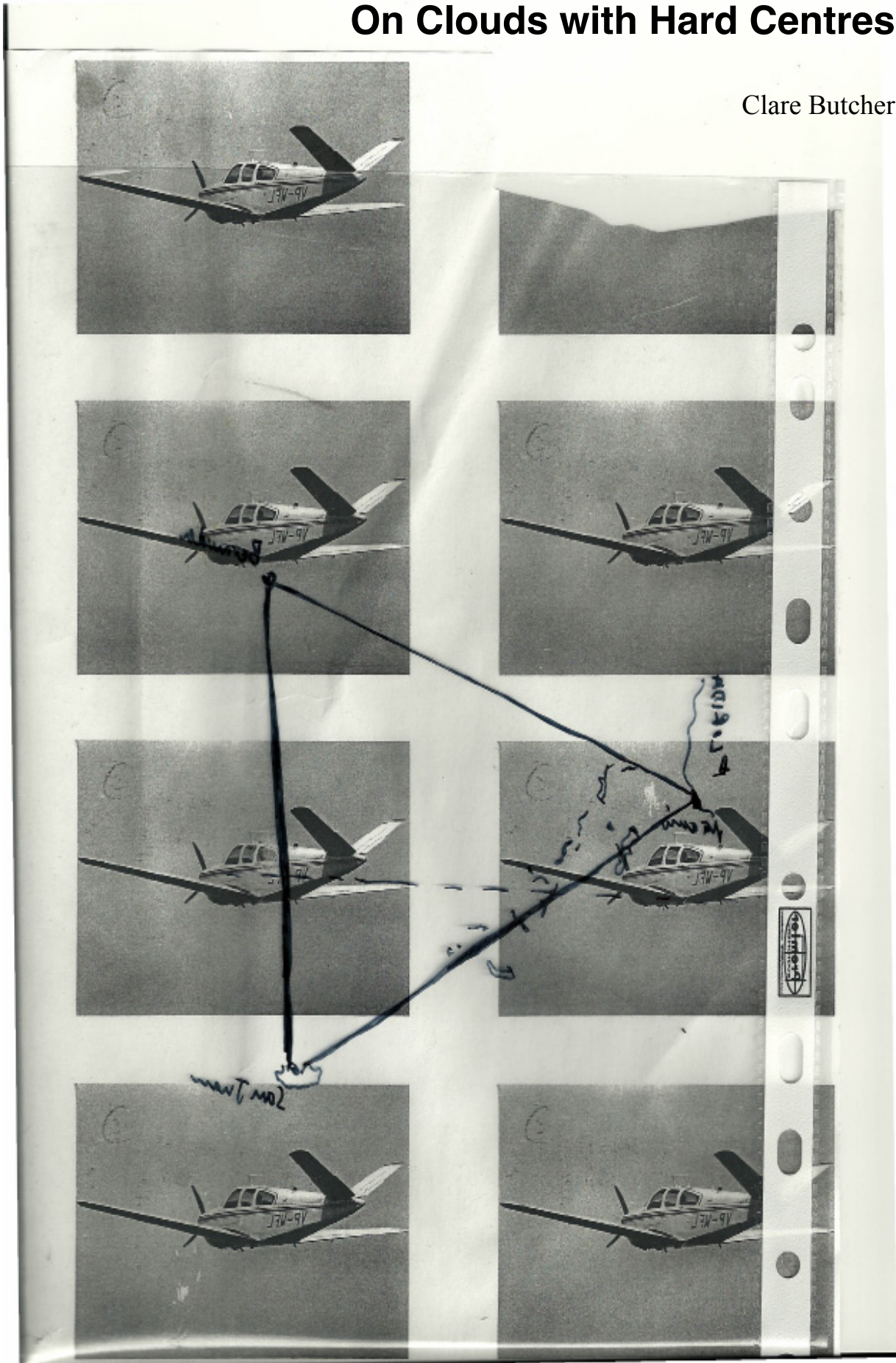
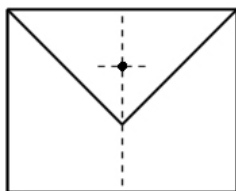
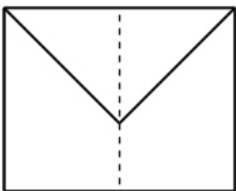
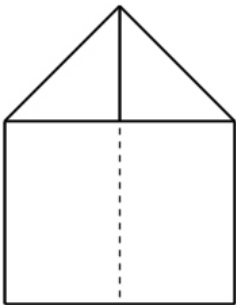
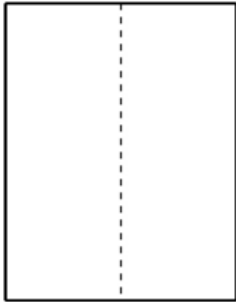


On Clouds with Hard Centres

Clare Butcher



*That is why we are in a kind of lull or interregnum in which we can no longer practice the dogmatism of a single truth and in which we are not yet capable of conquering the scepticism into which we have stepped.*¹



In many ways the history of exhibition-making is a history of border-crossing and risky navigation. If one thinks about it in basic terms, the movement of ideas and objects between one location and another, from the foreign to the familiar – whether it be through conquest, piety, curiosity, diplomacy – is implicit in the process of defining or expressing supposedly ‘embedded’ cultural values.² Through the juxtaposing of different things in the time and space of display, these objects and their viewers deflect, unsettle, ‘cross-check’ each other in a negotiation of what something is and is not. This statement may sound obvious but in fact, the historical belief in the power of objects (and I am speaking now about precious and/or art objects more specifically) to transport and translate, still forms the basis of contemporary curatorial practice.

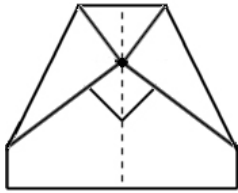
In an era made up of so many ‘posts’: post-Soviet, -colonial, -structural, etc. the prospect of an itinerant cargo of cultural artefacts and agents is tremendously appealing. One only has to look at the exponential increase of roaming art biennials, lofty World Expos, the pseudo-missionising ambitions of geographic survey shows (all time classic titles including the 2006-7 touring exhibition, *Wherever we go: Art, identity, cultures in transit*) – and with those the expansion of an international market – to understand the push and pull of the local and the universal, the ethnically essentialised and the cosmopolitan, in the making of what we consider to be a global contemporary culture.

As a curator of contemporary art myself, I find the conception of exhibitions as a kind of *terra nullius*, wherein aesthetic as well as socio-political dimensions might take shape autonomously, continues to be navigated by the arguably faulty tools of multicultural and internationalist discourse, which so dominated the last decades. Though many are aware of it, there seems little appreciation for the real conditions of discrepant broadband speeds, wildly unpredictable customs policies, visa requirements and straight-forward fear of flying. The work of many artists is often functionalised for purportedly ‘global’ ends but is done only so on the basis of its capacity to represent/speak for/communicate a certain regional origin. This phenomenon has been dubbed ‘parachuting,’ wherein curators,

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, Trans. Charles A. Kelbley, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1965, p 283.

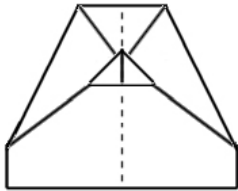
² See more on this in Stephen Greenblatt’s *Cultural Mobility: A manifesto*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010; as well as Stephen Bann’s ‘Shrines, Curiosities and the Rhetoric of Display,’ *Visual Display: Culture beyond appearances*, Eds. Lynne Cooke and Peter Wollen, Dia Center for the Arts, New York, 1995, pp 15-29.

themes and artworks fall from the sky and must somehow create a meaningful context in the void of the exhibition's usually off-white cube.³ Losses in translation are considered unavoidable collateral damage.

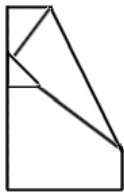


Pilot: *I think if you were to look at the area from a climate point of view, it is a very disturbed climactic area. Lots of clouds, storms and I would suspect that the majority of aircraft problems have been experienced by relatively small ones.*

And related to these conditions?



P: *Yes, you know it's a large amount of water that you're flying over. You look at the landmasses and think – oh, they're not so far away – but you've got South America, the Caribbean Islands, and you should always be able to 'put down' somewhere. But there is a great saying: there are old pilots, and bold pilots, but no old, bold pilots – because they're gone, and they go into the Bermuda Triangle. That's my view on this. It's a nice legend and it's something to terrify people who fly across that part of the world. Even in something as big as a Dakota⁴ – probably not well maintained, minimal navigational instruments. The pilot is probably bearded and hairy, and gives you the impression that he's done this a hundred times but in fact he's as scared as hell as you are as he runs into the cloud.*



So there are no large aircrafts that go into this area? Are they all flying too high?

P: *If they do, they all have proper navigational equipment. It's mostly those trafficking drugs, passengers who want to see 'real life' low down.*



Do you remember when people started talking about this as a phenomenon?

P: *It was probably after the Second World War – there were lots of second-hand Dakotas, and other smaller aircrafts with nothing in the way of instruments except what we call 'dead reckoning.' And 'dead reckoning' is you know: you plot your course, you ask if you're able, what the weather conditions are likely to be and allow for wind drift and that sort of thing, and take off, flying into weather. You look be-*



³ See Clementine Deliss's text on the notion of curatorial 'free fall' in 'Free Fall – Freeze Frame: Africa, exhibitions, artists,' in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, Ed. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson, Sandy Nairne, Routledge, New York, 1996, pp 275-294.

⁴ The Dakota, or Douglas DC-3 aircraft, revolutionised commercial air transport in the 1930s and 1940s due to its speed and extended fuselage.

hind you and that's thick too. So what do you do? You go down low, hoping you'll keep an eye on the sea. And it gets thicker and thicker. You can imagine it from the sea mist here. Your altimeter says you are at fifty feet. And you knock it and think – give another 100! And it doesn't. And then your propeller blades hit the water and then you're in. No one ever knows because you are out of range with your radio.

Why would that be?

P: *Because it's dependent on line of sight. The lower you go, the less visibility, radio visibility, you have.*

...I remember it was black as a devil's hat. And old Eddie was having a real problem even with reasonable equipment. So eventually he flew out to sea so we didn't hit any landmass – which is what they call 'clouds with hard centres.'

I conducted an interview with my grandfather a number of years ago concerning his perception of the climatically and historically turbulent zone of the Bermuda Triangle. I was interested in hearing from him, as a pilot himself, what the conditions were which predisposed the area to so much mythologising. As a symbol of placelessness within which things get mysteriously lost, and onto which stories get projected, the Triangle's significance for this discussion is perhaps obvious.⁵

LOCAL LIGHT, TECTONICS AND THE VOID

In his text, written more than twenty years ago, entitled 'Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance,'⁶ Kenneth Frampton addresses the importance of, what I suppose we could call, ambiguity in the making of signs and structures in contemporary culture. Ambiguous because these signs and structures exist in a constant tension between adhering to certain 'universal' styles (he was speaking specifically about architectural practice) while also responding to the architectonics of an actual location. 'How to become modern and return to sources?' he asks, quoting Paul Ricoeur.⁷ A building after all, is a thing which, like any other visible object, stands in syntax with surrounding elements. The light in a particular place, the temperature, the topography...all these tend to embed the form and its image. And it is this embedding that is often captured by parochial Populist or 'sentimental' Regionalist discourse of nostalgic vernacularism and constructed historicity, in which objects become propaganda for myopic social imaginaries.⁸

⁵ This interview and the original exhibition poster designed by the *Dada South?* team first appeared in the collaborative publication, *Objects in the Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear*, with windferreira and Palais de Tokyo on the event of the *Terminal Convention*, Cork, Ireland, 2011. With special thanks to my grandfather, EDD Cochrane, and poster designers Francis Burger and Christian Nerf.

⁶ Kenneth Frampton, 'Towards A Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance,' Ed. Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on postmodern culture*, Bay Press, Port Townsen, 1983, pp 17-34.

⁷ *Ibid.* p 17.

⁸ Peio Aguirre places Frampton's discussion in relation to a global art context in his article 'The State of Spain: Nationalism, Critical Regionalism, and Biennialization,' e-flux journal, 22, 2011, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-state-of-spain-nationalism-critical-regionalism-and-biennialization>, Accessed 01 November 2013.

Frampton argues that a Critical Regionalism, however, is predicated not on the entrenching of cultural artefacts (both concrete and conceptual), but rather on the capacity of those things to create a distance from the coordinates of ‘real life,’ as well as from the world of outside influences so seamlessly at work in a place. This distance is created by the confounding of traditional evaluative or navigational tools that would usually allow for the functionalisation or easy interpretation of a site/symbol. Forgive me if I’m misrepresenting Frampton, but it seems that within this distance – the space of ‘dead reckoning’ and radio silence, the lull, as cited at the start of this text – that clouds with hard centres emerge.

Maybe we could take a detour through these overcast weather conditions towards Walter Benjamin’s conception of the artwork and its aura. For it is that space around an art object, its presence, its power, whatever you might call it, which comprises the work of exhibition in a broader sense. When seen from the perspective perhaps of curators and artists from postcolonial contexts, that aura or cloud, also could be measured in geo-historical terms, extending all the way from the periphery to the metropolitan museum. Still it is intangible – a vapour – that continues to dull the senses and obscure our flightpaths when attempting, as itinerant practitioners, to ‘put down’ on dry land the political/contextual imperatives of artistic work.

Rather than aura, which gets us into a bank of dense philosophical fog, let’s speak of the void, in the sense in which cultural theorist, Nikos Papastergiadis articulates. Beginning with an account of the sceptical silence in a seminar room following the question of how to interpret a piece of ‘Aboriginal art,’ the author traces the hazy borders surrounding the spaces of difference and cultural translation. In opposition to a more reductive understanding of how foreign and familiar ideas and objects ‘interact’ to create new meaning, Papastergiadis explores the ‘force of nothing’, of loss, along the way. Like the notion of aura, the void lies in the metaphysical experience of a tension between universal and particular understanding – ‘it’s about difference and the desire to communicate...a space in which at best, only fragments collide’. Governed by power differentials, indeterminacy, blackouts in radio visibility, the void designates a zone emptied of preconceived notions in which ‘to ponder the terms of a non-assimilationist political future:’⁹ an unreconciled vision of coexistence.



If we were to impose a structure on this emptiness, say, that of an exhibition for example, we return to Frampton and his differentiation between scenographic and tectonic approaches in the creation of spaces for critical contemplation. Rather than masking the framework with flat façades, the tectonic approach reveals the ligaments of a structure in order to instantiate its bold resistance of gravity. It is not about function, as the form would stand whether its innards were exposed or not. But rather, the exhibiting of those components, of its contrivance, ‘raises the construction to an art form’ itself (in the words of Karl Bötticher,

⁹ Nikos Papastergiadis, *Cosmopolitanism and Culture*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2012, p 1932.

published over a century ago). The space, therefore becomes a force capable of resisting a nostalgic idea of place because of its mobilising of both specific needs and universal values. And the objects and agents within it must confront a cloud of constructions and obstructions in order to travel through Triangles of many kinds.

OBSTRUCTION

In December of 2009, a landmark exhibition opened at the South African National Gallery entitled *Dada South? Exploring Dada Legacies in South African art, 1960 to the Present*.¹⁰ The question in the title is not the only link with our discussion of indeterminacy and ambiguity. This show saw the maverick navigation of waters between Dadaist practices developed under the cloud of various nationalisms in Europe over the last century and the radical work of artists who were influenced by such strategies during apartheid and after. The exhibition as a site of historical recuperation was not functionalised in the sense that smooth flight paths were being mapped elegantly across a tumultuous set of politically climactic conditions. Rather, skimming dangerously close to the surface of things in the post-euphoria of contemporary South Africa, the curators and their team exposed the workings of bureaucratic systems and the impervious borders of cultural institutions they experienced en route.

My favourite example of their exhibitionist tectonic approach came as a result of budgetary and logistical limitations. With so few Europe-based collections willing to allow the passage of precious objects to an unknown corner of Africa, the curators, aside from mortgaging a house to cover insurance, also chose a radical response to the question of becoming modern and returning to the source. The answer came in the form of a reconstruction of an artwork by Man Ray, a North American who made his career in Paris during the heydays of Dada and Surrealism. *Obstruction* is a piece comprising sixty-three wooden clothes hangers formed in the shape of a mobile. The original was considered too fragile and too valuable, to travel so far. But on the opening day of the exhibition on the Southern tip of Africa, there it was, the 'real thing' suspended above the murky depths of alternating art historical currents. Having followed the artist's instructions from 1920, the parachute-like mass of domestic artefacts was made art for a second time. From a certain position in the room, one could see only the rest of the works only through its refracted perspective. As a collision of fragments in a non-assimilated but corresponding composition of social realities. A set of coordinates to be navigated only by the boldest of pilots.

