The Egyptian delegation to the Eighth International Congress of Orientalists, held in Stockholm in the summer of 1889, travelled to Sweden via Paris and paused there to visit the World Exhibition. The four Egyptians spent several days in the French capital, climbing twice the height (as they reported) of the Great Pyramid in Alexandre Eiffel’s new tower, and exploring the city laid out beneath. They visited the carefully planned parks and pavilions of the exhibition, and examined the merchandise and machinery on display. Amid this order and splendour there was only one thing that disturbed them. The Egyptian exhibit had been built by the French to represent a winding street of Cairo, made of houses with overhanging upper stories and a mosque like that of Quitbay. ‘It was intended’, one of the Egyptians wrote, ‘to resemble the old aspect of Cairo.’ So carefully was this done, he noted, that ‘even the paint on the buildings was made dirty’.¹

The Egyptian exhibit had also been made carefully chaotic. In contrast to the geometric lines of the rest of the exhibition, the imitation street was laid out in the haphazard manner of the bazaar. The way was crowded with shops and stalls, where Frenchmen dressed as Orientals sold perfumes, pastries, and tarbushes. To complete the effect of the bazaar, the French organisers had imported from Cairo fifty Egyptian donkeys, together with their drivers and the requisite number of grooms, farriers, and saddlemakers. The donkeys gave rides for the price of one franc up and down the street, resulting in a clamour and confusion so life-like, the director of the exhibition was obliged to issue an order restricting the donkeys to a certain number at each hour of the day.

The Egyptian visitors were disgusted by all this and stayed away. Their final embarrassment had been to enter the door of the mosque and discover that, like the rest of the street, it had been erected as what the Europeans called a façade. ‘Its external form as a mosque was all that there was. As for the interior, it had been set up as a coffee house, where Egyptian girls performed dances with young males, and dervishes whirled.²

After eighteen days in Paris, the Egyptian delegation travelled on to Stockholm to attend the Congress of Orientalists. Together with other non-European delegates, the Egyptians were received with hospitality – and a
great curiosity. As though they were still in Paris, they found themselves something of an exhibit. 'Bona fide Orientalists', wrote a European participant in the congress, 'were stared at as in a Barnum's all-world show: the good Scandinavian people seemed to think that it was a collection of Orientals, not of Orientalists.' Some of the Orientalists themselves seemed to delight in the role of showmen. At an earlier congress, in Berlin, we are told that 'the grotesque idea was started of producing natives of Oriental countries as illustrations of a paper: thus the Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford produced a real live Indian Pandit, and made him go through the ritual of Brahmanical prayer and worship before a hilarious assembly...'. Professor Max Müller of Oxford produced two rival Japanese priests, who exhibited their gifts; it had the appearance of two showmen exhibiting their monkeys. At the Stockholm congress the Egyptians were invited to participate as scholars, but when they used their own language to do so they again found themselves treated as exhibits. 'I have heard nothing so unworthy of a sensible man', complained an Oxford scholar, 'as... the whistling howls emitted by an Arabic student of El-Azhar of Cairo. Such exhibitions at Congresses are mischievous and degrading.'

The exhibition and the congress were not the only examples of this European mischief. Throughout the nineteenth century non-European visitors found themselves being placed on exhibit or made the careful object of European curiosity. The degradation they often suffered, whether intended or not, seemed nevertheless inevitable, as necessary to these spectacles as the scaffolded façades or the curious crowds of onlookers. The façades, the onlookers and the degradation seemed all to belong to the organising of an exhibit, to a particularly European concern with rendering things up to be viewed. I will be taking up this question of the exhibition, examining it through non-European eyes as a practice that exemplifies the nature of the modern European state. But I want to reach it via a detour, which explores a little further the mischief to which the Oxford scholar referred. This mischief is a clue, for it runs right through the Middle Eastern experience of nineteenth-century Europe.

To begin with, Middle Eastern visitors found Europeans a curious people, with an uncontainable eagerness to stand and stare. 'One of the characteristics of the French is to stare and get excited at everything new', wrote an Egyptian scholar who spent five years in Paris in the 1820s. It was perhaps this staring he had in mind when he explained in another book, discussing the manners and customs of various nations, that 'one of the beliefs of the Europeans is that the gaze has no effect'. An Ottoman envoy who stopped at Köpenick on his way to Berlin in 1790 reported that 'the people of Berlin were unable to contain their impatience until our arrival in the city. Regardless of the winter and the snow, both men and women came in
Egypt at the exhibition

carriages, on horseback, and on foot, to look at us and contemplate us.  
Where such spectacles were prevented, it seemed necessary to recreate them  
artificially. The members of an Egyptian student mission sent to Paris in the  
1820s were confined to the college where they lived and allowed out onto  
the streets only every second Sunday. But during their stay in Paris they  
found themselves parodied in vaudeville on the Paris stage, for the entertain-  
ment of the French public. ‘They construct the stage as the play demands’,  
explained one of the students. ‘For example, if they want to imitate a sultan  
and the things that happen to him, they set up the stage in the form of a  
palace and portray him in person. If for instance they want to play the Shah  
of Persia, they dress someone in the clothes of the Persian monarch and then  
put him there and sit him on a throne.’

Even Middle Eastern monarchs who came in person to Europe were liable  
to be incorporated themselves into its theatrical events. When the Khedive  
of Egypt visited Paris to attend an earlier Exposition Universelle in 1867, he  
found that the Egyptian exhibit had been built to simulate medieval Cairo  
in the form of a royal palace. The Khedive stayed in the imitation palace during  
his visit and became a part of the exhibition, receiving visitors with medieval  
hospitality. His father, Crown Prince Ibrahim of Egypt, had been less  
fortunate. Visiting the manufactories and showrooms of Birmingham in  
June 1846, he insisted warmly to the press after his experiences elsewhere  
with the British public that ‘he should be regarded merely as a private  
gentleman’. But he was unable to escape becoming something of an exhibit.  
He went out for a stroll incognito one evening and slipped into a showtent  
to see on display the carcass of an enormous whale. He was recognised  
immediately by the showman, who began announcing to the crowd outside  
that ‘for the one price they could see on display the carcass of the whale, and  
the Great Warrior Ibrahim, Conqueror of the Turks, into the bargain’. The  
crowd rushed in, and the Crown Prince had to be rescued by the Birmingham  
police.

This sort of curiosity is encountered in almost every Middle Eastern  
description of nineteenth-century Europe. Towards the end of the century,  
when one or two Egyptian writers began to compose works of fiction in the  
realistic style of the novel, they made the journey to Europe their first topic.  
The stories would often evoke the peculiar experience of the West by  
describing an individual surrounded and stared at, like an object on exhibit.  
‘Whenever he paused outside a shop or showroom,’ the protagonist in one  
such story found on his first day in Paris, ‘a large number of people would  
surround him, both men and women, staring at his dress and appearance.’ Such  
stories could be multiplied, but for the time being I want to indicate  
only this, that for the visitor from the Middle East, Europe was a place where  
one was liable to become an object on exhibit, at which people gathered and  
stared.

I should make clear my own interest in this mischief, because the tendency  
of Europeans to stand and stare has sometimes been noted before. In fact  
words such as those quoted from the Ottoman envoy on his way to  
Berlin have been offered as part of the evidence for an essential historical  
difference between Europeans and other people, the difference between the  
curiosity of the European concerning strange places and people, and the  
‘general lack of curiosity’ of others. The difference is said to go back to, and  
to illustrate, the great blossoming of European intellectual curiosity at the  
beginning of the modern age. We are told that it is to be understood, essen-
entially, as a ‘difference of attitude’.

Many people, myself included, would find it implausible that such staring could help to serve as evidence within a  
group for the presence or absence of intellectual curiosity. But there is also  
the implication that this ‘attitude’ – if that is how it should be understood –  
was in some sense natural. Such curiosity, it seems to be suggested, is simply  
the unfettered relation of a person to the world, emerging in Europe once the  
‘loosening of theological bonds’ had brought about ‘the freeing of human  
minds’. Fewer people would question this assumption. In fact I would argue  
that the notion of ‘theological bonds’ that loosen or become broken, leaving  
the individual confronted by the world, continues to govern our understand-
ing of the historical encounter of the Middle East with the modern  
West, and even of political struggles in the Middle East today. The reason  
for my detour through this mischief is because I want to examine the way of  
addressing the world that Middle Eastern writers found in Europe as some-
thing not natural but mischievous – dependent, so to speak, on a certain  
thought of its own.

Objectness

Accepting for the moment this curious attitude of the European subject, we  
can note first of all that the non-European visitor also encountered in Europe  
what might have seemed a corresponding ‘objectness’. The curiosity of the  
subject was called forth by a diversity of mechanisms for rendering things up  
as its object. Ibrahim Pasha’s encounter with the whale and the students’  
experience of being parodied on the Paris stage were only minor beginnings.  
The student from that group who published an account of their stay in Paris  
devoted several pages to the Parisian phenomenon of le spectacle, a word for  
which he knew of no Arabic equivalent. Besides the Opéra and the Opéra-  
Comique, among the different kinds of spectacle he described were ‘places  
in which they represent for the person the view of a town or a country or the
Egypt at the exhibition

like', such as 'the Panorama, the Cosmorama, the Diorama, the Europorama and the Uranorama'. In a panorama of Cairo, he explained in illustration, 'it is as though you were looking from on top of the minaret of Sultan Hasan, for example, with al-Rumaila and the rest of the city beneath you'.

The panoramas were the forerunners of the world exhibitions, which were organised on an ever increasing scale as Europe entered its imperial age. Along with other public and political spectacles, including the increasingly lavish international congresses of Orientalists, the first of which was held in Paris in 1873, these events became the major subject of Arabic accounts of the modern West. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, more than half the descriptions of journeys to Europe being published in Cairo were written to describe visits to a world exhibition or an international congress of Orientalists. These accounts devote hundreds of pages to describing the peculiar order and technique of such spectacles - the curious crowds of spectators, the device of the exhibit and the model, the organisation of panoramas and perspectives, the display of new discoveries and merchandise, the architecture of iron and glass, the systems of classification, the calculation of statistics, the lectures, the plans and the guide books - in short the entire machinery of what I am going to refer to as 'representation': everything collected and arranged to stand for something, to represent progress and history, human industry and empire; everything set up, and the whole set-up always evoking somehow some larger truth.

Spectacles like the world exhibition and the Orientalist congress set up the world as a picture. They ordered it up before an audience as an object on display, to be viewed, experienced and investigated. The Great Exhibition of 1851 in London claimed to present to its six million visitors 'a living picture' of the development of mankind. Orientalism, it was claimed in the same way at the inauguration of the Ninth International Congress in London in 1892, had 'displayed before us the historical development of the human race'. An earlier Orientalist, the great French scholar Sylvestre de Sacy, had envisioned this process of display in a manner very similar to the future world exhibitions. He had planned to establish a museum, which was to be 'a vast depot of objects of all kinds, of drawings, of original books, maps, accounts of voyages, all offered to those who wish to give themselves to the study of the Orient'; in such a way that each of these students would be able to feel himself transported as if by enchantment into the midst of, say, a Mongolian tribe or of the Chinese race, whichever he might have made the object of his studies.

By the later decades of the century, almost everywhere that Middle Eastern visitors went they seemed to encounter this rendering up the world as a picture. They visited the museums, and saw the cultures of the world portrayed in objects arranged under glass, in the order of their evolution.

They were taken to the theatre, a place where Europeans portrayed to themselves their history, as several Egyptian writers explained. They spent afternoons in the public gardens, carefully organised 'to bring together the trees and plants of every part of the world', as another Arab writer put it. And inevitably they took trips to the zoo, a product of nineteenth-century colonial penetration of the Orient, as the critic Theodor Adorno wrote, 'which paid symbolic tribute in the form of animals'.

These symbolic representations of the world's cultural and colonial order, continually encountered and described by visitors to Europe, were the mark of a great historical confidence. The spectacles set up in such places of modern entertainment reflected the political certainty of a new age. 'England is at present the greatest Oriental Empire which the world has ever known', proclaimed the president of the 1892 Orientalist Congress. 'She knows not only how to conquer, but how to rule.' Exhibitions, museums and other spectacles were not just reflections of this certainty, however, but the means of its production, by their technique of rendering history, progress, culture and empire in 'objective' form. They were occasions for making sure of such objective truths, in a world where truth had become a question of what Heidegger calls 'the certainty of representation'.

Such certainty of representation has a paradoxical quality, which I want to try and bring to light. By reading from some of the Arabic accounts of the world exhibition, it may be possible to understand a little further the strange objectness, and the strangely objective truths, that visitors from outside Europe encountered. The strangeness, I am going to suggest, did not arise as one might suppose from the 'artificial' quality of the endless exhibitions, displays and representations. It arose from the effect of an 'external reality' to which such seeming artificiality lays claim. The source of objective truths was the peculiar distinction maintained between the simulated and the real, between the exhibition and the world. This was a peculiarity which non-European visitors, finding themselves so often not just visitors but objects on exhibit, might have found a little more noticeable.

Representation

At first sight, the distinction between representation and 'external reality' seemed very clearly determined. There are three features of the world exhibitions I will mention in order to illustrate how this distinction was set up: the apparent realism of the exhibits, their organisaton around a common centre, and the position of the visitor as the occupant of this central point. First, it was remarkable how perfectly the exhibitions seemed to model an external world. As the Egyptian visitor noticed, on the buildings representing a Cairo street even the paint was made dirty. It was precisely
this kind of accuracy of detail that created the certainty, the effect of a determined correspondence between model and reality. Very often some of the most realistic exhibits were models of the city in which the exhibition was held, or of the world of which it claimed to be the centre. The realism with which these models were calculated and constructed always astonished the visitor. The 1889 exhibition, for example, included an enormous globe housed in a special building. An Arab writer described its extraordinary resemblance to reality:

Ordinary maps do not resemble the world perfectly, no matter how perfectly they are made, because they are flat while the earth is spherical. Conventional globes are very small, and the countries are not drawn on them clearly. This globe, however, is 12.72 metres in diameter and 40 metres in circumference. One millimetre on its surface corresponds to one kilometre on the surface of the earth. A city such as Cairo or Alexandria appears on it clearly. It is made of iron bars covered in thick paper shaped according to the form of the earth. It is mounted on a pivot on which it rotates with ease. Above it there is a large dome. Mountains, valleys and oceans are moulded on it, with the mountains raised proud of the surface. A mountain of 20,000 feet protrudes more than 6 millimetres, which makes it clearly visible. The globe turns on its axis one complete revolution every 24 hours, and rotates half a millimetre every second.

Equally accurate representations were made of the city where the exhibition was held. At the centre of the 1878 Paris exhibition visitors had found the Pavillon de la Ville de Paris, which included exhibits and models of 'everything connected with the city's functions: schools, sewers, pumping stations, urban rebuilding' as well as plans of the city in three-dimensional relief. This was surpassed at the next Paris exhibition, in 1889, where one of the most impressive exhibits was a panorama of the city. As described by the same Arab writer, this consisted of a viewing platform on which one stood, encircled by images of the city. The images were mounted and illuminated in such a way that the observer felt himself standing at the centre of the city itself, which seemed to materialise around him as a single, solid object 'not differing from reality in any way'.

Secondly, the clearly determined relationship between model and reality was strengthened by their sharing of a common centre. A model or panorama of the city stood at the centre of the exhibition grounds, which were themselves laid out in the centre of the real city. The city in turn presented itself as the imperial capital of the world, and the exhibition at its centre laid out the exhibits of the world's empires and nations accordingly. France, for example, would occupy the central place on the Champs de Mars surrounded by the exhibits of the other industrialised states, with their colonies and other nations surrounding them in the proper order. ('It is not on the Champs de Mars that one should look for the Egyptian exhibit', we are told in a didactic guide entitled *L'Égypte, la Tunisie, le Maroc et l'exposition de 1878. 'This is easily explained, for the country has no industry at all, properly speaking . . .') The common centre shared by the exhibition, the city and the world reinforced the relationship between representation and reality, just as the relationship enabled one to determine such a centre in the first place.

Finally, what distinguished the realism of the model from the reality it claimed to represent was that this central point had an occupant, the figure on the viewing platform. The representation of reality was always an exhibit set up for an observer in its midst, an observing gaze surrounded and set apart by the exhibition's careful order. If the dazzling displays of the exhibition could evoke some larger historical and political reality, it was because they were arranged to demand this isolated gaze. The more the exhibit drew in and encircled the visitor, the more the gaze was set apart from it, as the mind is set apart from the material world it observes. The separation is suggested in a description of the Egyptian exhibit at the Paris Exhibition of 1867:

A museum inside a pharaonic temple represented Antiquity, a palace richly decorated in the Arab style represented the Middle Ages, a caravanserai of merchants and performers portrayed in real life the customs of today. Weapons from the Sudan, the skins of wild monsters, perfumes, poisons and medicinal plants transport us directly to the tropics. Pottery from Assiut and Aswan, filigree and cloth of silk and gold invite us to touch with our fingers a strange civilisation. All the races subject to the Viceroy were personified by individuals selected with care. We rubbed shoulders with the fellah, we made way before the Bedouin of the Libyan desert on their beautiful white dromedaries. This sumptuous display spoke to the mind as to the eyes; it expressed a political idea.

The remarkable realism of such displays made a strange civilisation into an object the visitor could almost touch. Yet to the observing eye, surrounded by the display but distinguished from it by the status of visitor, it remained a mere representation, the picture of some strange reality. Thus there were, in fact, two parallel pairs of distinctions, between the visitor and the exhibit, and between the exhibit and what it expressed. The representation was set apart from the real political reality it claimed to portray as the observing mind was set apart from what it observed.

Despite these methods of creating the determined distinction between representation and reality, however, it was not always easy in Paris to tell where the exhibition ended and the world itself began. It is true that the boundaries of the exhibition were clearly marked, with high perimeter walls and monumental gates. But, as the Egyptian delegation had begun to discover, there was much about the real world outside, in the streets of Paris
and beyond, that resembled the world exhibition; just as there was more about the exhibition that resembled the world outside. It was as though, as we will see, despite the determined efforts within the exhibition to construct perfect representations of the real world outside, the real world beyond the gates turned out to be rather like an extension of the exhibition. This extended exhibition would continue to present itself as a series of mere representations, representing a reality outside. Thus we should think of it as not so much an exhibition as a kind of labyrinth, the labyrinth which includes in itself its own exits. But then, perhaps the sequence of exhibitions became so accurate and so extensive, no one ever realised that the ‘real world’ they promised was not there. Except perhaps the Egyptians.

The world as an exhibition

To examine this paradox, I will begin again inside the exhibition, back at the Egyptian bazaar. Part of the shock of the Egyptians came from just how ‘real’ the street claimed to be. Not simply that the paint was made dirty, that the donkeys were from Cairo, and that the Egyptian pastries on sale claimed to taste like the real thing. But that one paid for them, as we say, with real money. The commercialism of the donkey rides, the bazaar stalls and the dancing girls was no different from the commercialism of the world outside. This was the real thing, in the sense that what commercialism offers is always the real thing. The commercialism of world exhibitions was no accident, but a consequence of the scale of representation they attempted and of the modern, consumer economy that required such entertainment. Beginning with the 1867 Exposition Universelle in Paris, which was four times the size of any previous exhibition, the expense of the event was offset by charging each exhibitor for the costs of furnishing the exhibit, and by including throughout the exhibition-ground shops and places of entertainment.

As a result, the exhibitions came to resemble more and more the commercial machinery of the rest of the city. This machinery, in turn, was rapidly changing in places like London and Paris, as small, individually owned shops, often based on local crafts, gave way to the larger apparatus of shopping arcades and department stores. The Bon Marché opened in 1852 (and had a turnover of seven million francs by the end of the next decade), the Louvre in 1855, and Printemps in 1865. The size of the new stores and arcades, as well as their architecture, made each one almost an exhibition in itself. The Illustrated Guide to Paris offered a typical description:

These arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-walled passages, cut through whole blocks of houses, whose owners have combined in this speculation. On either side of the passages, which draw their light from above, run the most elegant shops, so that an arcade of this kind is a city, indeed a world in miniature.

The Egyptian accounts of Europe contain several descriptions of these mechanical worlds-in-miniature, where the real world, as at the exhibition, was something created in the representation of its commodities. The department stores were described as ‘large and well organised’, with their merchandise ‘arranged in perfect order, set in rows on shelves with everything symmetrical and precisely positioned’. Non-European visitors would remark especially on the panes of glass, inside the stores and along the gas-lit arcades, which separated the observer from the goods on display. ‘The merchandise is all arranged behind sheets of clear glass, in the most remarkable order... Its dazzling appearance draws thousands of onlookers.’ The glass panes inserted themselves between the visitors and the goods on display, making the former into mere onlookers and endowing the goods with the distance that is the source of their objectness. Just as exhibitions were becoming more commercialised, the machinery of commerce was becoming a means of creating an effect of reality, indistinguishable from that of the exhibition.

Something of the experience of the strangely organised world of modern commerce and consumers is indicated in the first fictional account of Europe to be published in Arabic. Appearing in 1882, it tells the story of two Egyptians who travelled to France and England in the company of an English Orientalist. On their first day in Paris, the two Egyptian protagonists wander accidentally into the vast, gas-lit premises of a wholesale supplier. Inside the building they find long corridors, each leading into another. They walk from one corridor to the next, and after a while begin to search for the way out. Turning a corner they see what looks like an exit, with people approaching from the other side. But it turns out to be a mirror, which covers the entire width and height of the wall, and the people approaching are merely their own reflections. They turn down another passage and then another, but each one ends only in a mirror. As they make their way through the corridors of the building, they pass groups of people at work. “The people were busy setting out merchandise, sorting it and putting it into boxes and cases. They stared at the two of them in silence as they passed, standing quite still, not leaving their places or interrupting their work.” After wandering silently for some time through the building, the two Egyptians realise they have lost their way completely and begin going from room to room looking for an exit. “But no one interfered with them”, we are told, “or came up to them to ask if they were lost.” Eventually they are rescued by the manager of the store, who proceeds to explain to them how
it is organised, pointing out that the merchandise being sorted and packed represents the produce of every country in the world. On the one hand this story evokes a festival of representation, a celebration of the ordered world of objects and the discipline of the European gaze. At the same time, the disconcerting experience with the mirrors undermines this system of representational order. An earlier Egyptian writer recalled a similar experience with mirrors, on his very first day in a European city. Arriving at Marseilles, he had entered a café, which he mistook at first for some sort of 'vast, endless thoroughfare'. 'There were a lot of people in there,' he explained, 'and whenever a group of them came into view their images appeared in the glass mirrors, which were on every side. Anyone who walked in, sat down, or stood up seemed to be multiplied. Thus the café looked like an open street. I realised it was enclosed only when I saw several images of myself in the mirrors, and understood that it was all due to the peculiar effect of the glass.' In such stories, it is as though the world of representation is being admired for its dazzling order, and yet the suspicion remains that all this reality is only an effect. Perhaps the world remains inevitably a labyrinth, rather than an interior distinguished from – and defined by – its exterior.

At any rate the unusual and sometimes disconcerting experiences of the world exhibition seem to be repeated, in such stories, in the world outside, a world of passions ending in one's own reflection, of corridors leading into a labyrinth of further corridors, of objects ordered up to represent every country in the world, and of disciplined, starring Europeans. It was not just in its commercialism, in other words, that all this resembled the world exhibition. Characteristic of the way Europeans seemed to live was their preoccupation with what the same Egyptian author described as intizam al-mansar, the organisation of the view. The Europe one reads about in Arabic accounts was a place of discipline and visual arrangement, of silent gazes and strange simulations, of the organisation of everything and everything organised to represent, to recall like the exhibition some larger meaning. Outside the world exhibition, it follows paradoxically, one encountered not the real world but only further models and representations of the real. Beyond the exhibition and the department store, everywhere that non-European visitors went – the museum and the Orientalist congress, the theatre and the zoo, the countryside encountered typically in the form of a model farm exhibiting new machinery and cultivation methods, the very streets of the modern city with their deliberate façades, even the Alps once the funicular was built – they found the technique and sensation to be the same. Everything seemed to be set up before one as though it were the model or the picture of something. Everything was arranged before an observing subject into a system of signification (to use the European jargon), declaring itself to be the signifier of a signified.

The exhibition, perhaps, could be read in such accounts as epitomising the strange character of the West, a place where one was continually pressed into service as a spectator by a world ordered so as to represent. In exhibitions the traveller from the Middle East could describe the curious way of setting up the world encountered more and more in modern Europe, a particular arrangement between the individual and an object-world which Europeans seemed to take as the experience of the real. This reality-effect, let me provisionally suggest, was a world more and more rendered up to the individual according to the way in which, and to the extent to which, it could be set up before him or her as an exhibit. Non-Europeans encountered in Europe what one might call, echoing a phrase from Heidegger, the age of the world exhibition, or rather, the age of the world-as-exhibition. World exhibition here refers not to an exhibition of the world but to the world conceived and grasped as though it were an exhibition.

There are three features of this world, each of them already introduced, that are going to provide themes I want to explore in this book. First, its remarkable claim to certainty or truth: the apparent certainty with which everything seems ordered and organised, calculated and rendered unambiguous – ultimately, what seems its political decidedness. Second, the paradoxical nature of this decidedness: its certainty exists as the seemingly determined relation between representations and 'reality'; yet the real world, like the world outside the exhibition, despite everything the exhibition promises, turns out to consist only of further representations of this reality. Third, what I will refer to as its colonial nature: the age of the exhibition was necessarily the colonial age, the age of world economy and global power in which we live, since what was to be rendered as exhibit was reality, the world itself.