There the connection ends. Ackermann's paintings, knee-deep in semiotics - signage, tourism, satnav graphics etc - are teeth-grittingly awful.

Katie Paterson's map of many thousands of dead stars is a futile attempt to commemorate the history of the universe, obsolete the moment it was made since so many stars have since died. Compared to the astronomical knowledge it represents, the map is visually a dead bore.

Walead Beshty's glass boxes, incessantly Fed-Exed across the globe, aim to record a trajectory through the "non-places" within international air-space, each box "sculpted" by the journey. Translation: they got broken in transit.

I couldn't even begin to express the inanity of Simon Starling's latest project, involving a desk designed but never made by Francis Bacon for Australian writer Patrick White, except to say that, with his addiction to pointless projects, Starling is unlikely ever to be superseded as the least interesting of all Turner Prize-winning artists.

Bourriaud talks a lot about time and space, referring to them as the last terra incognita for art. In fact, he just means history and geography and it wouldn't be hard to come up with a long list of successful art-explorers from the past. But again, one sees certain links between artists.

Olivia Plender stumbles across a breakaway sect from the scouting movement in the 1920s. She tells the story of the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift in words and pictures for idiots, parodying the way we narrate history. (Although her observations of modern times, interspersed, are worryingly simple-minded).

Matthew Darbyshire notices similarities between state-sponsored architecture of the past and present - between the socialist realist Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw and Will Alsop's arrogantly whimsical contemporary arts centre, the Public, in West Bromwich. Astute and satirical ideas in the catalogue, alas, translate into nothing more than pastiche décor juxtaposed in the gallery.

In fact, the more one considers the art as opposed to the ideas the worse this show seems. There are good things here, notably Marcus Coates's gentle film in which the artist, accoutred with stuffed animal heads, solicits a question about youth violence from an Israeli mayor which he then pretends to answer, shamanically, on behalf of the animal world with a long-winded but beautifully shrewd parable about plovers.
And it is great to see new work by Tacita Dean in the form of one-frame films, ghostly visions of shipwrecks, explosions and inexplicable phenomena entirely conveyed through enlarged photographs inscribed with evocative script directions.

But Dean, with her poet's imagination, has no more connection with altermodernism than with the YBAs, the artists who just happen to be her contemporaries. And I have no idea why Gustav Metzger, now in his eighties, is represented here with the kind of liquid-crystal light show he used to create for Cream concerts at the Roundhouse, other than the fact that, since his flight from the Nazis in the 1940s, the German-born artist has been stateless.

Metzger's projections are monotonous but sensual, at least, compared to so much else here: scatological videos, half-baked observations, stream-of-consciousness performances. It is a dull show in the end, with few exceptions, just as Altermodernism itself is not a very thrilling definition, or redefinition, of where art may be heading.

It is by no means certain, in any case, that any theory of art that can be made to stretch all the way from Tacita Dean to Franz Ackermann is of much ultimate value. Altermodernism does not work as an idea so much as a web of observations, a web with a weaver at its centre. The real hyperlink here is not the art, but Bourriaud himself.